



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on April 26, 2011

Pollsters Claim Californians Want More Taxes

Californians want to be taxed more — at least according to a new Los Angeles Times/USC poll. Governor Jerry Brown (left) has been traveling around the state attempting to generate support for his plan to balance the budget by spending reductions and tax increases. The poll reports that 60 percent of Californians, including a majority of both Republicans and Democrats, want a vote in June to renew several tax increases that will otherwise end on July 1.



Republicans have pushed a different proposal, which would not involve an election to retain the tax increases but instead would reduce state expenditures by almost one-third.

The poll results, however, are not quite as encouraging to statisticians such as Jerry Brown as it would seem from a cursory overview. When those polled were asked what was responsible for the state budget crisis, 41 percent — easily the largest response — named the wasteful spending of money by state leaders; nine percent thought the cause of the financial crisis was California's bad business climate; 20 percent blamed the national recession; only 13 percent blamed the problem on inadequate help to the poor and middle class; and finally, 15 percent — a significant number — either did not know or had a response that did not fit the questionnaire. Curiously, respondents were not asked if high tax rates might be part of the budget problem, even though the poll was used as evidence that Californians would support higher taxes.

When asked how the budget crisis should be solved, 53 percent of respondents favored a combination of cutting spending and raising taxes. But the way that question was phrased masks the obvious feelings of Californians. In the same question, 33 percent opted for cutting spending alone, while only nine percent favored raising taxes alone. Thus, the tendency in the responses is clearly to prefer cutting spending over cutting taxes.

Question 38 provides one of the most shocking answers, which ought to debunk any value in this particular poll. In relation to Governor Brown's plan, the question asked respondents to opt for either "favor strongly," "favor," "oppose somewhat," "oppose strongly," or "don't know." The support for the plan, though obviously weak, was presented as strong: 33 percent of Californians favored Brown's plan while 26 percent opposed it. A whopping 40 percent, however, answered "don't know." These responses were after Brown had crisscrossed the state attempting to sell his plan to residents. A more honest interpretation of Question 38 would be that even after a full court press by a savvy Governor to drum up support for his idea, only one in three Californians supported it. Nevertheless, Dan Schnur, Director of the Jesse Unruh Institute of Politics at USC, opined: "It looks like Jerry Brown has successfully reframed the discussion. Spending cuts are okay to people in the abstract, but when you get specific they start to



get scared.”

That is not what a close reading of the next question, number 39, shows. After Californians were asked in Question 38 whether they supported the Brown plan or not, the exact same question is asked again in number 39 — but the pollster recites the presumed impact of the cuts (highlighting what might alarm Californians the most) and then describes the Brown plan as “letting the voters decide on the tax part of the budget in a special election.” The poll then asks, “After hearing this information, do you favor or oppose this budget plan proposed by Jerry Brown?” The percentages change, with 52 percent of state residents saying that they support the budget plan while 38 percent oppose it.

This polling certainly appears to be crafted to provide a particular result. What would the answer have been if the question had not mentioned the spending cut particulars at all, but rather recited the loss to individual Californians produced by ending a promised tax cut? What if the pollsters had quoted the average salary of school administrators, or the retirement benefits for public employees in California? One wonders what the answers would have been if the question had been something such as this: “Independent organizations that have reviewed the California state budget have found tens of billions of dollars in waste and fraud. After hearing this information, do you support or oppose the budget plan proposed by Jerry Brown?”

But Question 39 contains an even deeper level of dishonesty. That long query ends by stating that the Brown plan would allow Californians to vote on tax increases. The cumulative 53 percent of respondents who answered in the affirmative would have to include those who thought that voters, not Brown and the state legislature, ought to decide how to resolve the budget crisis. Moreover, Question 55 asks if the legislature should pass a bill to keep the tax increases. Only 42 percent were in favor of the legislature voting to increase taxes while 53 percent opposed that action. Why would respondents oppose the legislature passing a bill to keep the tax increase in place, but favor having a state ballot question on the issue of raising taxes? Surely those who wanted taxes increased would not object to the legislature simply doing that.

There is much evidence that Californians do not want their taxes to be raised. Two years ago, they rejected a tax increase measure. The vote was not even close: State Proposition 1A lost in every single county. That result was widely interpreted then as evidence that Golden State taxpayers felt that they were putting more than enough into the state coffers. Unless the whole mood of the state had changed dramatically — which is not what the election results last November would suggest — then increasing taxes remains very unpopular; however, confused respondents to polls might well be guided into appearing to support higher taxes.

There are many long, confusing questions in the *Los Angeles Times*/USC poll. There are oddities such as Questions 38 and 39, in which the wording of the second question encompasses the first question but includes as “facts” information that would help sway respondents in only one direction. Most curiously, the poll does not include straightforward questions such as, “Which would you favor more to balance the state budget, raising taxes or cutting spending?” or “Do you believe that more spending could be taken out of the state budget without affecting services?”

Ultimately, it does not matter what politicians or even voters in California would “prefer.” High taxes are already driving businesses and productive citizens out of the state. Dr. Arthur Laffer pointed out three decades ago, speaking mainly of the federal government, that revenue begins to decline at a certain point of rising tax rates. It is much easier for a taxpayer in one state (say, Massachusetts) to remain in America but simply move to a nearby state with lower tax rates (e.g., New Hampshire).



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As lovely and blessed a land as California is, it is being looted and gutted by politicians and public employees' unions. Whatever poll results say, Brown and the politicians in Sacramento will not be able to increase tax revenues much longer.



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