Just a few months ago, Gov. Jerry Brown chastised "declinists" and "dystopian journalists" for their pessimism about California, particularly about emerging from a deep recession.

"Contrary to those critics who fantasize that California is a failed state, I see unspent potential and incredible opportunity," Brown told the Legislature in January, citing supposed signs of economic recovery.

On Monday, however, Brown blamed a sluggish economy for revenues falling billions of dollars short of the rosy estimates in the budget he signed last June.

"You can never get it quite right," Brown told reporters as he released a revised budget aimed at closing a deficit he pegged at $15.7 billion, $6.5 billion more than his previous estimate.

"We have an uncertain economy," he added, describing revenue and deficit numbers as a "guesstimate."

Whatever the deficit may truly be, Brown's revised 2012-13 budget is as much a political document as a fiscal one, clearly aimed at persuading voters to approve new sales and income taxes next November.

One of the charts he displayed uses $16.7 billion as a goal ($15.7 billion deficit plus a $1 billion reserve) and claims that his budget relies on $8.3 billion in cuts for half, while counting on just $5.9 billion in new revenues, plus $2.5 billion in other moves, mostly one-time shifts.

His goal, quite obviously, is to prove to voters that he isn't just asking them to pay more taxes, but is also slashing health and welfare services, courts, state employees' pay and other spending categories.

"California has been living beyond its means," he said. "There has to be a balance and a day of reckoning. This is a ... day of reckoning."

Brown's been making similar pronouncements since resuming the governorship last year, bolstering his bid for credibility with such symbolic steps as eliminating state-paid cellphones for bureaucrats.
But that credibility took a hit a year ago when his administration conjured up an additional $4 billion in revenues that allowed legislators to pass a supposedly balanced budget without further cuts – and regain their salaries that Controller John Chiang had cut off.

As it turned out, not only did the $4 billion never appear, but revenues fell even shorter while many of the supposed spending cuts in the budget never occurred – hence the new and bigger deficit.

Given that rather sorry fiscal track record, why should voters believe the new numbers?

Brown responded by citing uncertainty in the economy and in predicting taxable capital gains. He said his new numbers are "pretty careful projections" and added, "Thoughtful, honest people are trying to figure it out."

Those would be the same people, one would assume, who based the 2011-12 budget on wishful thinking, rather than hard data.