

EDITORIAL: Swearengin follows independent path

By The Fresno Bee Editorial Board



Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin, a candidate for California controller, is drawing fire from some Republicans for not following the party line on unity.

FILE PHOTO

The far left vs. far right tug-of-war dominating California politics leaves scant room for thoughtful, moderate candidates — especially outside the San Joaquin Valley.

This fact every so often prompts some people to yearn for a major third party that might bring problem-solving equilibrium to the Capitol.

But reality is, the two-party system is here to stay in California, leaving some candidates (and voters) out of sync with some of the values and ideas promoted by their party of choice.

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin, who is running for state controller, and secretary of state candidate Pete Peterson, executive director of Pepperdine University's Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership, are two Republicans who fall into this camp.

Both are bright, hardworking and favor clear-eyed analysis over hysteria, political stunts and tea party talking points. Both are the GOP's best hopes for winning election to statewide office come November. And both are in their party's doghouse for not endorsing or expressing reservations about the other Republican statewide candidates at last weekend's California GOP convention.

It takes considerable political courage to buck your party on any given day, let alone when campaigns are heating up and candidates need campaign contributions to deliver their messages.

The Sacramento Bee's David Siders reported Saturday that Swearingin's refusal to endorse Republican gubernatorial candidate Neel Kashkari drew a response of "felony stupid" from California GOP Chairman Jim Brulte.

We understand the importance of party unity during elections and the need to support the top of the ticket. But Kashkari is a weak candidate with little chance of defeating Gov. Jerry Brown. Moreover, the "brands" of Swearingin and Peterson, according to the most recent Field Poll, are resonating better with voters than the GOP brand as a whole.

Knowing that they must appeal to moderate Democrats and moderate independents to win, Swearingin and Peterson made the smart choice to signal their interest in attracting bipartisan support. Voters without a party preference make up 23.1% of California registered voters.

Swearingin's and Peterson's strategy might not prove to be a winning one. But it should be another wake-up call to the leaders of California's shrinking Republican Party that it needs to attract and support candidates who more closely reflect the values and aspirations of a majority of the state's residents.

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