

Controller race declared too close to call

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With about 5,600 of almost 3 million votes dividing three candidates scratching for a place in the runoff, the race for state controller by early Wednesday morning was stuck in a near-photo finish that could take weeks to resolve.

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swarengin, with 24% of the vote in unofficial results, appeared to be holding on to the top spot. But the three candidates vying for a chance to challenge her in a November runoff -- former Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez, Board of Equalization member Betty Yee and former California City mayor David Evans -- tallied vote counts virtually indistinguishable from one another. Only the two top finishers will make the final ballot.

The secretary of state declared the controller race an official "close contest" and warned that counting all provisional and mail-in ballots could stretch the guessing game more than a month. The deadline for all canvassing is July 11.

Swarengin, a Republican, had been widely considered the best candidate to revive the somnolent California GOP's hopes of statewide office. But the other Republican in the race, the little-known Evans, showed surprising strength as votes rolled in.

Much of the drama in the campaign came from the inter-party fight between Pérez and Yee, both Democrats. Pérez, who was Assembly speaker until last month, has enjoyed strong support from labor unions. The former labor operative from Los Angeles also holds a larger war chest, allowing him to run television ads touting his work on the state budget alongside Gov. Jerry Brown.

Yee is from the Bay Area and had hoped voters would recognize her financial expertise from more than two terms on the state tax board. She previously worked in Gov. Gray Davis' Department of Finance. Yee raised much less money than Pérez, limiting her advertising abilities.

Swarengin is touting her experience as mayor in Fresno, a city once on the brink of bankruptcy. Republicans currently do not hold any statewide offices in California and have steadily lost ground in voter registration, making a general election campaign a heavy lift for a GOP candidate.

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The controller makes sure California's bills get paid on time and oversees a team of auditors examining state and local finances. The position also gets a seat on powerful public pension boards.

Megerian reported from Sacramento and Holland from Los Angeles

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