

Ashley Swearengin stands by her independence after controversial state GOP convention

By John
Ellis



Republican candidate for state controller Ashley Swearengin stands onstage after being introduced at the California GOP convention on Friday, Sept. 19, 2014, in Los Angeles. CHRIS CARLSON — AP

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin was in and out of the state Republican convention in Los Angeles in less than 12 hours, but in that short time she found herself the biggest story of the weekend-long event.

Not in a good way.

Swearengin, the Republican candidate for state controller, managed to anger several party leaders and some delegates by refusing to endorse gubernatorial candidate Neel Kashkari or anybody else on the ticket, save for Pete Peterson, the party's secretary of state candidate.

Peterson offered similar reservations, but Swearengin seemed to bear the brunt of the anger because she made the comments to the media immediately after delivering the keynote address at a Friday convention dinner honoring the Republican Party's women.

State Republican Party Chairman Jim Brulte called it "felony stupid" after Republican lieutenant governor candidate Ron Nehring fired off an angry email saying he doubted Swearengin "was given the prominence of speaking Friday night as a platform to generate news by blowing off others on the statewide ticket."

The question is, what does it all mean for Swearingin, who is making her first run for statewide office on the platform of a leader who took over a financially troubled Fresno and turned it around.

She is also running as a moderate who sees the controller's office as nonpartisan. Her opponent is Bay Area Democrat Betty Yee, a state Board of Equalization member.

"I registered to vote as a Republican when I was 18 years old and yet I serve in a nonpartisan office today, so I'm used to working with people across the political spectrum and that's what I intend to do as the next state controller," Swearingin told reporters following her Friday speech.

Sherry Bebitch Jeffe, a veteran political analyst at the University of Southern California, said she thinks Swearingin may be trying to woo moderate independents and even some moderate Democrats with her independent stance.

"I believe she is taking a risk that because she doesn't look like the archetypal Republican, or sound like the archetypal Republican -- even speaking before a gathering of Republican activists -- that will help her more than hurt her in the general election," Jeffe said.

Tim Clark, Swearingin's campaign consultant, said Monday that he "got many high fives" for Swearingin's stance and others telling him she was "a breath of fresh air we need in the party."

And he -- and, it seems, Swearingin -- showed no signs of backing off of the independent streak shown at the convention.

"We're at 28.5% registration," Clark said of the GOP statewide. "Maybe it is time for a breath of fresh air, and this is what Ashley Swearingin brings."

The Los Angeles Times took note of her for that reason and on Monday night posted its online endorsement of Swearingin over Yee. The Times, which also endorsed Swearingin in the June primary, cited her broader experience in political office as another strength.

Swearingin says she has no intention to endorse at all in the governor's race.

There's been plenty of speculation that Swearingin remains miffed that Kashkari picked Fresno as a place where he would spend a week homeless, film it, and then release the video and an accompanying commentary to The Wall Street Journal. He did so without informing Swearingin, only telling her about his visit when he released the video.

"I think there's a lot of personal animosity there," Jeffe said of Swearingin and Kashkari.

But Clark said it's much simpler. It is just Swearingin being Swearingin.

"It's foreign to her, these inside political machinations," he said. "She's working on solutions as mayor, not keeping score by what party they are. She is keeping score on whether they are interested in a forward-looking solution ... Ashley has always been fiercely independent -- and she remains so."

Clark did say, however, that Swearingin plans to attend a Nehring fundraiser and will be at a Hispanic 100 event this Friday in Orange County with both Kashkari and Petersen. It remains unknown if she will endorse her fellow Republicans in races other than the governor's contest.

None of the endorsement controversy is new. Swearingin has waffled on endorsing Kashkari for weeks. But at a Republican convention -- the very nerve center of partisan politics -- reiterating that stance after giving a keynote address was seen as bad form.

"I think her position is politically foolish because the better Kashkari does the better she does," said Allan Hoffenblum, a longtime Republican strategist and author of the California Target Book, which tracks the state's elections. "You win

when you're united."

On Sunday, Hoffenblum tweeted that it was "pathetic" that the non-endorsements by Swearingin and Petersen were the biggest stories out of the convention.

Nehring's email said as much: "This does NOT help the party, and it distracts from the efforts made to convey a positive theme. The coverage is not of a party expanding its reach. It's about a party that isn't unified because its candidates can't get it together and get on the same page."

And some prominent Republicans have said they were told by some delegates they won't vote for Swearingin. It has nothing to do with her support of the state's proposed high-speed rail project, which most Republicans oppose, but instead because of her behavior at the state convention.

But Clark said "Ashley is who she is, and you have to campaign who you are. That gives us the best shot at winning. If we try to fit her into a partisan mold, it's just not going to work."

The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6320, jellis@fresnobee.com or [@johnellis24](https://twitter.com/johnellis24) on Twitter.

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