

California gubernatorial primary reflects alienation from US two-party system

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14 June 2006

The record-low turnout in last week's California primary elections for governor and other offices reflects widespread disaffection with the two parties of big business, not only in California, but across the country.

In the primaries, voters selected the candidates of the Democratic and Republican parties who will run in November for state and local offices, as well as for the US Congress. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger easily won the Republican nomination for a second term, while Phil Angelides, the state treasurer, defeated Steve Westly, the state controller, to win the Democratic nomination for governor.

Voters rejected two state-wide ballot measures, one that would have funded preschool education by increasing taxes on the rich, and another to fund libraries through a bond issue.

Most of those eligible to vote did not participate. The Secretary of State's office recorded a turnout of just over 30 percent, or less than 5 million out of approximately 15-and-a-half million registered voters in the state. This is the lowest percentage turnout for a primary election in California since figures were first kept in 1946.

In spite of broad discontent over the policies of the Schwarzenegger administration, reflected in the rejection of ballot measures pushed by the governor last November, there was little support for either of the Democratic nominees. Both are millionaires, and Westly used \$35 million of his own fortune, accumulated during his tenure as an executive at eBay, to fund his campaign.

Angelides is a former developer with his own substantial fortune. He had support from fellow developer and mentor Angelo Tsakopoulos, who, with his daughter, reportedly spent \$8 million helping to get Angelides elected. Angelides also won the official

support of the Democratic Party apparatus, including the major trade unions, Democratic senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and most of the major California newspapers.

In running his campaign, Angelides sought to downplay his reputation as a liberal anti-Schwarzenegger candidate. While the Democratic Party as a whole collaborated with Schwarzenegger throughout much of the governor's term, Angelides positioned himself as a critic. This was aimed at retaining some credibility for the Democrats in the event that public opinion shifted decidedly against the Schwarzenegger administration. At the time, the Democratic Party, and in particular Westly, were working closely with the governor in passing a right-wing budget that included sharp cuts in social programs.

The decision of the Democratic Party establishment to throw its weight behind Angelides is in part motivated by concern over the alienation of most California voters from both political parties. Party officials are worried that this sentiment could find channels outside the two-party system.

Early in the campaign, Angelides raised a proposal to increase taxes on the wealthy in order to fund education programs, part of an attempt to adopt a "left" line that also included raising environmental issues. Westly ran as a "moderate" and attacked Angelides for his tax proposals.

The cynicism of Angelides' reform proposals was highlighted in a *Los Angeles Times* article published June 8. Author Mark Barabak noted that the "trick now for Angelides is to scamper back toward the political center..." The article quoted Paul Maslin, a top Angelides strategist, who emphasized that the

Democratic gubernatorial candidate was in fact “a moderate liberal” and a “fiscally conservative state treasurer, whose true portrait would emerge over the next several months.”

Both Democratic candidates officially endorsed Proposition 82, which would have paid for preschool education from a tax increase on individuals making more than \$400,000, but neither sought to make it an issue in the election.

The results of the gubernatorial primary must be seen within the context of recent political developments in California. Last November, voters in the state resoundingly defeated a series of ballot initiatives pushed by Schwarzenegger, including one attacking California teachers and another that would have instituted spending caps.

Schwarzenegger decided that his chances for winning a second term required a change in tactics. He demonstratively turned his back on the extreme right of his own party and made overtures to the Democrats, who control the state legislature.

In late 2005, Schwarzenegger brought in Susan Kennedy, a Democrat who played a key role in formulating the right-wing economic policies of former governor Gray Davis, as his new chief of staff. The California Democratic Party hailed the move as a sign of bipartisanship, which, in fact, it was—a bipartisan effort to impose unpopular economic measures.

Kennedy’s appointment was followed in May of this year by the installation of Westly’s former chief of staff, Linda Adams, to head California’s Environmental Protection Agency. Schwarzenegger also brought in Matthew Dowd to run his 2006 gubernatorial campaign. Dowd is a former Democratic strategist who helped manage President Bush’s reelection campaign in 2004.

To carry through this shift to something approaching a coalition government, the governor has also courted the unions.

In recent months, the two parties have collaborated in passing components of the so-called Strategic Growth Plan, which includes proposals for infrastructural development demanded by businesses. It is part of a broader budget proposal that involves further cuts in some social programs combined with increased spending on others.

The state has a substantial surplus from last year,

which the governor has sought to use to temper opposition to his previous proposals. He has made clear, however, that he will move quickly to resume across-the-board cuts in social programs if the economic situation worsens, which is expected to happen over the coming months.

It is likely that the California Democratic Party, which has no serious political differences with Schwarzenegger and is content to serve as his partner, will merely go through the motions in Angelides’ election campaign and make no serious effort to unseat the incumbent governor.

The Socialist Equality Party is petitioning to place John Burton on the ballot for US Congress in the 29th District, centered in Pasadena. Burton is the only candidate running on a socialist program and calling for a break with both parties of American big business.



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