

Dan Walters: What's at stake in this primary election?

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By Dan Walters

It's a pretty strange election when the most interesting contest is between two Republicans vying for the right to be buried in a Jerry Brown landslide.

The duel between Assemblyman Tim Donnelly, the darling of the Republican right, and Neel Kashkari, a moderate whom the GOP establishment hopes will eke out a win, gets a lot of media attention simply because there's not much else to stir interest.

Apparently voters agree with that appraisal because the voting that started a month ago and ends on Tuesday is likely to be among the lowest turnouts for a statewide election in memory.

Based on the scant return of mail votes so far, it would not be surprising if as few as 25 percent of the state's nearly 18 million registered voters will have cast ballots.

The Republicans who hope that Kashkari, a former banker, edges out Donnelly know that Brown is an overwhelming favorite to capture a record fourth term as governor in November. The only question, really, is how big his landslide will be. Sixty percent is a given, and 70 percent is well within reach.

They believe not only that Kashkari would be a stronger candidate against Brown than Donnelly, but that he would not, unlike Donnelly, make the California Republican Party a laughingstock. And, of course, Democrats hope Donnelly becomes the GOP nominee for precisely that reason.

Beyond the Donnelly-Kashkari duel, the "top-two" primary election's major import are the contests among Democrats for legislative seats, pitting liberals backed by unions and other like-minded groups against business-backed moderates.

The contending interests are pouring millions of dollars into "independent expenditure" campaigns, with the centerpiece being an epic battle for a vacant Assembly seat in Alameda and Contra Costa counties.

Steve Glazer, a veteran campaign consultant who advised Brown's 2010 run for governor, is the business candidate in the 16th Assembly District while unions are spending heavily for teacher Tim Sbranti.

Although the suburban 16th AD has a Democratic voter registration edge, it's not overwhelming and more than 20 percent of its voters are independents. With a third Democratic candidate on the ballot and just one Republican, Catharine Baker, she has a good shot at winning a spot on the November ballot and a chance for an upset.

On a smaller scale, the Glazer-Sbranti duel is being replicated in a number of other legislative districts.

They evolve from the perennial battles in the Capitol between business interests and their liberal rivals – unions, environmentalists, consumer activists and trial lawyers – over legislative issues.

Despite lopsided Democratic legislative majorities, business groups have been remarkably successful in staving off liberal bills, largely because of their adroit involvement in Democratic primaries.

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