

Dan Walters: Election indicates GOP may be coming back

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By Dan Walters

It's risky – perhaps even foolhardy – to read much into the results of an abysmally low turnout primary election.

With that caveat, however, it appears that the California Republican Party, which has been on the brink of utter irrelevance, may be making at least a mild comeback.

Three of its candidates for statewide office present a new, more moderate and more inclusive face to voters, with banker Neel Kashkari's defeat of Assemblyman Tim Donnelly the most obvious example.

Kashkari, of course, has almost no chance of denying Gov. Jerry Brown a fourth term, but he's a credible, intelligent and articulate candidate whose win avoids the embarrassment that Donnelly would have brought the party.

Pete Peterson's chances of defeating Democratic Sen. Alex Padilla for secretary of state are only slightly better, given the state's strong Democratic bent.

However, Fresno's Republican mayor, Ashley Swearingin, has at least a fair shot at becoming state controller, although she still doesn't know for certain whether she's on the November ballot, thanks to a close four-way race. She'll likely make it and probably face former Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez or Board of Equalization member Betty Yee.

Swearingin is clearly a rising Republican star, potentially a future candidate for governor or U.S. senator.

Results further down the ballot indicate that recent GOP efforts to broaden its reach are paying off.

A number of Latino and Asian American Republicans seeking legislative and congressional seats won spots on the November ballot, and while not all will be elected, some will.

Mario Guerra, a Downey city councilman, topped all candidates in Los Angeles County's 32nd Senate District, for example. The area's current senator, Democrat Ron Calderon, is under indictment, and despite the district's big Democratic voter registration margin, Guerra has an outside chance against former Assemblyman Tony Mendoza.

Orange County Supervisor Janet Nguyen likewise topped the field in the 34th Senate District, and her duel with Democrat Jose Solorio is widely considered the key to whether Democrats recapture their Senate supermajority.

Elsewhere in Orange County, Young Kim is the GOP challenger to Democratic Assemblywoman Sharon Quirk-Silva, whose win in the 65th Assembly District two years ago was something of a fluke.

There are several other examples of GOP diversification, such as Republican Rudy Mendoza, favored to succeed Assembly GOP leader Connie Conway in the San Joaquin Valley's 26th Assembly District, and Diamond Bar Councilman Ling-Ling Chang, the likely Republican winner in Southern California's GOP-leaning 55th Assembly District.

Republicans still face an uphill climb to regain relevance, and may never make it. But Tuesday's election gave them a good start.

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