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The Tax Extension Election: Why it's an Uphill Battle



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The voters may have a simple way of resolving the state budget crisis: do away with state government. That's a conclusion you can take from an unusual survey of opinions on government conducted for California Forward by Viewpoint Learning and released last week.

The survey looked at voter opinions of the various levels of government. Virtually without exception, respondents had more faith in local government to fix problems than state government. But neither level did particularly well. The survey asked how good a job STATE government was doing making California a good place to live: 21 percent said excellent or good; 75 percent said fair or poor. When asked about LOCAL government, the numbers were 36 percent excellent and good; 60 percent fair and poor.

When given 12 factors that kept state government from working well, too much "bureaucracy, waste and fraud" ranked first with 72 percent saying this was a big problem. It was followed by "political leaders don't listen to regular people" (67 percent) and "elected officials aren't held accountable for their action" (66 percent).

When asked a series of "agree or disagree" questions, 77 percent agreed that "too much money is spent on state programs that don't do what they are

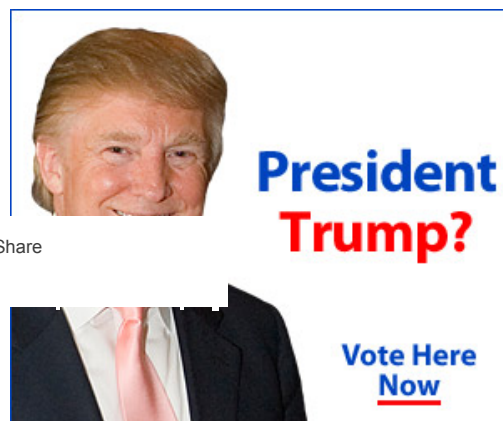
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higher to pay for the services Californians things, the survey asked, 81 percent said, provide good results."

low should we improve of programs that don't

This survey provides a window into two th t why the voters turned down every tax increase proposal on the November 2010 ballot, despite a

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statewide Democratic landslide, and the difficulties Gov. Brown and Democrats will have selling the tax extension on a June special election ballot.

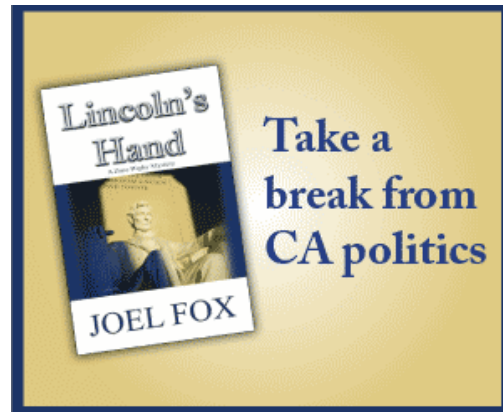
First, extending current taxes might work but enacting new taxes are definitely out. So Brown and the Democrats face a serious political problem; they have to have a June special election before the 2009 tax hikes expire. After June, getting them back would be a new tax, not extending an old tax. Their window for action is very narrow, and it must include reversing the highly negative view of state spending this survey finds.

Secondly, the voters will not extend the tax hike to balance the budget; the voters are convinced it can be balanced by cutting "bureaucracy, waste and fraud." The only way they might vote to extend the taxes is if they saw the money going to local services. Some 59 percent said they would be open to more taxes if "voters locally have more control over how the money will be spent," and 58 percent want to "give local government more control over revenues because they are more in touch with their communities needs."

But Brown seems to be heading in the opposite direction; his fight with local governments over redevelopment money and other budget actions seems to be sending the signal the state will take money from locals, not return money to them.

And the cuts Brown has proposed work against extending the taxes; the more the state budget is cut the more voters are going to think they are right: there is "bureaucracy, waste and fraud" that can be cut. If the voters are confronted with threats of even more draconian cuts, this survey suggests they will be even happier.

The governor and legislature have prophesized Armageddon for the past five years but budgets have been cut and voters have turned down tax increases, and nothing has happened. Maybe we actually need the \$25 billion in cuts to schools, prisons, local programs that will come without the tax extension to change the public's attitude that it is just a matter of "bureaucracy, waste and fraud." Real cuts, and real agony, may well be necessary before the voters are willing to open their wallets to more taxes.



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