

## Election fatigue could make polls a lonely place

**Observers say people undecided, tuned out**

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What, another election?

That seems to be the attitude of California voters with Tuesday's primary election just days away and public-opinion polls showing record numbers of them undecided or disengaged.

"The mood of the voters is a voice-mail recording that says, 'We're not home right now; please leave a message,' " said Jack Pitney, a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College.

San Diego County may be the focal point of political fervor, owing to the nationally watched slugfest between Republican Brian Bilbray and Democrat Francine Busby to replace disgraced former Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham, whose central role in a congressional bribery scandal landed him in federal prison.

Also, the South Bay is enlivened once again by Round 3 of the Democratic grudge match between Rep. Bob Filner and Assemblyman Juan Vargas.

But California as a whole is another matter.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger faces no serious opposition for the Republican nomination Tuesday, and the Democrats who want his job – state Treasurer Phil Angelides and state Controller Steve Westly – are locked in a free-spending, too-close-to-call battle, but have failed to create clear impressions in voters' minds.

Democratic U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein is running for a third full term, but the campaign has generated so little notice that voters may be surprised to find it on their ballots.

By far the best-known statewide candidate not running for governor or the U.S. Senate is Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown, the former governor who's attempting a statewide comeback by running for the Democratic nomination for attorney general. Despite his star power, Brown's race hasn't attracted much attention, in part, no doubt, because polls suggest he could be an easy winner over Los Angeles City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo.

As for the races for other statewide constitutional offices, the biggest factor appears to be huge numbers of undecided voters.

In addition, while there are usually long lists of complicated and controversial propositions on California ballots, this time there are only two – Proposition 81, a \$600 million library bond, and Proposition 82, a universal preschool program funded by a tax increase on the wealthy.

Veteran Democratic campaign strategist Gale Kaufman said she had a hard time recalling when there have been so many tuned-out voters.

"I think they're snoozing," she said. "Every once in a while they lift their heads up and then go back to bed. 'Please leave me alone and go away.'"

Kaufman attributes the indifference to the unprecedented run of elections in California this decade, which essentially has created five years of nonstop electioneering.

In addition to the traditional presidential and gubernatorial election cycles, there was the 2003 recall of former Gov. Gray Davis and the 2005 special election over Schwarzenegger's ill-fated "reform agenda." Both unique, odd-numbered-year elections generated high voter interest, and intense and sustained grass-roots political activity throughout California.

"I think last year took a lot out of people," Kaufman said. "There was an awful lot of back-and-forth for a very extended period of time, and people stayed engaged. Those who are suggesting there's some burnout are right."

Pitney agreed. "I remember during the recall election hearing people talking about politics in all kinds of different places," he said. "Standing in a supermarket checkout line, you'd hear people talking about the recall. I haven't heard the names Westly or Angelides in Ralphs once."

A Field Poll published Friday showed the Democratic race for governor in a statistical tie – 35 percent for Westly, 34 percent for Angelides. It also showed that 26 percent of the likely Democratic primary voters hadn't made up their minds. Pollsters said such a high undecided vote was unprecedented so close to election day.

Officials of both campaigns acknowledged that their candidates have had difficulty breaking through.

The Angelides campaign is banking on its endorsements from such prominent Democrats as Feinstein and Sen. Barbara Boxer and numerous labor unions to carry the day, while the Westly campaign is putting renewed emphasis on the former eBay executive's résumé.

"I think voters have been fatigued, and they're just taking longer to make up their minds," Westly campaign manager Jude Barry said.

"The undecideds are in a 'park' position," said Bob Mulholland, senior strategist for the Angelides campaign. "Some of them won't vote. I think the others will vote and will be looking for some advice, and that's why I think Barbara (Boxer) and Feinstein will be helpful."

Meanwhile, the Schwarzenegger camp is watching the whole thing with ill-concealed glee as the governor methodically goes about trying to restore some of the popularity that the acrimonious special election cost him. He's tending to gubernatorial duties in as public a fashion as possible.

Matthew Dowd, chief strategist for the Schwarzenegger re-election campaign, contended that the tepid response to Angelides and Westly demonstrates that the governor is in better political shape than polls would indicate.

"There's a counterargument to the argument Democrats are making that voters are all mad at the governor and getting ready to take him out of office," Dowd said. "If that were the case, there'd be much more enthusiasm about the Democratic campaign than we're seeing."

Many analysts believe that the relentlessly negative TV advertising war between the Democratic campaigns

in the past month has hurt both candidates.

“We've done studies that show that negative campaigning does not help among Democrats and it does not help among independents,” said Stanford political scientist Shanto Iyengar, an expert on political advertising.

“I think there's definitely a sense of cynicism,” Iyengar said. “There's a real sense that they're not addressing the kinds of things I care about. It's just these tactical moves.”

Both sides' ads have been heavy not only on negativity but on out-of-context facts and misleading hyperbole.

A Westly ad claims Angelides' land development company invested in a condominium project that was fined for illegally dredging and dumping sludge into Lake Tahoe. Angelides says that although his company owned one of the 22 condos, it did not develop the property and had nothing to do with the dredging.

An Angelides ad depicts Westly as a “Schwarzenegger twin” by showing footage of the two campaigning together for Propositions 57 and 58, the 2004 deficit-reduction measures.

The ad claims Westly was Schwarzenegger's “strongest ally even while Schwarzenegger was cutting education, health care and aid for the disabled.” Westly never endorsed the budget cuts, and most of the state's prominent Democrats, except Angelides, supported Propositions 57 and 58.

Although Angelides is aiming his appeal at the liberal base of the Democratic Party and Westly toward more moderate and independent-minded Democrats, there's little difference between them on most issues.

The issue that has received the most attention is taxes. Angelides advocates raising taxes on wealthy individuals and corporations to fund education. Westly says he would only do so as a last resort.

Republican strategist Ken Khachigian, while a critic of Angelides and his tax plan, said the issue gives the treasurer a somewhat sharper profile.

“I get the sense that Angelides is somebody who sticks to his guns and sticks to his principles,” Khachigian said. “His message is, 'I'm demanding excellence for California and you have to pay for it, and the ones who are going to pay for it are those Chevron CEOs.'”

“Westly's ads were the typical positive, squishy, 'I'm for the environment; my kids go to public school; I've got a nice family.'”

Angelides is backed by most of the state's labor unions and is counting organized labor's traditional grassroots operation to help put him over the top.

Kaufman, who coordinated last year's massive mobilization against the Schwarzenegger ballot agenda by public-employee unions, said labor's activity will be nowhere near last year's level.

“I think it would be impossible to believe for the unions that you could ask people who have come out for a lot of election cycles to rev up for this one,” she said. “People are waiting until November because they understand that turnout is critical then.”

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