

Angelides and the Charisma Question

Some voters say the Democrat can't compete with the governor's star power. Aides disagree.

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To Tarzana car dealer Marvin Arnold, Democratic gubernatorial nominee Phil Angelides comes off as a "party hack" — and a dull one, at that.

"He does not have a very arresting personality," said Arnold, 78, a Democrat who is leaning toward supporting Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger for reelection.

The auto broker is sizing up each contender's stands on education, global warming and much more. But he cares about personality too, and on that score he finds Schwarzenegger the more captivating choice.

It is no small task for Angelides to compete in a personality contest with Schwarzenegger, a Hollywood star who has spent three decades polishing the public image that produced his wealth and political power base.

For Angelides, a Sacramento insider who toils over bond sales and pension funds in his job as state treasurer, a lack of pizzazz would, in theory, have little bearing on his ability to run the state.

But candidate personalities always matter in a race for governor, and the difficulty of vying one-on-one against Schwarzenegger's is one of the most serious challenges that Angelides faces.

"Voters vote for people, not for platforms," said Mark Mellman, a Democratic pollster who often surveys public opinion in California. "At the end of the day, who a candidate is, as a person, is vastly more important than almost anything else."

Angelides advisors play down the significance of the personality contrast.

"This is so far down the list of what voters' concerns are," said Bill Carrick, a Los Angeles campaign ad maker who produces TV spots for Angelides. "It's mostly about what they think the candidates are going to do that's going to impact their lives."

Carrick also questioned whether likability played much of a role in the victories of California's three previous governors: Gray Davis, Pete Wilson and George Deukmejian. None of the three was known for wit, charm or personal magnetism.

But unlike any of them, Angelides is running against a world-famous muscleman who has devoted much of his adult life to projecting a favorable image on camera for millions of fans.

Also, analysts say, there are specific aspects of Angelides' personality that risk putting off voters who will get to know him mainly through television news and campaign ads over the next 12 weeks.

Angelides, a Harvard graduate, seems at times to strike an "I-know-everything" attitude, and he can get carried away with a pugnacious speaking style, said Joseph Tuman, a professor of political communication at San Francisco State.

"He comes across as a little caustic," Tuman said. "There is that edge to him."

In an interview, Angelides, 53, joked that Schwarzenegger would soon be forced "to deal with my charisma and likability in this contest."

On a more serious note, he said Californians would get a chance "to see who I am, see my family, get to know me."

"They're going to see someone who's always stood up for what I believe is right, who has a very close-knit family, who despite the spin of columnists and pundits has had the same friends all his life."

He described himself and his wife, Julie, as "pretty simple people" who had raised their children in the same Sacramento neighborhood where they had grown up in the 1950s and '60s.

"He's not a larger-than-life mega-celebrity," said Angelides consultant Eli Attie, a television writer and former Al Gore speechwriter. "But he is somebody who's intelligent and thoughtful, and real and genuine, and reads a lot, and knows a lot about the issues."

To be sure, Schwarzenegger's personality is not entirely an asset for the governor. His penchant for making spontaneous remarks that backfire poses constant political risk. He set off an uproar on conservative talk radio last month by saying that a woman's angry remarks to him on illegal immigration had exposed him to the "intensity of prejudice" among some Californians.

Also, even as the governor's popularity ratings have rebounded this year, women still view Schwarzenegger less favorably than men do, polls show. And the Angelides campaign is trying to turn the governor's knack for showmanship into a liability, calling him a "photo-op" governor who is "all shtick and bravado," as Attie put it.

Still, Schwarzenegger is extremely well known to virtually all California voters, while Angelides is still trying to introduce himself to many of them. And as the Democrat has tried to become better known, Schwarzenegger and the Republican Party have sought to sully his reputation with attack ads that follow an even tougher ad assault on Angelides by his vanquished Democratic primary rival, state Controller Steve Westly.

So far, Angelides has made minimal effort to sketch his biography for Californians. In television ads, the main vehicle for statewide candidates to reach voters, he has said nothing about his family's Greek roots, his upbringing in Sacramento, his work for a state assemblyman, his business as a tract-house developer or his rebuilding of a nearly collapsed state Democratic Party as its chairman in the early 1990s.

Instead, Angelides has highlighted his stands on schools, healthcare, taxes and the environment, portraying himself as gutsy enough to stand up to Schwarzenegger when the governor was most popular. His three daughters have appeared as character references, saying Angelides taught them to "do what's right" and "reach for our dreams."

To the extent that voters have come to know Angelides, many have not warmed up to him, polls show. The chill was apparent in recent conversations with a dozen voters in the San Fernando Valley, a strongly Democratic area where Schwarzenegger did well in the 2003 recall, but where Angelides would need to prevail if he is to win statewide.

Ray Rosales of Van Nuys, a Democrat who audits defense contracts, said he preferred Schwarzenegger over Angelides, mainly on economic and environmental grounds, but also on the basis of personality.

"Sometimes you need to have a certain charisma, especially if you're going to hold the highest state position," said Rosales, 51, citing the need of any governor to sway state and federal lawmakers.

Another Democrat, retired West Hills film technician Chuck Ferris, 69, described Angelides as "not much of a personality." "Dull," said Ferris, who is learning toward Schwarzenegger. "That's all I can say: Dull."

And Northridge teacher Wendy Lund, 58, another Democrat, described Angelides as "kind of a cocky know-it-all — thinks he can fix everything."

"I'm not thrilled with what we have right now, but at least there's that comfort zone and familiarity," she said of

Schwarzenegger. "I just don't think Angelides is the right replacement."

In campaigning around the state, Angelides has tried to soften his image. On a recent visit with nurses in Glendale, he got some laughs, as he often does, by poking fun at his meager build.

He also has begun to break his habit of reminding people that he attended Harvard. (In March, he told a crowd of educators in Los Angeles: "I happen to have gone to Harvard as an undergraduate." But in Oakland early this month, he did not mention Harvard as he told of his political awakening at college, describing it instead simply as "my campus.")

As Gore, Sen. John Kerry (D-Massachusetts) and others who have sought high office can attest, failure to connect personally with voters can harm a candidacy. Most famously, a sweaty and pale Vice President Richard M. Nixon contrasted poorly in a 1960 presidential debate with the more vibrant Sen. John F. Kennedy, who went on to win.

It remains unclear whether Angelides and Schwarzenegger will debate, but the governor's team is already trying to cast a negative light on the Democrat's personality — and diminish his stature along the way.

Steve Schmidt, Schwarzenegger's campaign manager, called Angelides "fundamentally unlikable." The governor has been "talking about big things, so he looks big," Schmidt said. "Phil Angelides is talking about small things, petty things. He's making small attacks, so he looks small."

Some independent analysts are skeptical of the value of such personal attacks. "I think the Schwarzenegger people, they're really going to be scraping the bottom of the barrel if they try to make the story line 'we've got the guy with the winning personality,'" said Shanto Iyengar, a professor of political science and communications at Stanford University.

Carrick, the Angelides media consultant, called Schmidt's description of Angelides a "crock." He said shortcomings with Schwarzenegger's image had led the governor to minimize personal appearances in his own reelection ads, and show city skyline and beach scenes instead.

"They're trying to make people feel better about the state," Carrick said, "because they can't make people feel any better about him."
