



OPINION > OPINION COLUMNISTS

Hernandez: In California, this is a pocketbook election. Just ask voters

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We at the New California Coalition rang in the new year with a prophesy — that the next California election would not be fought on a strictly partisan map cleaved neatly into partisan blocs. The new divide, we argued, would be between builders and blockers: those who want California to produce housing, jobs, water, energy, safety and accountability — and those content to let scarcity, process and political theater do the governing for them.

Our [new statewide survey](#), conducted by FM3 Research, suggests that we were onto something.

By roughly 2-1, likely 2026 voters prefer candidates who will “focus on California and address the problems facing our state” over candidates who will “fight back against Donald Trump.” Among independents and moderates, the margin is almost identical: 69% choose the California-results candidate. Among Latinos, it is 68%. Among small-business households, 69%.

This is not a red-state fever dream smuggled into California. Trump is as toxic as ever, with 64% registering an unfavorable opinion. The message is more surgical: voters can oppose Trump and still be tired of Sacramento using him as a hall pass for the hard decisions.

That is where the builders-vs-blockers frame becomes more than a slogan. The builder is not merely someone who likes cranes. It is the leader who understands that housing, energy, water, jobs, taxes and homelessness are one cost-of-living ecosystem. The blocker is not merely the neighborhood crank with a CEQA lawyer. It is anyone who treats California’s dysfunction as an acceptable price for ideological purity or bureaucratic comfort. The poll shows voters are done paying that bill.

Our survey’s deeper message is that the thirst for affordability has become California’s unifying ideology.

Inflation and the rising cost of living sit at the top, rated extremely important by 83% of voters, with food, gas and essential goods only two points behind.

But the concern does not stop at the grocery aisle. A nearly identical 81% are stressed about water security. Seventy-five percent are sweating safe, affordable energy. And despite boasting one of the most progressive income taxes in the nation, 76% of likely voters want lower taxes on working- and middle-class families.

Interest groups and lobbyists may tell you something different, but these are not separate issues.

Housing drives commutes. Commutes drive gas bills. Energy prices punish households and small businesses. Water insecurity raises food costs and regional anxiety. Taxes, fees and wild revenue swings deepen the suspicion that Sacramento simply operates a slot machine in place of a budget.

Homelessness is what happens when housing scarcity, addiction, mental illness, disorder and bureaucratic self-protection all attend the same policy potluck, and nobody brings accountability.

The Public Policy Institute of California supplies the grim footnote: California has the nation's highest share of homeowners spending more than half their income on housing costs, 14%, and the third-highest share of renters doing so, 28%. That is not merely a housing crisis. It is a family formation crisis, a workforce crisis and, eventually, a legitimacy crisis.

Our poll findings sharpen the point. Voters prefer a leader focused on making California affordable over other priorities, 55% to 37%.

By a 21-point margin, they prefer building a strong economy and attracting jobs over expanding the social safety net.

They prefer working with major employers over fighting corporate greed, 53% to 41%. This is the survival math for a gubernatorial field that has been celebrated primarily for its ability to underwhelm.

Perhaps most striking in our survey, voters want a government that can build trust. Eighty percent rate increasing transparency and accountability to reduce waste, fraud and abuse in state and local government as extremely important — just one point behind inflation and the rising cost of living.

In other words, accountability has become a pocketbook issue. Californians do not see waste as an abstraction; they see it as one more hidden tax on a state already too expensive to inhabit.

Voters are not asking Sacramento to abandon its values. They are asking it to make those values livable — in homes built, bills lowered, water delivered, power kept reliable, businesses kept open and families kept here.

California voters are sending a clear message to aspiring state leaders from governor on down: political theater doesn't pay the bills.

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