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Tepid Voters Favor Davis

Times poll shows the governor's lead stems from a dislike of Simon, not from incumbent's popularity. Most think state is on wrong track.

By Mark Z. Barabak
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One week before election day, Democrat Gray Davis is clinging to a steady lead over Republican Bill Simon Jr., but widespread discontent with the incumbent has kept him from pulling away in the governor's race, according to a new Los Angeles Times poll.

Californians remain underwhelmed by their choices: More than half of likely voters in the poll say their pick is merely the best of a bad lot. And they give Davis dismal ratings on most issues facing the state. A majority believe that California is on the wrong track and just about half consider Davis a poor leader.

And yet, by 45% to 36%, those likely to cast ballots next Tuesday say that they will vote to reelect Davis to a second four-year term, according to the survey completed Sunday night. Eleven percent of the likely voters were backing other candidates and 8% were undecided. The numbers were largely unchanged from a Times poll conducted four weeks ago.

Davis' advantage stems almost entirely from the fact that, unpopular as he is, Simon is held in even worse regard.

"Gov. Davis can't make up his mind whether to put his right shoe on his right foot. He sits there and does nothing," said Leona Wise, a 70-year-old college librarian and Democrat from South Pasadena who consented to a follow-up interview. That said, Wise continued, "if push comes to shove" and she absolutely had to, she would vote for Davis, because she believes his GOP rival "is an idiot."

Negative assessments of Simon were shared by nearly 6 in 10 likely voters, the survey found. Only about a third had a favorable view of the Los Angeles businessman, a first-time political candidate who has been the subject of millions of dollars worth of Davis attack ads. The governor is scarcely more popular, even though he has shifted the tone of his advertising lately to a more positive message in hopes of buffing his image. A little more than 4 in 10 likely voters had a favorable impression of Davis, while 56% viewed him unfavorably.

In other statewide contests, Democrats were leading all seven down-ballot races for offices such as lieutenant governor, attorney general and treasurer. But several of the contests have tightened over the last month and two of them—the fights for controller and secretary of state—have turned into genuine horse races.

In the contest for controller, Democrat Steve Westly was marginally ahead of Republican Tom McClintock, 41% to 37%. In the race for secretary of state, Democrat Kevin Shelley was leading Republican Keith Olberg, 41% to 35%. In both races, the lead was within the poll's margin of error.

Elsewhere on the ballot, a pair of measures dealing with fiscal matters received favorable marks from likely voters. Proposition 47, a bond measure to relieve school overcrowding and repair aging facilities, was supported by 62% of those surveyed and opposed by 27%. Proposition 49, the Arnold Schwarzenegger-backed initiative to promote after-school programs, was ahead 57% to 33%.

A third measure on the Nov. 5 ballot, dealing with the state's election laws, was trailing among likely voters. The initiative, Proposition 52, would allow eligible Californians to register to vote as late as election day. Thirty-five percent approved and 57% were opposed to the measure.

For all the events of the past month—including a candidate debate and a flap over a misfiring attack by Simon on Davis' fund-raising—the fundamental dynamic of the governor's race has remained largely unchanged. At this point, just about three-quarters of the likely voters said they had made up their minds and an additional 15% said they were pretty certain how they would vote. Of the 11% who were still considering their choices, a bare majority were Democrats, about a third were Republicans and the rest were independents.

Among those wavering is Sharon Nelson, a Democrat in Redwood City. She is unimpressed with Davis' lackluster performance over the last four years. "I don't think he has his finger on the pulse of the economy," said the 55-year-old accountant. "With all the money that's been pumped into the state for education, I still haven't seen a positive thing with that. Those are the two main things on my agenda."

But if she had to decide right now, Nelson said, she would probably "go with the status quo."

"I don't know much about Simon to take that leap of faith," Nelson said, adding that the one thing she did know about—his false accusation that Davis had illegally accepted campaign cash on state property—was "mudslinging to the nth degree. You don't put out damaging [information] like that without any due diligence."

The combination of discontent, ambivalence and disgust that Nelson expressed appears to be widely shared by her fellow Californians.

Overall, a majority of likely voters polled expressed dissatisfaction with the state of their state and unhappiness with the man they elected nearly four years ago to run it.

Fifty-two percent believed things are on the wrong track in California; 51% disapproved of the way Davis has performed as governor.

Usually, such poor ratings would signal near-certain defeat at the polls. But Davis is running ahead of Simon, in good measure because many likely voters believe the Republican nominee would do an even worse job.

On many issues—education, homeland security, crime, handling the economy—likely voters tended to prefer Davis, often by a sizable margin. The sole exception was energy, the source of much of the displeasure with the Democrat because of his hesitant handling of last year's electricity crisis. By 41% to 32%, likely voters said Simon would do a better job on the energy issue; 18% said neither candidate would outperform the other.

Davis was also favored over Simon on other, less tangible measures. The incumbent was rated a stronger leader than his GOP challenger, came closer to sharing voters' values and was thought to display more honesty and integrity than the Republican hopeful, though nearly a quarter said neither candidate won out in that category.

By 69% to 12%, an overwhelming majority of likely voters said Davis knew more about California than Simon, who moved to the state just about 12 years ago.

The governor also appeared to have won favor with his action on a pair of contentious bills that reached his desk in the final days of the legislative session. He signed a measure that requires independent mediation when labor talks stall between growers and farm workers. And he vetoed legislation that would have allowed illegal immigrants to obtain California drivers' licenses if they were applying for U.S. citizenship.

Both moves proved popular with a substantial majority of likely voters, with more than 6 in 10 backing them. Latinos likely to cast ballots on Nov. 5 were even more supportive, even though some Latino political leaders have angrily criticized the veto on the driver's license bill. Two-thirds of likely Latino voters approved of the veto; about three-quarters backed Davis' signing of the farm workers bill.

Overall, the Democrat enjoyed 57% support among likely Latino voters, compared with 25% for Simon. The GOP hopeful was slightly ahead among white voters, 44% to 36%.

The two were running essentially even among men, while Davis enjoyed a substantial advantage—49% to 29%—among likely women voters.

Geographically, Davis was running far ahead of Simon in the Democratic strongholds of Los Angeles County and the San Francisco Bay Area, with Green Party candidate Peter Camejo receiving 11% backing in the north. The two major candidates were running close to even in Orange County, San Diego and the Inland Empire, with 44% support for Simon and 41% for Davis. The governor was leading Simon 43% to 36% in rural Northern California and the Sacramento region, but Simon was leading 43% to 36% in the Central Valley.

The biggest imponderable in next Tuesday's election is turnout. With dissatisfaction so widespread among Californians, experts are predicting record low participation. That means the depth of each candidate's support could prove important, because it could dictate whether backers actually show up at the polls.

Neither candidate, the poll made clear, has bowled the state over. Only 2 in 5 of likely voters interviewed said they liked the candidate they supported; 56% described their choices as the best of a bad lot.

Raedine Martinez, a 55-year-old San Diego Republican, may skip the governor's contest. It would be the first time she has failed to vote in a top-of-the-ticket race in more than 30 years.

Of the two main choices, she described Davis as "wishy-washy," and Simon as untrustworthy.

"I would almost rather not vote," Martinez said, "because I will not vote the party just to vote the party."

Still, Davis was faring marginally better than Simon when it came to the enthusiasm of his supporters.

Nearly half of the governor's backers said they were voting for the Democratic incumbent mostly because they liked him, compared with about 3 in 10 Simon supporters who liked their candidate.

Asked separately why they were supporting the Republican challenger, 38% of Simon's backers said they were doing so because they disliked Davis and just 18% said it was because they considered Simon the best choice of the field.

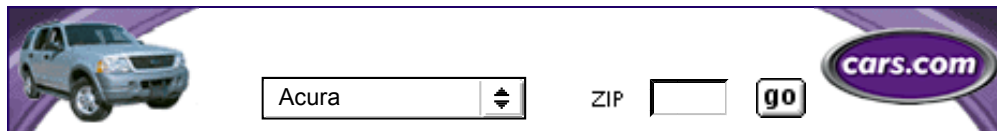
Twelve percent said they were supporting Simon to bring about a change in Sacramento.

Among Davis supporters, 24% were backing the governor as the best choice, 16% because of his job performance and 14% because of his stand on issues. One-tenth of the Davis voters said they were backing the incumbent out of dislike for Simon.

The Times Poll, under the direction of Susan Pinkus, interviewed 879 likely voters statewide from Oct. 22 through Oct. 27. The margin of sampling error is 3 percentage points.

Claudia Vaughn, data management supervisor for the Times Poll, contributed to this report.

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