

# Analysis: Blame cuts both ways in Capitol

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SAN FERNANDO - It's not even February yet, and the campaign is on.

After a week of partisan bickering between Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and legislative Democrats, the Republican governor took his first official step Friday toward what many lawmakers and analysts suspect has been his intention all along - going around the Legislature to sell his proposals directly to voters.

At an event at a local charter school, Schwarzenegger stood before a blue-and-white banner emblazoned with the slogan "Year For Reform."

It's not that he wants to fight with the Legislature, he said in an interview afterward.

"It's just that I think we should go and move forward," he said, "and they're not moving forward as fast as I'd like."

As Schwarzenegger and the Legislature wrangle over who's to blame for the lack of action on his agenda at the Capitol this month, there's truth on both sides.

Lawmakers aren't likely to move much, if at all, to compromise with the governor. But it's also true, analysts say, that Schwarzenegger would be just as happy to go straight to the ballot on his own as he would be to cut deals with lawmakers over everything from redistricting to spending controls.

Some analysts say he simply wants to appear to be making an effort to negotiate, because voters would prefer a special election only as a last resort.

"I have believed from day one he would prefer to have the Legislature not give him what he wants because they will not

give him everything," said Sherry Bebitch Jeffe, a University of Southern California political scientist. "He would have to negotiate with the Legislature, and he does not want to negotiate and doesn't have to if he goes directly to the voters. That's part of the dance we're seeing."

Both sides are expecting - and gearing up for - a combative fall election with competing visions and proposals about the future of politics in America's largest and, arguably, most complex state.

In the meantime, each suggests the other is the biggest obstacle to progress.

Schwarzenegger's campaign-style event, complete with Hollywood-quality staging and lighting, came at the end of a hard week of partisan jousting in Sacramento.

He said at a Sacramento Press Club luncheon that Democrats had done "nothing" for three weeks of a special session he called on four issues: exploding pension costs, legislative redistricting, state spending and merit pay for teachers.

Democrats, led by Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez of Los Angeles, countered that next year's budget - including education spending - was their top priority. The rest of it, Núñez said at a Thursday press conference, was still "half-cooked."

He said the legislative process is a deliberate one that can't be rushed.

"You don't act on a bill the day it gets introduced or the week that it gets introduced," he said. "There's a process that you have to set in place to do that. ... There's a lot of action going on here. It may not be the action that the governor prefers, but there's action."

The issues Schwarzenegger have chosen to debate are not ones on which Democrats are inclined to compromise.

The party has resisted even minor changes in the state's pension system, let alone the switch to a 401(k)-style program the governor is proposing.

Merit pay for teachers, repeatedly proposed by former Gov. Pete Wilson, has been a long-standing nonstarter with Democratic lawmakers. Schwarzenegger's proposal to restrain state spending runs head-on into guaranteed school funding formulas under Proposition 98.

Democrats, who control the Legislature under currently drawn district lines, also aren't interested in changing the redistricting process, although they might be tempted by the possibility of coupling that with extending term limits.

"Maybe out of the four, we can do one or two together," Schwarzenegger acknowledged Friday. "I'm looking forward to that. But if not, we'll go the other way."

Anticipating a ballot fight with the governor, Democrats this week welcomed a statewide poll which found that about half of California adults disapprove of how Schwarzenegger is handling K-12 education issues.

"We're not as popular as the governor, we know," Núñez said. "But we like to think that on some of these issues, (voters) agree with us.

"Most important is that we continue to make education the number one priority in this state. That is the core of our responsibility and that is the number one issue for Democrats."

The governor's event Friday, in fact, was designed to fight any perception that he's weak on education. At Vaughn Next Century Learning Center, a charter school, he sought to remind teachers, parents, students and the news media that, contrary to what his critics have suggested, he has proposed increasing education spending.

"I'm not frustrated," he said afterward. "I just wanted to make sure I step it up and let the people know."