

Poll: Davis leading, but his edge hollow given disgust for both men

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SACRAMENTO — Gov. Gray Davis' summer-long barrage of negative television ads against Republican rival Bill Simon hasn't given the incumbent the runaway lead he'd hoped for, and voters are increasingly disenchanted with both candidates, according to a statewide poll released Wednesday.

Davis led Simon 38 percent to 31 percent in the latest Field Poll, which surveyed likely voters between Aug. 23 and Tuesday. Both men's standing has sunk since Field's July poll, which also showed Davis leading Simon by seven points, 41 percent to 34 percent.

The proportion of undecided voters has climbed to 22 percent, as both candidates struggle. Democrat Davis is fighting criticism over the state's budget woes, his handling of the energy crisis and his prolific campaign fund raising. First-time candidate Simon, a businessman in an anti-business climate, is striving to clear his name after a jury found his family investment firm liable for defrauding a former partner and convicted drug trafficker.

"Voters in some respects are recoiling from both of the major party candidates," pollster Mark DiCamillo said. "Voters just don't have a positive view of these guys."

In what would be a record high if voters' views hold through the Nov. 5 election, 9 percent of those surveyed said they are inclined to support a minor party candidate for governor.

Linda Crites, 54, a registered Republican from Modesto who participated in the poll, is one of them.

She distrusts Davis' record of raising large sums of campaign cash from big business.

She doesn't like that Simon has tried to distance himself from troubles with his family firm.

Davis' campaign reacted to the survey with disbelief.

"Our own tracking shows a double-digit lead and we trust our own tracking," spokesman Roger Salazar said.

Simon's campaign rejoiced.

"This campaign literally will go down to the finish line," said Simon adviser Sean Walsh.