

# Daniel Weintraub: Governor gets dose of reality in new survey

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A new poll published last week confirmed by the numbers what a lot of people in California politics were already sensing in their gut: 2005 will be a year of peril but also great opportunity for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The survey, by the Public Policy Institute of California, revealed that Schwarzenegger's honeymoon with the state's voters is beginning to fade. Democrats, in particular, are growing more suspicious of the Republican chief executive, and increasing numbers of voters of all stripes say they disagree with some of Schwarzenegger's priorities.

Oddly enough, though, the more specific the questions become, the more of an advantage Schwarzenegger gains. Californians seem to like the details of his agenda more than its broad outlines.

Overall, Schwarzenegger's approval rating remains high, with six in 10 Californians saying they approve of the job he's doing as governor. But that number masks an important shift toward a more partisan view of the former actor.

In this survey of 2,002 California residents, Democrats disapproved of Schwarzenegger's performance by a margin of 49 percent to 43 percent. A year ago, they approved by a spread of 46 percent to 27 percent. And while 60 percent of independents approve of the governor's performance - the same as a year ago - the portion that disapproves has nearly doubled, from 18 percent to 32 percent. Nearly nine out of every 10 Republicans still say they support the governor.

"Californians like Gov. Schwarzenegger, but they no longer view him as being above the political fray," poll director Mark Baldassare said in summarizing the results. "This is problematic, because politics-as-usual is not an option for the governor. His

plan to take a bold reform agenda to the people this year still requires broad bipartisan support."

Schwarzenegger's numbers are highest for his performance in seeking to reform California government (58 percent approve) and boost the economy (56 percent approve). But only 48 percent like what he has done on the budget and taxes, and 35 percent approve of his policies on transportation.

The Legislature's approval ratings, while they remain low, are rising, with 37 percent now positive about the performance of state lawmakers. And 35 percent say they are inclined to side with Democrats in the Legislature on budget issues, compared with 29 percent who back the governor.

The real red flag for the governor is on education, the issue Californians say is most important to them. With Democrats and independents turning solidly against him, Schwarzenegger's approval rating on the issue has sunk to just 34 percent, with 51 percent saying they disapprove.

Much of this decline seems related to the impression that Schwarzenegger has proposed cutting education spending, though in reality his budget would raise spending enough to allow schools to keep pace with enrollment growth and inflation. Only 38 percent of adults say they are satisfied with the governor's budget proposal, and 62 percent say they think the state should spend more money on the schools.

The survey's respondents also disagree with Schwarzenegger's stand against any tax increases, with 51 percent saying the state's budget gap should be closed with a mixture of spending cuts and tax hikes or by taxes alone.

Only 34 percent say the deficit should be erased by spending cuts alone. By far, the most popular tax increase would be raising rates on the "wealthiest Californians," a notion supported by 69 percent of those surveyed.

Despite this evidence of Schwarzenegger's vulnerability, however, Californians seem inclined to support his policies when

they are asked about them point blank, instead of in general terms.

His budget reform proposal would require that the state spend no more than it takes in from taxes, and it would trigger across-the-board cuts in all programs when revenues fall short. Among likely voters, the idea is favored by 64 percent to 28 percent, even though the same people also told the pollsters they thought tax increases should, ideally, be part of the mix.

The poll found a similar level of support for the governor's proposal to change the pension system for public employees from a traditional, defined benefit plan to something similar to a private-sector 401(k). Among likely voters, 64 percent favored the idea, with only 26 percent opposed.

Schwarzenegger's plan to shift the job of drawing political boundaries from the Legislature to an independent commission of retired judges was favored by 46 percent of likely voters and opposed by 40 percent.

The governor's ace in the hole might be the public's position on who should decide these issues.

Asked whether they thought major reforms should be done by the Legislature and the governor or by the people at the ballot box, 68 percent chose the people. Schwarzenegger seems to agree.