

## Opinion:

### CALIFORNIA VOTERS REJECT EDUCATION REFORMS

By Alan Bonsteel, School Reform News, vol. 10, no. 1, January 2006

In a California special election on November 8, a slate of four reform initiatives, all with a bearing on the future of California's beleaguered K-12 schools, was voted down. Three of the initiatives had been qualified by allies of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, while a fourth, a Paycheck Protection initiative that would have required public employee labor unions to get the permission of their members before using their money for political purposes, had been qualified independently but was embraced by Schwarzenegger in October.

The four initiatives included Proposition 74, a modest reform of teacher tenure; Proposition 75, Paycheck Protection; Proposition 76, a budget reform initiative to fix California's chronic budget deficits; and Proposition 77, which would have reformed California's gerrymandered legislative districts. In the last of the slate, Proposition 77, it was debatable whether making California legislative districts more competitive would have helped or hurt teacher union influence; however, the most important player in California politics, the California Teachers Association, clearly saw it as being in its interest to perpetuate noncompetitive legislative races and worked hard to preserve the gerrymandered districts.

In addition to the governor's slate of four initiatives, four other unrelated initiatives that qualified for the same ballot were also voted down, making it a clean sweep of all eight initiatives on the ballot losing. Opponents of the governor's slate characterized the special election as an unnecessary one, with issues that could have waited for the next scheduled election in June 2006. The voters seemed to agree, and seemed to be in a "Vote No on Everything" mood.

Schwarzenegger was elected during a Wild West-style recall election of former Governor Gray Davis in October 2003. On the same ballot in which voters decided whether Davis would stay in office, they were also asked to vote on his replacement, should he lose the recall. Schwarzenegger bested 134 other candidates, including a sumo wrestler and a starlet of erotic films, with 90 of those candidates appearing simultaneously at one point on the Jay Leno show.

With his popularity in the early stages of his governorship in the 60% range, Schwarzenegger planned a "sequel" of a "Year of Reform" to fix what he termed a "broken system" controlled by union bosses that protected incompetent teachers and generated huge budget deficits.

During the most recent fiscal year, Schwarzenegger, battling such a budget deficit, was still able to increase K-12 public school funding by \$3 billion at a time when most public services were being pared back. However, the teachers unions accused him of renegeing on a commitment to increase K-12 funding by an additional \$2 billion, and ran ads even prior to the election campaign accusing Schwarzenegger of having “reduced” public school funding by that \$2 billion.

Proposition 76, the budget reform initiative, was especially vulnerable to being characterized as “anti-public school,” because it admittedly could have resulted in lower public school spending. However, the labor unions were successful in characterizing the whole slate of initiatives as undermining public schools.

With almost all public employee unions aggrieved by the budget cutbacks made in an only partly-successful attempt to balance the latest budget, the unions banded together to discredit Schwarzenegger, with teachers, nurses, firefighters, and policemen dogging him at every public appearance and dominating television news coverage of his speeches. As a result, by the time election day arrived, Schwarzenegger’s popularity had plummeted to the 30% range.

Part of the logic in qualifying a slate of initiatives for the ballot was to force the public employee unions to fight on multiple fronts. However, the slate also angered virtually all of California’s public employee unions, including the newly-powerful prison guards union, and they united as they never had before in opposing the slate, outspending the reformers by about 3-to-1 and mustering more grassroots workers to knock on doors and staff phone banks.

Especially frustrating to school reformers was the loss of Proposition 75, Paycheck Protection, which, in the early stage of the campaign, led strongly in every opinion poll and was supported even by union households. However, the incessant union-sponsored television advertising against it took its toll. On election night, with absentee ballots counted first, it started out with a 57-43 lead in the vote count, only to fade to a 46.5-53.5 loss when the final vote was tallied. California is dominated like no other state by its public school labor unions: the California Teachers Association, the California Federation of Teachers, and the California School Employees Association. A win on Proposition 75 would have opened many doors to advancing school reform in California, but it was not to be.

Larry Sand, a Los Angeles Unified School District teacher and education reform activist, commented that “The biggest problem was that the governor, who obviously was very identified with the propositions, took a pummeling from the Democrats all summer and remained silent. The other side gained a lot of ground during that time, and the last minute flurry to overcome it was too little/too late.”

Peter Hanley, a longtime school choice activist and the executive director of California Parents for Educational Choice, observed that “The chances of passing Proposition 75, Paycheck Protection, were weakened by including every labor union that

had even one public employee. That brought in essentially every labor union in California because even building trades unions have small percentages that work somewhere in state, county, and/or local government. These allied themselves with the powerful nurses, prison guards, and teachers unions.”

Two days after the defeat, in a televised speech Schwarzenegger commented that his error was in moving too quickly. “These kinds of reforms we’re talking about—maybe it takes a year, two years, three years,” he said. “And it takes more collaboration and more working together. So I got that message.”

He also observed, “If I were able to do another Terminator movie, I would have the Terminator travel back in time to tell Arnold not to have a special election.”