

Ex-GOP star Schnur, running for state office, is over parties

<http://www.sfgate.com/politics/article/Ex-GOP-star-Schnur-running-for-state-office-is-5316081.php>

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Updated 6:55 am, Friday, March 14, 2014



Candidate Dan Schnur, shown visiting the S.F. Mint, says the California secretary of state should have no party affiliation. Photo: Brant Ward, The Chronicle | [Buy this photo](#)

For years, [Dan Schnur](#) was one of the stars of the California [Republican Party](#), a nationally known strategist and chief spokesman for luminaries like presidential candidate [John McCain](#) and former Gov. [Pete Wilson](#).

But when hundreds of [California Republicans](#) gather starting Friday at their state convention in Burlingame, Schnur will be nowhere in sight.

The former head of the state's [Fair Political Practices Commission](#) shocked the political establishment by abandoning his party to become an independent three years ago. Now he's running for secretary of state, hoping to be the first independent candidate ever elected to statewide office.

Schnur, 50, argues that secretary of state should be a nonpartisan position because it oversees voter registration, elections, campaign finance reporting and business licenses. But he says he had a larger goal in leaving the Republican Party - to clean up an election system awash in money.

"Fundraising has metastasized into a never-ending, pervasive arms race," said Schnur, who is on leave from his post as director of the [Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics](#) at the [University of Southern California](#). "And both parties are complicit in this out-of-control system."

Fundraising ban

He's called for a ban on fundraising by Assembly and state Senate incumbents during the legislative session. He also says candidates should report their political contributions online within 24 hours, rather than the current quarterly system.

"Every day in Sacramento, a relay race takes place in which members of both parties sprint out of the Capitol," Schnur said. The fundraising, he said, takes up hours weekly - hours away from the business of government.

The unusual campaign is being run by an equally unlikely bipartisan team of influential consultants, among them Republicans Rob Stutzman and [Donna Lucas](#), and [Democrats](#) Darry Sragow and [Karen Skelton](#).

Schnur may need all that A-list help. With Democratic Secretary of State [Debra Bowen](#) being termed out, the race has attracted a crowd of partisan candidates.

Demo jostling

On the Democratic side, state Sens. [Alex Padilla](#) of Pacoima (Los Angeles County) and [Leland Yee](#) of San Francisco, along with Common Cause leader [Derek Cressman](#), vied for the party's backing last weekend at the Democratic state convention in Los Angeles. Democrats decided on no endorsement.

Also running is [Republican Pete Peterson](#), who helped launch California Common Sense, a think tank devoted to boosting civic engagement. He now heads the [Davenport Institute](#) at [Pepperdine University's School of Public Policy](#).

The race will showcase the effects of California's top-two primary system, which will be in place for statewide races for the first time this year. The leading two vote-getters in the June primary, no matter their party, advance to the November general election.

In California - where 43 percent of voters are Democrats, 29 percent are Republicans, and 1 in 5 is independent - that may create a challenge for the GOP, said [Mark DiCamillo](#), director of the statewide Field Poll.

Different odds

It also gives Schnur a chance he wouldn't have had under the old party-primary system, DiCamillo said.

Schnur's campaign as an independent - instead of as a Republican - "will be an interesting test case," he said.

With the label of the Republicans "so tarnished" in California, DiCamillo said, Schnur "may be trying to show the way forward for moderate Republicans - that is, not to put the name 'Republican' next to them, because it's such a negative.

"Maybe he's on to something," DiCamillo said.

Republicans and Democrats have been unusually united in blasting Schnur's debut as an independent candidate.

[Steve Maviglio](#), a spokesman for Democratic legislators, said Schnur's proposal to ban legislative fundraising for 10 months of the year is "unworkable" and unlikely to curb excesses by unethical legislators.

He has also noted that Schnur wore the Republican "team jersey" for years and said voters shouldn't expect him to abandon it now.

An adviser for [Peterson's](#) campaign had a similar take.

Skeptical observer

"Dan Schnur claiming to run as a reformer is a joke," said [Brandon Gesicki](#). "He's been a GOP political operative, paid, for close to 30 years ... (and) teaches other GOP operatives how to message and manipulate the press.

"It appears he's trying to manipulate the press into thinking he's somehow changed."

Schnur responded, "I'm flattered, but the truth is, I'm not that good a planner."

The spokesman for McCain's 2000 presidential campaign and onetime press secretary for Wilson says the last partisan job he held was for [Peter Ueberroth](#), who ran as a Republican in the gubernatorial recall campaign of 2003.

"I changed my registration from one of the two major political parties to be an independent - which makes me like 1 in 5 Californians today," Schnur said. "The umpire shouldn't wear a

Giants or Dodgers jersey - and the state's chief elections officer shouldn't be suiting up for either side."

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