Jerry Brown's insider attempt to crack California's budget nut has been no more successful than Arnold Schwarzenegger's outsider attack.

Both relied on unrealistic assumptions about Capitol reality – Schwarzenegger because he was a newbie and Brown for reasons known only to him.

Brown offered a complex mixture of spending cuts and tax extensions tailored to the supposed predilections of a disaffected California electorate.

Nearly four months later, however, the Capitol is stalemated – and not merely because of its deep ideological divisions.

For weeks, Brown negotiated with a few Republican senators who were evidently willing to place an extension of temporary taxes before voters if public pension and budget reforms were part of the ballot package.

The talks eventually collapsed. Brown says, in effect, the Republicans demanded too much, but it's also evident that he, Democratic lawmakers and their allies, especially public employee unions, got cold feet.

Private and public polls indicated that if taxes, pension reforms and a spending limit were placed on the ballot, voters might easily reject the taxes and pass the two others.

A new USC Dornsife/Los Angeles Times poll underscores the Democrats' dilemma, finding voters' support for a tax election and pension and budget reforms is very high but for taxes is barely 50 percent.

It's since become evident that Democrats are in disarray. Brown is still publicly sticking to his campaign pledge to raise taxes only with voter approval, but the unions and their legislative allies don't want an election anymore – regardless of voter sentiment – and are now beating the drums for extending taxes without voter approval, which would also take at least four Republican votes.

Brown, the Republicans and some Democratic legislators have been touring the state, supposedly talking to voters, but mostly creating an illusion that they are engaged in the issue.
They're really just waiting for Brown to reveal a revised budget in mid-May, with updated revenue and spending estimates.

While revenues appear to have improved marginally, there's still a big gap between projected income and outgo, and Brown probably will unveil an all-cuts revision that could hit K-12 education, the most popular spending category, hard.

What happens then? Democrats will not abide an all-cuts budget. There's some talk of extending taxes very temporarily, subject to later ratification by voters, but Republicans still want those pension and budget reforms, and there are several other sticky points to resolve. Politicians could revert to the hide-the-pea gimmicks – trickery that Brown has denounced and insisted he would not use.

Truly, no one knows what will happen, especially if the state runs out of cash this summer and must once again revert to IOUs to pay its bills.