From his perch in Sacramento, insulated from speculation that he might run for president because he is ineligible as a naturalized citizen, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger thinks he knows exactly what voters are looking for in the next occupant of the White House.

"People want bold leadership," he said in a phone interview last week, "somebody who is clear in his or her views, who can make tough decisions and who will reach across the aisle to address the important issues -- health care, immigration, public safety, climate change and the rest -- someone who has a vision and a plan for the future, well beyond the next election."

Skeptics may argue that what works for the onetime bodybuilder and action-movie star would be risky for anyone else. But Schwarzenegger's prescription tracks pretty well with the views of independent voters in a survey conducted by The Washington Post in conjunction with the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University. (Detailed findings of the survey of more than 2,000 voters, including more than 1,000 self-described independents, are reported on the front page of today's Post.)

These are the swing voters who usually decide close elections, the ones who split their votes between George W. Bush and John F. Kerry in 2004 and swung strongly to the Democrats in the midterm elections of 2006. Their ideal candidate would sound more like a Democrat than a Republican on many key issues. He or she would have a plan for ending U.S. involvement in Iraq, and would want to fight global warming, expand health care and give working families a greater sense of job security and more hope for their economic future. He or she would be a strong advocate of abortion rights and of gun control, and would promote legal rights for same-sex couples.

But . . . he or she would also support holding the line on taxes, favor the death penalty for
murderers and promise strong measures to combat terrorism.

To independents, a potential president's religion is not important. But they would want to know if he or she is honest and a good manager, because corruption and inefficiency are what drive them batty about government now.

While these independents swung substantially to the Democratic side in 2006, 77 percent of them say they would seriously consider voting for an independent if one were running. Doing so wouldn't be new for many of them; half of them say they already have voted for independent or third-party candidates for president or statewide office.

And there are a lot more of them now than there were back in 1992, when Ross Perot made his third-party run, let alone earlier years when John B. Anderson and George C. Wallace tried. Estimates now are that 30 percent or more of American voters consider themselves independents -- almost as many as call themselves Democrats and outnumbering the Republicans.

One reason the independents might vote for a third-party candidate involves their dislike for the leading Democrats and Republicans. Forty-two percent of independents say they definitely would not vote for Democrat Hillary Rodham Clinton, and 49 percent have mentally ruled out Al Gore. When considering the Republican side, 40 percent of independents say they wouldn't vote for John McCain, 47 percent have eliminated Mitt Romney, and even before he's entered the race, Fred Thompson has been nixed by 44 percent.

Democrats Barack Obama and John Edwards do far better, with only 29 percent and 37 percent of independents, respectively, saying they would not consider them. Rudolph W. Giuliani is the least objectionable Republican, with 36 percent definitely rejecting him.

But the support for an independent has deeper roots than just antipathy to particular candidates. Doug Bailey, one of the leaders of Unity08, an organization planning an Internet "convention" to nominate an independent national ticket, said, "People sense the [political] system is broken, and this can't be like recent elections or we're really in trouble."

Bailey says it will be next winter before the extent of possible support for an independent candidate can begin to be measured. He expects no serious aspirants to emerge until the Democrats and Republicans have identified their likely nominees -- possibly by Feb. 5, 2008, when half the states are planning to hold caucuses or primaries.

Bailey and others said there is widespread agreement among independents on the agenda facing the next president. It includes Iraq and the fight against terrorism, education, health care, climate change, energy independence, immigration and corruption in Washington. More than 90 percent of those responding to Unity08 surveys have categorized all those topics as crucial to the future well-being of the United States, Bailey said. By contrast, gun control, abortion and same-sex marriage are called crucial by only 30 or 40 percent.

When it comes to which issues they care about most, independents resemble Democrats much more than Republicans, the survey shows. The top four issues on the Democratic and independent lists are identical, with the war in Iraq ranking first, followed by health care, corruption and the economy. Independents listed the terrorism fight and illegal
immigration next, while Democrats put global warming and the federal budget deficit into fifth and sixth places. The Republican list was quite different, with the campaign against terrorism in a virtual tie with Iraq at the top, illegal immigration and corruption in Washington tied for third, and health care well behind.

But Schwarzenegger, from his California perspective, said the partisan differences can be overcome -- with the right kind of leadership. Implicitly, he criticized both parties' Washington leaders, saying, "Just look at the poll numbers. Eighty percent say the country is going in the wrong direction. The administration gets 24 percent approval; Congress, 18 to 24 percent. Whatever they're doing, people don't like it.

"People are looking for leaders who can bring people together," he added. "If the parties don't provide them, then a latecomer can come in from the outside and provide the leadership that will work on the problems."

Schwarzenegger declined to speculate on the identity of such a candidate. But he has already met with and praised one possible contender, New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, with whom he shared a recent Time magazine cover. Bloomberg insists that he is not a candidate, but his personal wealth, his political success in New York and a wave of publicity about his recent decision to change his registration from Republican to independent have made him seem a likely contender.

More than half of those in this survey said they would consider voting for Bloomberg if he were to run. But another experienced Sacramento politician offers a cautionary note. Attorney General Edmund G. (Jerry) Brown Jr., a former governor and unsuccessful aspirant for the Democratic presidential nomination, said in an interview, "I always think there is an opening for an independent or third-party candidate. The party [nominating] process is not that credible. But when 60 percent or more are already committed to one party or the other, it's hard for any individual to get all of what's left -- which you'd just about need to win a three-way race."

That's true, but the environment is shaping up in a way that someone may try.

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