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THE SPECIAL ELECTION

Governor Stays Cool as Voters Fire Questions

By Michael Finnegan and Mark Z. Barabak
Times Staff Writers

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With just five days left to sway voters before the special election, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger faced a skeptical audience Thursday night that turned a televised question-and-answer session into an extended advertisement against his ballot initiatives.

Appearing live on a KNBC-TV Channel 4 forum at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, the Republican governor was peppered with hostile questions from a crowd of about 75 voters screened by the station.

One told Schwarzenegger that his proposal to change the law on union campaign donations was fraudulent. Another got into a shouting match with the governor over his proposal to scale back teacher tenure. Still another suggested, in a question directed to one of Schwarzenegger's rivals, that the governor hoped to establish dictatorial power over the state budget.

Schwarzenegger, unruffled throughout, politely dismissed the arguments against his four ballot measures as scare tactics by unions and their Democratic allies. He said he was not mounting an assault on labor or pursuing a witch hunt against teachers.

"We want to add teachers," he said. "I love teachers."

One voter, whose wife and son are teachers, said he was "absolutely appalled" by Proposition 74, the governor's proposal to extend the probationary period for public school instructors from two years to five.

"It's almost impossible, almost impossible to fire a teacher," Schwarzenegger said.

"No, you're wrong," the man interrupted.

Schwarzenegger asked for a chance to finish.

"No, I'm not going to let you finish, because you're wrong," the man argued.

The governor, who rocked gently back and forth on his heels during the exchange, made light of the confrontation, saying: "I like when you're passionate."

The event was Schwarzenegger's first unscripted event of the campaign in California's largest media market. He has rejected all invitations to debate, but has agreed to take questions from voters at forums around the state, provided that his opponents appear separately. Although the station hired an outside consultant to provide a demographically and politically balanced audience, most of the questioners seemed to lean against the governor. While the names of some questioners were mentioned during the forum, a station spokeswoman said that she did not have immediate access to their correct spellings Thursday night.

When the governor left the stage, after 30 minutes spent largely on the defensive, Assembly Speaker Fabian Nuñez (D-Los Angeles) and Barbara Kerr, president of the California Teachers Assn., attacked his proposals for the next half-hour. They drew repeated applause and laughs from the crowd.

The Los Angeles forum followed polls released over the last week that found voters largely siding against Schwarzenegger's ballot proposals.

As the two sides pressed their case, money continued pouring into the campaigns, most of it benefiting Schwarzenegger's opponents, led by organized labor and Democratic legislators. They raised \$15.5 million in the 10 days ending Nov. 2, according to campaign finance reports.

The governor and his supporters collected \$11.3 million, including \$3 million in personal donations from Schwarzenegger. Although final totals won't be known until early next year, the governor's opposition has already raised more than \$100 million. He has collected about \$46 million — including a total of \$7.25 million of his own money.

In the KNBC forum, Schwarzenegger pressed his effort to regain the bipartisan support he has lost over the last year as his political base shrunk to a core of Republicans and conservatives. But the many Democrats in the crowd made that difficult.

One of them, a Camarillo man who works in the healthcare industry, invoked White House political guru Karl Rove as he questioned Schwarzenegger about Proposition 75, which would require unions to get consent from members each year before spending their dues on political campaigns.

"When you have this deceptive language, this Rovian spin that you Republicans like to use to kind of package things and sugarcoat them and say 'this is paycheck protection' — that's fraudulent," he said.

Schwarzenegger replied that it "has nothing to do with right wing versus left wing" but was an attempt to protect working people from "union bosses."

"It has nothing to do with Republicans versus Democrats," he said, arguing that he was "not trying to silence anyone.... We want to reform the system that is good for everybody in California because I am the people's governor." Appearing in the state's biggest Democratic stronghold, Schwarzenegger also stressed the Kennedy family pedigree of his wife, Maria Shriver, who has not taken a public position on his ballot agenda. When one voter was introduced as a Republican, he joked: "I have nothing against Democrats. I sleep with one every night."

Still, Schwarzenegger took aim at the Democrats who control the Legislature as he argued for Proposition 76, his plan to impose a spending cap, enhance the governor's budget powers and change minimum school funding requirements. "We have a bunch of spending addicts in Sacramento," he said.

He renewed his vow not to raise taxes and took credit for what he portrayed as a dramatic recovery from the fiscal mess he faced when he took office after the recall election two years ago: "I inherited a state that was physically dead."

The crowd's antagonism toward Schwarzenegger grew more apparent during the session with Nuñez and Kerr. In a question to the Assembly leader, a man identified as a Los Angeles Democrat and graphic designer suggested that Schwarzenegger hoped to move the state away "from a democracy and closer to a dictatorship."

"Don't you think this is an extremely dangerous precedent, especially in the United States ... to have something like that here?"

A smiling Nuñez praised the "wonderful question" and said the premise "was totally correct."

Another Democrat cited the tens of millions of dollars the special election is costing and said it flew in the face of Schwarzenegger's "talk about fiscal responsibility." She also said corporations overwhelmingly outspend unions in political campaigns.

"So where's the protection against the people whose money goes to corporations?" she demanded.

"She's right," Kerr said.

Schwarzenegger followed the contentious Los Angeles event with a more placid forum before 300 people in San Luis Obispo. Earlier in the day, he appeared in San Diego, where a dozen school board members and former school administrators echoed his criticism of the teachers union.

In Los Angeles, meanwhile, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and other local lawmakers joined firefighters at a downtown news conference where they urged a "no" vote on Propositions 75 and 76, the union dues and state spending measures.

Times staff writers Fred Alvarez, Richard Fausset and Tony Perry contributed to this report.

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