

Fresno Mayor Swearengin, two prominent Democrats lead state controller race

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John Ellis

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin is a front-runner for state controller along with Assembly Speaker John Perez and Bay Area Democrat Betty Yee. JOHN WALKER — Fresno Bee Staff Photo [|Buy Photo](#)



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Bay Area Democrat Betty Yee has been running for state controller since not long after she won a second term on the state Board of Equalization in 2010.

Until last October, she pretty much had the field to herself. That's when Assembly Speaker John Perez, a political heavyweight, entered the race.

That started the pundits talking about a clash of titans -- two Democrats, one from Los Angeles, the other from the Bay Area -- facing off in a battle to replace Controller John Chiang, who is termed out this year.

But three days before the filing deadline, Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin -- a moderate Republican considered by many to be an up and coming star in the GOP -- entered the controller race.



When the dust cleared, others were in the race as well, but as a Field Poll showed last month, Perez, Swearengin and Yee are the frontrunners for an office that is largely a mystery to state residents -- a position at times called California's chief fiscal watchdog, its top bookkeeper or lead fiscal officer.

The other contenders are Democrat Tammy Blair of Lakewood in Southern California, Republican David Evans from California City in Kern County's high desert region, and Green Party member Laura Wells of Oakland.

[Editor's note on Fresno Bee Voter Guide](#)

Just who will succeed Chiang is anyone's guess, but a major culling of the six-person field will come next month. Only the top two finishers will move on to the November general election, and it looks like Swearengin could be one of those two, while either Yee or Pérez won't.

Yee or Perez are "going for the number two spot," said Allan Hoffenblum, a longtime Republican strategist and author of the California Target Book, which tracks the state's elections.

That leaves the real battle for Swearengin the November general election, and it will be a difficult one in a state that generally favors Democrats.

"For a Republican to win statewide would be extraordinarily difficult," Hoffenblum said, noting the current statewide GOP registration stands at a dismal 28.6%.

That's fine with Swearingin, at least for now. First things first, and she says her focus is on moving from the June primary to the November general election.

"You have two general elections to run," she said. "We are not taking anything for granted in June. We are running and raising money for June, and then we'll start all over again for November."

Since entering the race, Swearingin's campaign has worked to develop policy recommendations and has focused on editorial board interviews, fundraising and building a campaign infrastructure.

She received a major boost last week with an endorsement from the Los Angeles Times.

It's a different outlook for Yee and Perez, both Democrats who are primarily courting the same voting bloc -- the state's dominant Democrats.

Hoffenblum said the voter pool could be small for the June primary. He thinks turnout could be at or near "historic lows" -- around 25% to 27% statewide.

"When you get that low of a turnout, anything could happen," he said.

Yee said she likes her chances. Her campaign is targeting loyal Democratic Party voters, and she said the biggest share of that group is on her home turf -- the Bay Area.

Her state Board of Equalization district represents 21 counties from the Oregon border to Santa Barbara, almost all of it Democratic dominated. She says Perez, by comparison, represents an Assembly district in urban Los Angeles.

Still, Perez is sure to be formidable.

"My gut says Perez," Hoffenblum says.

He is the Assembly speaker, is strongly backed by labor, and is a Hispanic in a state where Hispanics are strongly Democratic. He also is totally dominating the fundraising battle, with almost \$1.8 million in his campaign account as of March 17, and around \$300,000 raised since then.

Yee spent heavily in the first three months of this year in preparation for the primary, and as of mid-March had around \$100,000 in her account. She says her campaign budget is around \$1.5 million. Swearingin has raised about \$225,000 since entering the race.

None of the other candidates have filed campaign finance reports.

What Swearingin and Yee do have going for them, at least according to a Field Poll released last month, is a lead in the polls. The Field Poll showed they were one-two among likely voters in the controller's race.

The poll, with 4.5 percentage point margin of error, showed Swearingin at 28%, Yee at 19% and Perez at 14%. But it also showed 38% of likely voters still undecided.

At this point, at least, Yee is clearly focused on Perez.

"We're on level footing with the exception of the amount in the war chest," she says.

For Swearingin, though she ranked first -- with Perez and Yee almost certainly splitting the

Democratic vote -- the poll also showed that she has work to do in getting known around the state. Among poll respondents, 59% of Democrats and 64% of Republicans, which is Swearingin's party, had no opinion of her, either favorable or unfavorable. Those numbers were higher than for either Perez or Yee.

Tim Clark, Swearingin's campaign consultant, has already said raising Swearingin's name identification among voters around the state is a campaign priority. She is already known among the state's business leaders and the Republican donor base, he said.

Yee said her campaign work is focusing on outreach to local chambers of commerce and Democratic Party clubs and organizations.

Perez, 44, didn't return a phone call seeking comment, but his campaign website suggests he would continue the work started as Assembly speaker in keeping the state's economic recovery in motion. Part of that, he has said, is sound fiscal management -- a key role of the controller.

Political experts have said some of Perez's strengths lie in knowing Sacramento politics and how to get things done, politically, at the state level.

He's supported by several labor organizations as well as Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

But Yee, 56, says she has the background best suited for the position. Prior to serving on the Board of Equalization -- which hears tax appeals -- she was chief deputy director for budget at the state Department of Finance, and before that held staff positions on several fiscal and policy committees in both the state Assembly and Senate. She has a master's in public administration.

"I don't run for offices I don't feel qualified for," Yee said.

Swearingin, 41, sees her own history as a qualification for the job.

She was first elected Fresno's mayor in 2008, easily won re-election in 2012, and steered the city through the depths of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. Before that, she was CEO of the Regional Jobs Initiative.

She also has a master's in business administration.

Both Yee and Swearingin say part of their campaign is educating voters about the controller's position and its job responsibilities.

It isn't an easy task, and shows the challenges of campaigning for a statewide office that isn't high in the minds of voters.

"We are very pleased with where we are today, even though we are struggling to communicate importance of this position in state government," Swearingin said. "It's a challenge to get attention on down ticket races."

[The Bee's Voter Guide](#)

Top three state controller candidates

JOHN PEREZ

Age: 44

Hometown: Los Angeles

Occupation: Assembly Speaker

Education: Attended UC Berkeley

Family: Single

Party preference: Democratic

Web: perezforcontroller.com

Twitter: @JohnAPerez

Facebook: www.facebook.com/pages/John-A-Pérez/132953126784352

ASHLEY SWEARENGIN

Age: 41

Hometown: Fresno

Occupation: Fresno Mayor

Education: BS, Business Administration; MA, business administration, both from Fresno State University

Family: Married, two children

Party preference: Republican

Web: AshleyforCA.com

Twitter: @Ashley4CA

Facebook: www.facebook.com/ashleyswearengin?ref=ts

BETTY YEE

Age: 56

Hometown: Alameda

Occupation: state Board of Equalization, District 1 representative

Education: BA, Sociology, UC Berkeley; MA, public administration, Golden Gate University

Family: Single

Party preference: Democratic

Web: bettyyee.com/

Twitter: @BettyYee2014

Facebook: www.facebook.com/BettyYee2014

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