

# Dan Walters: Governor, Democrats gird for mother of all political battles

By Dan Walters -- Bee Columnist

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If anyone still doubted it, this week's verbal jousting between Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and legislative leaders underscores the certainty that in seeking a sweeping overhaul of state government, the governor is igniting the mother of all California political battles, whose outcome will determine the course of political policy for years, perhaps decades, to come.

Schwarzenegger castigated the Legislature for not moving quickly on the agenda he laid out in his State of the State speech three weeks ago, saying all he had heard since then was "a lot of excuses, a lot of complaints, a lot of finger-pointing." He's clearly laying the groundwork for the message he would deliver to voters - that lawmakers are isolated and more interested in catering to special interests than satisfying the public's hunger for reform.

"The people want reform," Schwarzenegger told the Sacramento Press Club on Wednesday. "That was what the recall was all about." He referred to voters as "my true partners" against "the Legislature, against politics as usual, against the status quo."

Schwarzenegger's public spanking of the Legislature drew a sharp rebuke from Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez, who complained that the Republican governor had not offered specific bills, and that, in turn, sparked another Schwarzenegger news conference on Thursday in which he listed the measures already submitted.

The verbal salvos over legislation, however, are merely preliminary skirmishing. The real battle will be waged over a series of Schwarzenegger-sponsored initiatives at a special election later this year, with the governor and his allies pitted against Democrats and their friends, principally public employee unions.

Schwarzenegger's agenda includes drawing new and presumably more competitive legislative districts, shifting public pension programs into a defined-contribution system similar to 401(k) plans in private business, imposing automatic spending cuts when revenues fall short of projections, and creating teacher merit pay.

The agenda's centerpiece is legislative redistricting, undoing a 2001 bipartisan gerrymander that was aimed at eliminating partisan competition for seats, and having a panel of retired judges draw new districts to take effect in 2006. "Both parties are against it, much like open primaries," Schwarzenegger said. "I have to do what is right ... for the people of California."

The 2001 plan, it's generally agreed, created more ideological division in the Capitol, and Schwarzenegger believes that more competitive districts would elect more compromise-minded moderates and, at least potentially, lead to more action on pressing issues. Given its potential effect on the political security of those already holding office, Schwarzenegger's redistricting overhaul generates the most angst and debate among Capitol insiders - but ironically, it may be one proposal that stands some chance of being placed on the ballot without an initiative.

Hopes for compromise hinge on what insiders believe to be Schwarzenegger's willingness to fold changes in the state's term limits law into redistricting reform. If lawmakers are willing to have new districts drawn, he's implied, he might be willing to marry it to allowing them to remain in their current offices longer.

The strongest public hint of that attitude came in a Schwarzenegger interview with the San Diego Union-Tribune's editorial board. "With the term limits," he said, "people are realizing that maybe it was wrong because we never really create someone who is an expert on anything in Sacramento. Because of that, the special interests are becoming more powerful and smarter and having more influence on the legislators because they have their experts. They're around forever. And so people are talking about maybe we should extend the term limits (for) another period of four years."

Schwarzenegger won't tie term limits to redistricting reform publicly, but privately, those in and around the administration have left no doubt that he would be willing to make that kind of a deal - a prospect that alarms term-limit advocates and members of Congress, who have nothing to gain from changing legislative term limits but could find their seats less secure under a new redistricting plan.