

Endorsement Ashley Swearengin for state controller

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What, you may wonder, does the state controller do? Among other things, he or she serves as the state's fiscal watchdog, keeps track of the checkbook, helps administer the California Public Employees' Retirement System and the California State Teachers' Retirement System, and sits on 81 boards and commissions. The current controller, Democrat John Chiang, has done a solid job during his eight years in the position, but he is now termed out (and is a candidate for the job of state treasurer, the controller's conjoined twin).

The June 3 election includes a primary to select Chiang's successor. The leading contenders are Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin, a Republican; Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez (D-Los Angeles); and Betty Yee, a Democrat from the Bay Area who sits on the state Board of Equalization. The Times has decided — and it was a difficult decision — to endorse Swearengin.

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Yee's resume compelled close consideration. As an elected member of the Board of Equalization, which hears tax appeals, she has developed significant experience with the tax code and tax policy. As a former chief deputy director for budget at the state Department of Finance, she also has intimate experience with the budget. She has identified tax reform and unfunded pension obligations as key fiscal issues facing the state, but she inspires less confidence than do Pérez and Swearengin in her ability to get the job done over the objections of powerful interests inside and outside government.

Pérez would have no such problem. It was with no small measure of regret that this page opted not to endorse him. Pérez, a former labor activist, is extremely smart, with a broad and deep understanding of how California government works. A natural political wrangler, he has been an impressive leader across a range of legislative issues, particularly in working with the governor, fellow Democrats in the Assembly and state Senate, and the GOP minority to help lead the state out of the financial crisis that began the year before he first won his Assembly seat.

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Pérez, who has been one of the most powerful officials in Sacramento for several years, has a bright future in public service, but state controller isn't the right job for him. He's running for it, we suspect, not because it particularly interests him or plays to his strengths but because he's termed out of his current job, and this seemed like a reasonable landing place to keep him in the political game and introduce him to voters statewide. He shouldn't be blamed for that decision; that's what California's restrictive term limits require of talented, up-and-coming politicians who want to remain in politics. But it doesn't necessarily make him the best candidate for the position.

Swearengin, though she lacks Pérez's experience on the state level, seems better suited for the job. As mayor, she righted Fresno's listing financial ship by reducing the number of public employees by 1,700 positions, and she recently won a higher pay-in by city workers for their pensions. She has drawn on her experience in economic development to try to position Fresno, the poorest of the

state's large cities, for a better future, including diversifying from its agriculture production economy.

It is a big step from a city budget to a state budget, and there is room for concern that Swearingin could stumble in that move up to a larger scale. But she seems to understand the fundamentals of executive management, so there is reason to feel confident that she can handle the broad responsibilities. And as the rightward lurch of the state GOP has sent it off into political obscurity in this generally left-of-center state, Swearingin stands out as a moderate pragmatist who is not pursuing an unpopular social conservative agenda.

Swearingin has the clearer view of the controller's primary responsibility — fiscal accountability — and the better background to do the work. The Times endorses Ashley Swearingin.

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