

Deconstructing

While California Democrats were whooping it up at their state convention in Sacramento, nearly 90 miles away in Oakland, their state Assembly candidate Elihu Harris was busy sending out an S.O.S. signal. His campaign sensed trouble only weeks before the March 30 election. Its first urgent call for help came just two days before the election.

But it was too little, too late.

Green Party candidate Audie Bock, a 53-year-old political novice and virtual unknown, beat out veteran Democrat Harris in the 16th Assembly race by a scant 327 votes. It was clearly a milestone victory for the Greens, who now have their first member ever in a state Legislature.

But for the Democrats, it was an inconceivable blow to a party still high and heady on the November 1998 victories that gave them control

Democratic bosses were so confident in Elihu Harris' ability to retake his old Assembly seat that they appointed him a committee chair even before the special election was held. Then came a rude awakening. Voters put their feet down to reject the veteran pol in favor of the fresh face of Green Party candidate Audie Bock.

of the governorship, plus both houses of the Legislature and all but two statewide offices.

Reactions ranged from disbelief to shock as news of the defeat spread. One legislative staffer, who was out of town during the election, thought it was an April Fool's joke when she was told the results. "We were stunned," she said. "We didn't even know what hit us."

Soon came the finger-pointing and the soul-searching, as the party faithful scrambled to get a grip on what happened.

By most accounts, the upset was the result of a confluence of special circumstances: extremely low voter turnout, a vulnerable yet overconfident candidate, a sea of restless voters, a distracted Assembly leader and flawed campaign tactics.

**By Emelyn C.L.
Rodriguez**

The chicken dinner theory

Harris, the former Oakland mayor and ex-assemblyman, had his own theories: "People could have been anti-me, pro-her or mad about the chicken dinners," he said at a post-election press conference, referring to the California Democratic Party's offer of free chicken dinners during the February primary. The dinners were meant to increase voter turnout in primarily low-income, minority areas. "It could be about individual personalities, only time will tell."

Harris



Illustration by Sandra Hoover

Only a month prior to the election, the 51-year-old Harris beamed with confidence. And why not? In February, he had only narrowly missed winning the Oakland area Assembly seat outright. In an interview in mid-February, Harris said hundreds of volunteers would be walking the precincts and the phone banks would be going non-stop until after the polls closed on Election Day. Yet his spartan campaign office in Oakland's Eastmont Mall appeared almost deserted that afternoon. Two volunteers were taking turns answering calls.

Bock's campaign meanwhile worked feverishly round-the-clock. The 53-year-old community college instructor and small business owner hit the streets with her message, knocked door-to-door, introducing herself, and held discussion groups to answer voter questions. She cried foul over the Democratic Party's chicken-dinner tactics and repeatedly challenged Harris to debates. She even had her elderly mother working phone banks and taking home phone lists in the evening to make campaign calls on her behalf.

Bock said people responded to her candidacy because they wanted a voice for change on the state level and someone who would fight for more school funding, universal health care and closing corporate tax loopholes.

Questions about Harris

"People are not satisfied with what the two major parties have to offer," Bock said at her March 31 victory party. "This race reflects that dissatisfaction."

Meanwhile, Harris was clearly anxious to return to his old Assembly seat, which he held from 1978-1990, though much had changed since the days he was part of former Assembly Speaker Willie Brown's leadership team. City government, Harris said, was getting too personal. In the local arena, he said, "The collegiality and collaboration often break down to the raw practical reality of competing for limited resources in the midst of incredible demand."

At that time, political observers were calling Harris' election a foregone conclusion, citing his strong connections and wide name recognition. "I think Elihu is going to

Enter Audie Bock

Early impressions are that Bock is just what the voters wanted — an Assembly representative with a fresh and new outlook.

By Max Vanzi



Days after an improbable victory launched her farther in American politics than any Green Party member before her, Audie Bock was still laughing.

No one, it seemed, could have been gladder than Bock on the day she was sworn in as the Legislature's only representative from a minor party in 82 years — and the only Green nationwide to have captured a state-level partisan elective office.

Not that she is a stranger to success. Writer, teacher, Fulbright scholar, Bock is also fluent or near-fluent in four foreign languages. For 10 years she was professionally associated with the great Japanese film director Akira

Kurosawa.

As his interpreter, "Audie Bock was Kurosawa" in the English-speaking world, recalled an American living in Japan. Bock translated the director's autobiography. She dealt with some of the film industry's most powerful figures while assisting in productions of Kurosawa's works.

Later, she ran her own film distribution company from her home in Piedmont near Oakland.

However, despite the weighty resume and the historical significance of the moment, here was Bock, 53, tending to chuckle a lot upon being sworn in following her upset victory over Democrat Elihu Harris in a special election to fill