

Neel Kashkari could be California's Goldwater

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California Republican Gubernatorial Candidate Neel Kashkari, center, greets supporters during a election night party at the Port Theater, Tuesday, June 3, 2014 in the Corona Del Mar area of Newport Beach, Calif. (AP Photo/Chris Carlson) (Chris Carlson/AP)



MENLO PARK, Calif.

Fifty Julys ago, up the road near San Francisco, in the unfortunately named Cow Palace, the Republican National Convention gave its presidential nomination to Arizona Sen. Barry

Goldwater, who knew he would lose: Americans were not going to have a third president in 14 months. Besides, his don't-fence-me-in [libertarian conservatism](#) was ahead of its time. His agenda, however, was to change his party's national brand.

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Today, in this state where one in eight Americans lives, and where Democratic presidential candidates can reap 55 electoral votes without spending a dime or a day campaigning, the Republicans' gubernatorial candidate has an agenda and spirit similar to Goldwater's. Neel Kashkari is not, as some careless commentary suggests, an anti-Goldwater, diluting the state party's conservatism. He is Goldwater 2.0, defining conservatism a half-century on.

He relishes "turning upside down" the parties' stereotypes. The Democratic candidate, 76-year-old Gov. Jerry Brown, is "the old white guy." Kashkari, the [40-year-old son of Indian immigrants](#), was born in 1973, the year before Brown was first elected governor. Brown is a [child of the establishment](#) — his father, Pat, California's 32nd governor, was defeated in 1966 by Ronald Reagan. Jerry Brown, California's 34th and 39th governor, is a government lifer, having been secretary of state, attorney general and Oakland's mayor when not unsuccessfully seeking a U.S. Senate seat and the presidency (three times).

Kashkari prospered in the private sector, a place as foreign to Brown as Mongolia. Born in Ohio, Kashkari studied mechanical engineering at the University of Illinois, came to California to work in the aerospace industry, then earned an MBA from Wharton, joined Goldman Sachs and landed a Washington job with a Goldman Sachs alumnus, Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson. As a treasury official during one of the most dangerous periods in the United States' economic history, from July 2006 to May 2009, Kashkari says: "I saw the best in our political system."

He remembers that, with a liquidity-deprived financial system pushing the nation to the precipice of a depression, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell simply said, “Of course we’ll find a way to get this done.” The politically perilous but nation-saving business of [bailing out the banking system](#) was done in days. “What other democracy in the world,” Kashkari asks, “can move that fast to deal with a crisis?”

Just as [McConnell’s opponent](#) in this year’s Kentucky Republican primary execrated McConnell’s finest hour, Kashkari’s primary opponent vociferously deplored Kashkari’s role as administrator of the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP). This opponent, a factually challenged fire-breather (of illegal immigration, he said, “We are in a war”), also said Kashkari supports sharia law. That would be peculiar for a Hindu who calls himself “a libertarian socially” (he is pro-choice and pro-same-sex marriage) and lives in Southern California’s culturally relaxed Laguna Beach.

Today, California is a one-party state: Democrats have 2-to-1 majorities in both legislative chambers and account for 40 of 55 members of Congress. Republicans hold no statewide office and have only 28 percent of voters registered by party. All of this has something to do with these facts: California has the nation’s highest income tax, sales tax and poverty rate (adjusted for the cost of living) and the second-highest gasoline tax. Only four states have higher unemployment rates. Kashkari says California’s “U-6 unemployment rate” — which includes unemployed people seeking full-time jobs, part-time workers who want full-time jobs and people too discouraged to seek jobs — is [more than 16 percent](#).

Running against Brown requires discerning silver linings on black clouds. Kashkari says of polls showing Brown leading 52 percent to 32 percent: Well, 100 percent of Californians know who Brown is, so 48 percent are looking for an alternative.

Kashkari promises to derail Brown’s obsession — the (at least) \$68 billion San Francisco-to-Los Angeles bullet train. Brown has been silent about the recent [court decision](#) striking down the tenure system that entrenches incompetent public school teachers. The public likes the decision; teachers unions loathe it. Brown, Kashkari says dryly, has “multiple owners.”

“If I get Jerry on a debate stage,” Kashkari says, “anything can happen.” That is true, as is this: Goldwater lost 44 states but won the future. His conservative cadre captured the GOP, which won five of the next six and seven of the next 10 presidential elections. If California becomes a purple state and Democrats can no longer assume its 20 percent of 270 electoral votes, Republicans nationwide will be indebted to the immigrants’ son who plucked up Goldwater’s banner of conservatism with a Western libertarian flavor.

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