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Debate in California Governor's Race

By **JESSE MCKINLEY**

SAN FRANCISCO — With polls showing a tight race and a large block of undecided voters still in play, the two major party candidates for California governor met on Tuesday in the first of three debates, with the state's economy and its deep financial problems dominating the discussion.

And while the candidates clashed, Jerry Brown, the Democratic nominee, and his Republican opponent, [Meg Whitman](#), both seemed to recognize that there were no simple fixes for a state with a \$19 billion deficit and unemployment of more than 12 percent.

"This will not be easy," said Ms. Whitman, the billionaire former chief executive of eBay. "The governor of California, I believe, has got to have a spine of steel."

Mr. Brown, a former two-term governor who is now the state attorney general, said he had thought "long and hard about whether I should run for governor again."

"I've been there; this is not an easy job," Mr. Brown said. "And certainly I don't think it's a job that, because you know how to run a private business, you can run government."

Neither candidate was shy about attacking the other, with Ms. Whitman describing Mr. Brown's connections to labor, which has given him sizable campaign contributions, as an impossible barrier to his making tough decisions on issues like public pensions and budget cuts.

"If your campaign is funded by those public employee unions, it's going to be extraordinary difficult to negotiate," Ms. Whitman said. The unions, she said, would be there "to collect their i.o.u.'s" if Mr. Brown was elected.

Mr. Brown rejected the claim, and he suggested at one point that Ms. Whitman seemed to be merely repeating campaign talking points.

"I won't try to respond to that TV commercial I've seen so much of," he said.

Ms. Whitman has spent a record \$119 million of her own money on the campaign, something she said — repeating a point she has made on the campaign trail — makes her independent.

Mr. Brown, who ran essentially uncontested for the Democratic nomination, has been relatively quiet in his campaigning, with few public events. But on Tuesday, it was Mr. Brown who was livelier and more animated, sprinkling his answers with salty language and drawing large laughs from the crowd assembled at the [University of California, Davis](#).

One of those moments came when he was asked why California voters could be assured that he would not run for president again, something he did unsuccessfully in 1976, 1980 and 1992. Mr. Brown, who is 72, responded in one word.

"Age," he said, adding with a laugh: "Hell, if I was younger you know I would be running again."

Both candidates are trying make history.

Ms. Whitman would be the first woman to be governor of California. Mr. Brown, who led the state from 1975 to 1983, would be its first governor to serve three nonconsecutive terms. He would also be its oldest, something he joked about in reference to his eventually collecting a pension. "I won't collect until I'm 76," he said. "I'm the best pension buy California has ever seen."

How the debate — which was held at 6 p.m., when many California commuters are still on the roads — will affect the race is an open question. A Field Poll released last week found Mr. Brown tied with Ms. Whitman at 41 percent. More striking, however, was the widening number of voters, about 18 percent, who said they had not yet made up their minds, an increase of 5 points from July.

While some of the questions at the hourlong debate addressed issues like the environment, and the death penalty — a scheduled execution was stayed as the candidates talked — it seemed likely that the economy would remain a focal point of the campaign.

Ms. Whitman kept her responses focused on her three-part plan for the state, which includes cutting regulations, raising the retirement age for public employees and reducing the size of government. Mr. Brown promised to call in all 120 state legislators to meet and fix the budget.

"I don't care if it takes 200 hours, 500 hours," he said, adding that while he had worked on eight budgets in his previous terms, he had never seen anything "like this mess."

