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As governor slides in polls, citizens sound off

Opinions around state range from 'nobody likes this guy' to 'I like what he's doing' to 'I understand he's trying to renege on a deal'

- [Carla Marinucci, Chronicle Political Writer](#)

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In California, voters have seen this movie before: A governor sails into power with the wind at his back, his popularity cresting high. Then storms hit, troubles grow and enemies become emboldened.

Earlier versions have starred Pete Wilson and Gray Davis, but now a real action hero is in the role, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who billed himself the people's governor.

With job approval ratings that have dipped to near 40 percent, Schwarzenegger is facing a unified opposition party and a band of teachers, nurses and activists who are angered at being labeled special interests.

With his call for a special election this year, the Republican governor said he intends to take issues directly to voters -- redistricting, budget caps, pension changes, teacher pay -- but the risky move has voters worried.

The Chronicle visited four communities across California last week -- from the state's newest suburb to cities with overcrowded schools to those beset by commuter gridlock -- to talk about the governor, his vision for the state and his call for reform.

Mountain House

(San Joaquin County)

In this freshly minted suburb, one of California's newest communities, streets with names like Tradition Way wind around the skeletons of homes going up, row upon row, like a waiting army in the green hills above Livermore.

The name Mountain House long has been associated with an Altamont Pass bar frequented by bikers and rockers. Now the suburb is being marketed to thousands of new homeowners as California's "most spectacular master-planned community" in a gateway to the Bay Area -- expected to be home to 43,000 residents in the former farming region near Tracy.

Voters here wonder whether Schwarzenegger can help solve the problems that come with booming growth.

"It seems like California is facing a lot of issues, and if you keep taking money away from the communities, I don't see how it benefits anyone," says Lynelle Duncan, 32, sitting surrounded by children, Hayden, 3, Abigayle, 5, and Andrew, 7 -- in the courtyard of their new neighborhood school, Wicklund Elementary.

Duncan moved to Mountain House with her husband, Jason, in September from Virginia; while she marvels at this fresh place full of beautiful parks and still-empty custom homes, she also worries about whether her community will get the services it needs.

Mountain House is not even on the map yet -- the closest hospitals are in Tracy and Livermore -- along with the closest major shopping. Nearly everything requires a commute -- at \$2.60-plus per gallon of gas.

Her husband, a software engineer, makes a grueling trip daily to Oakland and back -- a battle with traffic and BART that takes two hours each way and threatens to become more expensive if BART raises its fares, Duncan noted.

"He gives up time with the family, and it's a sacrifice, but he'd do it longer for a good education for the kids," she said, adding one of the draws of Mountain House was the promise of new schools. "But I don't get the feeling that education is a strong priority for the governor. He says it's a priority, but not in the way we'd like to see."

That's because while teachers are working hard, and parents volunteer countless hours, the new elementary school has "a beautiful library with no books, and a beautiful computer lab" lacking software and computers, she said. "I've never experienced this, and I've lived in several states ... the infrastructure isn't there.

"I know there's issues with budget and money," she said. "(But) I understand he's trying to renege on a deal" to provide full funding to education.

Across the road, another Wicklund school mom, Thida Penn, 35, agreed. "I wish the funding was there," she sighed, lamenting the school's struggle for books and materials as she pushed a baby stroller with neighbor Christina Fortes, 31, a mother of two.

"We both voted for Schwarzenegger," said Fortes, a Republican. "He talked the talk then."

"He's not doing such a good job now," Penn said.

Fortes, a nurse in a Tracy hospital, said, "I understand there were shortfalls, and he couldn't solve everything ... but schools and health care are important."

San Bernardino

It is an astounding site, the army of 1,400 kids who attend kindergarten through fifth grade at Lincoln Elementary School here in what's known as the Inland Empire, 60 miles east of Los Angeles. And they come to the classroom in one of California's largest schools with plenty of challenges: 99 percent of the students are at poverty level and use the free breakfast and lunch programs each day.

Patricia Kahler, 33 -- one of 12 kindergarten teachers -- looks around affectionately at the

clusters of grateful kids eating lunch on the playground.

"This is my heart," she said, motioning to the ragtag apartment buildings and homes with iron bars on the windows near the school yard. "This is personal to me. I came through the free lunch program. I know what it is to struggle and eat beans for days and days, and always wear hand-me-downs and shop at thrift stores.

"I tell my kids every day: You be proud, proud that your mom and dad are giving you everything they have ... be proud that you're in school."

In a state where public education is criticized as failing its children -- and the governor has declared the teachers' union a part of the problem -- Kahler is on the front lines of the debate. A parent of 3- and 5-year-old daughters whose husband is a high school algebra teacher, she said Schwarzenegger is the one who has failed Californians.

"He needs to get down here -- and not with a parade, and coffee and cookies," she said last week during a break. "He doesn't understand the everyday lives of people, who struggle on a day-to-day basis."

Indeed, at Lincoln, said school counselor Tim Odening, the challenges of educating kids goes beyond mere test scores.

"We have kids who live in cars and kids who live in motels," he said. The vast majority of Lincoln's kids are Spanish-speaking, and many are transient kids who show up one week and drop out the next, when mom can't make the rent or dad's construction job goes away.

That's one reason the governor's call for merit pay for teachers strikes a bitter chord.

"Our kids come early just to eat the free breakfast, and they're coming in saying that so-and-so's mom got shot yesterday," Kahler said. "They're supposed to do well on their tests so the teacher can get a bonus?"

Other heads nod.

"I voted for the guy," says Chip Fiacco, 43, who has been a kindergarten teacher here for 17 years. "I thought he was really behind education ... but now I feel like we got stabbed in the back.

"This is an inner city school. ... We're not here for the money or the prestige. We're here because we care, and these teachers are working extra hard."

Danville

The lunch crowd is talkative -- and opinionated -- inside Elliot's Bar on Main Street, a place where years of discussions about politicians, taxes, growth and jobs are all but etched into the worn walls.

Denzil "Mac" McCuskey, 71, the commander of the local Veterans of Foreign Wars post, sits with friends here in the center of town, a ranching area in Contra Costa County turned tony suburb where voters supported Davis' recall by a whopping 20 percentage points.

"He's doing just fine," McCuskey said of Schwarzenegger, adding he voted for him in the 2003 recall and will again should the governor run for re-election next year.

"He's trying to do the right thing, but that's difficult: The Legislature is on the opposite side of the fence."

McCuskey, a loyal Republican voter, says he's glad the governor is taking on the Democrats who have the majority in the Legislature -- while also fighting off big interests like unions. He's trying to break gridlock -- against the odds.

"There are two very big issues he's trying to address," McCuskey said. "That's the budget and the immigration problem. And they're both costing the state."

Down the bar, heads nod in agreement.

"I'm a Republican, and I voted for Arnold, and the recall," says Dan Hromatko, 39, who owns a Danville construction business. "He's doing a good job. Maybe he's not as tactful as some politicians, but I like what he's doing."

Hromatko said the governor is taking hits from unions and Democrats who have put their own interests first. With Davis, he scoffs, "it was spend, spend, spend -- and don't be accountable."

Gavin Tefs, 51, an electrical contractor, said Schwarzenegger is confronting difficult issues like illegal immigration. And it must be addressed, he said, because small businesspeople -- especially in construction -- are finding it tougher and tougher to compete with the waves of undocumented workers who will work for less and are paid in cash.

Thomas Johnson, 54, a general contractor, insisted the governor's troubles have been exaggerated by his enemies. "I don't believe in the polls," he said. "Who's taking them?"

All three say that California has improved under Schwarzenegger: They have more than enough work, and thanks to low interest rates, there is a booming demand for their services, they said.

Problems exist, but Johnson said, "I want someone who takes care of the people, who takes care of this state. We voted for him because we thought he was bulletproof."

So far, they said, they still do.

Rancho Cucamonga

(San Bernardino County)

Outside the city's day laborer center, a trailer and parking lot, clusters of immigrant workers stand at the ready to be hired for their assignments of the day -- gardening, construction, cement work, bricklaying.

A few blocks away, Rene Lemus, 45, an immigrant from El Salvador, is at work in his shop, Baseline Upholstery -- where he and his crew are working on recliners, boats, couches

and chairs.

Here's the problem with the governor, Lemus said: "Latinos voted for him ... and now, nobody likes this guy. He has no feeling for them, or for the way most people live."

There's a contrast here in the Inland Empire, a Republican stronghold that voted for Schwarzenegger 2-1 over the crowd of other candidates in the 2003 recall. His numbers among conservatives here remain solid -- but there are also challenges. The region suffers some of the state's heaviest air pollution and worst traffic congestion thanks in part to its rapid growth.

The governor's stances on immigration have managed to fire up those on both sides of the political divide.

Schwarzenegger's praise of the Minuteman Project, an armed volunteer group aiming to patrol the borders to guard against illegal crossing, has drawn conservative support; in nearby Chino, an offshoot of the Arizona-based group has announced they intend to start a California branch.

But in Rancho Cucamonga, the governor's support looks shakier among Latinos, whose effect on the economy is evident in the numbers of family-owned small businesses lining the streets.

"He's an immigrant himself ... and he's thinking of his own interests," Lemus said. "The economy here depends on all the workers. And a lot of them are immigrants."

He motions down the street toward the day laborer center, which he says fuels the economy and provides workers to build and maintain the area's homes. He acknowledges many of the men are undocumented. But he said the state would be better served if they could get driver's licenses so local communities would have a record of them.

Many Latinos voted for Schwarzenegger, Lemus said, because they were impressed by his celebrity.

"He's good at acting, not politics," said Ramon Tejada, who works for Lemus. "He ought to stick to pictures."

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