



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your

colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for

samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

---

September 20, 2011

# Political Shift in California Trips Brown

By ADAM NAGOURNEY

SACRAMENTO — Jerry Brown ran for governor on the argument that his age and experience — the son of a governor, he has spent a lifetime in politics, including two terms as governor himself 30 years ago — was what California needed to rescue it from a spiral of partisanship and financial decline as destructive as anywhere in the nation.

But 10 months after his return here, a time when Mr. Brown might have hoped to move beyond struggling with the budget crisis that has dragged down this state, his associates say he appears bewildered and stunned by how much Sacramento has changed since he first served.

Mr. Brown has told friends he was unprepared for the extent, in his view, to which Republicans have not made sufficient efforts to accommodate him on critical issues, like putting on the ballot measures to extend taxes to avoid budget cuts.

In one case, Mr. Brown told a friend, he said he felt like “we weren’t even on the same playing field” in negotiating face to face with a Republican lawmaker who would not accept his assertion that most money in the California education budget did not go to administrative costs. Mr. Brown said he finally just stood up and left the meeting.

Again and again, he said, he has found that approaches that once worked — inviting Republicans to

dinner rather than attacking them, offering measured concessions on issues like pension cutbacks and spending, trying to rally public support for what he described as balanced proposals — were no longer effective.

“He is aghast,” said Jodie Evans, a longtime associate who had recently had dinner with Mr. Brown in Oakland. “He reports on some of the conversations, like he couldn’t believe the narrowness or lack of comprehending by public officials. He said, ‘Some of my old tools aren’t going to work.’ ”

But, she added, “He is committed to his purpose, focused and on fire.”

Tom Quinn, a longtime political adviser, said Mr. Brown began the term confident that what had worked before would again. “I was more pessimistic about him getting Republican support,” Mr. Quinn said, adding, “He thought I was too bleak in my assessment.”

Mr. Quinn said: “He is frustrated, he is disappointed. It was entirely different then. It’s awful now. He’s going to have to come up with another approach.”

Republicans strongly disputed Mr. Brown’s view that they have been intransigent, saying that they were prepared to reach a budget compromise but that Mr. Brown was unwilling to give on issues like pension cutbacks or spending caps because of allegiance to labor unions. They said he failed to appreciate how strongly they saw taxes as a threat to the economy.

“The governor needs to stop making excuses and get the job done,” said Senator Bob Dutton, the Republican leader. “When he first got elected, I was truly giving him the benefit of the doubt. But I think he actually thought he could operate the same he did when he was governor last time: Strictly pick off votes. This is a different culture.”

Mr. Dutton added: “He’s all talk and no go. He throws a few scraps out there just to get rid of a few cellphones, let’s get rid of a few cars, let’s demonize the Republicans, and that’s supposed to fix a problem?”

At 73, Mr. Brown is certainly indefatigable and remains exceedingly optimistic, as was clear during a cheerful 45-minute interview in his office last week. He said he would propose another budget next year that again offered the Legislature a choice between raising taxes or imposing more cuts, in the belief that at some point, voter backlash to reductions would push some Republicans to act on taxes.

“I mean, how much less school do you want?” he said.

For all the obstacles, Mr. Brown said he had overseen the passage of an on-time budget for the first time in five years, and sharply reduced the structural budget deficit, producing a markedly better view of California finances from Wall Street.

A Field Poll of California voters released Tuesday reported that Mr. Brown is viewed favorably by 49 percent of respondents; by contrast, 20 percent had a favorable view of the Legislature. Politicians here say the results are respectable given that the state’s high unemployment rate and the partisan battle in the legislature.

“Here’s the problem: in process-oriented journalism we think that because he didn’t get the outcome he wanted, it’s a failure,” said John A. Pérez, the Democratic speaker of the Assembly. “I don’t know if there’s a single thing he could have done differently to get a different outcome. You have to judge him on the ideas and effort.”

That said, Mr. Brown has found himself at a crossroads: He said he could not think of anything he might have done differently, but said he realized that he probably had to find different approaches going forward. The alternative, he said, was to scale back his ambitions and focus only on legislation that can pass with Democratic support.

Even though Democrats outnumber Republicans in the Legislature, state law requires a two-thirds vote on tax bills.

“The Republicans are far less engaged and independent than they were 30 years ago,” Mr. Brown said.

“The Republicans then were very independent. Everything was not a party-line vote.”

Now, he said, “They are afraid. They don’t want to move.”

He added: “You’ve got to adjust to reality. You can’t jump out of a plane without a parachute no matter how much you’d like to get to the ground.”

Some people in both parties thought that Mr. Brown’s experience would give him an advantage in dealing with Republicans not enjoyed by, for instance, President Obama. Mr. Brown said experience had helped, if not as much as he wanted.

“I am working with the Legislature. They are doing stuff. We did get a balanced budget on time. We didn’t get the tax extensions but we got massive cuts that won praise on Wall Street.”

Darrell Steinberg, the Democratic president of the Senate, said: “No amount of experience can overcome the context and the nature of the opposition that he is facing. You always feel that reason will prevail in the end. Sometimes it doesn’t.”

Those gains came about almost entirely because Democrats agreed to huge spending cuts after Mr. Brown failed on taxes. As part of the budget passed in June, more cuts will take effect if revenues do not meet projections, which seems likely.

Mr. Brown’s legacy could very much be defined as being a Democrat who oversaw a huge retrenchment in state government built, in part, by Mr. Brown and his father.

“Managing with less is not pleasant,” Mr. Brown said.

He invoked the National Legion of Decency — an outgrowth of the Roman Catholic Church that stood as a watchdog on moral standards in film — in describing what he said was the decisive power exercised over Republicans by four forces: by anti-tax leaders here and in Washington, by a conservative radio talk show in Los Angeles, and a conservative Web site.

“Any two of those can stop any bill in the Legislature where Republicans are needed,” Mr. Brown said.

Republicans, he added, “basically work for them.”



More in Politics (5 of 28 articles)

OPEN

## Dispute on Disaster Aid Threatens Bill to Avert Government Shutdown

[Read More »](#)