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Times/USC Dornsife poll: California voters want public employees to help ease state's financial troubles

A cap on pensions and a later retirement age — even for current public employees — are supported by the poll's respondents.

By Shane Goldmacher, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Sacramento

California voters want government employees to give up some retirement benefits to help ease the state's financial problems, favoring a cap on pensions and a later age for collecting them, according to a new [poll](#).



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Voter support for rolling back benefits available to few outside the public sector comes as Gov. Jerry Brown and Republicans in the Legislature haggle over changes to the pension system as part of state budget negotiations. Such benefits have been a flashpoint of national debate this year, and the poll shows that Californians are among those who perceive public retirement plans to be too costly.



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Voters appear ready to embrace changes not just for future hires but also for current employees who have been promised the benefits under contract.



Seventy percent of respondents said they supported a cap on pensions for current and future public employees. Nearly as many, 68%, approved of raising the amount of money government workers should be required to contribute to their retirement. Increasing the age at which government employees may collect pensions was favored by 52%.

Although pension costs today account for just a fraction of the state budget, they are putting local governments under considerable financial strain, and analysts say effects on the state may not be far off.

"It's pretty clear that there's broad support for making changes in the area of pensions," said Democratic pollster Stanley Greenberg, who co-directed the bipartisan poll for The Times and the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences.

Many public safety officers can retire at 50 with a pension equal to 3% of their final salary for each year

worked — for example, 60% of salary after 20 years on the job. Many other state employees can retire at 55, with 2.5% of salary for each year worked. And tens of thousands of public workers may also purchase "air time" — credit for years they do not actually work — to boost their retirement income.

Guaranteed pensions have faded from corporate America in recent decades, replaced largely by 401(k) accounts that workers pay into and that rise and fall based on the fluctuations of financial markets. Voters back an integration of such plans into the government retirement system, with 66% supporting a blend of the traditional pension and a 401(k).

"It's just gotten way out of hand," said Beverly Marcelja, a 67-year old Democrat and retiree living in Tracy, in the Central Valley.

David Martinez, 59, a nonpartisan voter who lives in Rowland Heights, said existing retirement plans reflect a time when private-sector workers were afforded the same pensions.

"It's come to the point where the government is paying much more than private industry is," he said. "It should be equal."

The public sentiment is a cause for concern for organized labor. Public employee unions that spent millions of dollars helping to elect Brown are working aggressively to keep their pensions intact. But the governor has made clear that he believes they must make concessions as the state struggles.

Art Pulaski, executive secretary-treasurer of the California Labor Federation, said the public is trapped in a "moment of envy" over benefits that he maintains are far from lavish.

His union's position is that every worker should be entitled to a pension, not an unsecured retirement reliant on Wall Street earnings. Policy makers should focus on winning back a stable retirement for private-sector workers rather than demonize public employees, he said.

Some state and local public employee unions have already agreed to some changes, such as a delay in the retirement age for new hires.

"It's one thing for Republican governors in Wisconsin and Indiana to support these types of changes, but seeing this type of support from California voters, even California Democrats, is really remarkable," said Dan Schnur, director of the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at USC and a former GOP strategist.

Among Democratic respondents, 71% supported increasing retirement contributions for future hires and 66% backed a pension cap for both current and future workers. However, fewer than half of the Democrats surveyed favored cutting benefits and raising the retirement age for current employees.

Majorities of Republican and nonpartisan voters favored every potential money-saving pension change they were asked about.

Linda DiVall, a Republican pollster who co-directed the poll, said the results show that on the subject of retirement benefits, the public believes it is "unfair what the state employees have going for them."

Although Republicans have crusaded for years against what they view as bloated government pensions, California voters are not confident that they are best suited to tackle the issue. Only 29% said Republicans would best handle a revamping of the pension system, whereas 43% would prefer that an overhaul be left in the hands of Brown and his fellow Democrats.

And although voters strongly supported downsizing parts of the pension system, they were divided on whether most public employees were compensated appropriately. Forty-three percent said wages and benefits were too high; 33% said they were about right; 12% said they were too low.

The Times/USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences poll surveyed 1,503 registered voters from April 7 to 17. It was conducted by a bipartisan team of polling companies based in the Washington, D.C., area: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, a Democratic firm, and American Viewpoint, a Republican firm.

The margin of error is plus or minus 2.53 percentage points. Some pension questions were posed to half the respondents and have a margin of error of plus or minus 3.58 percentage points.

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