

Swarengin to CA GOP: Unity for Me But Not for Thee

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Last weekend at their state convention, the California GOP rolled out the red carpet for Fresno Mayor Ashley Swarengin, the GOP nominee for State Controller. The opening night's main event was a dinner banquet profiling the "Women of the GOP" — and the plum keynote speech for that dinner was given to the charismatic Swarengin.

Swarengin in talking with the press corps at that very event, created a divisive earthquake for the GOP by making it clear that she is not supporting the GOP's nominee for Governor, Neel Kashkari.

Swarengin told the *Los Angeles Times*, "I'm looking at the two candidates like other Californians are... We still have not had a chance to meet, so I've been focused on my race and getting the word out to voters around the state that I think California needs some independence when it comes to watching the treasury."

The *Sacramento Bee* reported that she has no intention of endorsing in the Governor's race at all.

As I walked around the convention the rest of the weekend, GOP delegates ran the gamut from disappointed to hopping mad about this. Several leaders of the California Federation of Republican Women, whom I have found the least likely within GOP circles to ever speak ill of a Republican candidate, expressed their dismay. One told me, "If Ashley won't support the ticket, then I don't think her name should appear on our get-out-the-vote door hangers!"

After Kashkari defeated Assemblyman Tim Donnelly in June, Swarengin wouldn't take a meeting with Kashkari — and still has not done so. Adding to the drama was some political theatre by Kashkari earlier in the summer that did not earn him brownie points with Swarengin. Kashkari wanted to demonstrate the difficulties of getting a job in California. He decided, with a camera crew in tow, to spend a week pretending to be a homeless person looking for work. The city he chose in which to film: Fresno.

It is worth mentioning that Pete Peterson, the GOP nominee for Secretary of State, who won his primary on the strength of his political party affiliation, has said that he believes that because he is running to be the chief elections officer, that he should not endorse other candidates.

It may not be a coincidence that the two candidates, who are keeping arms-length from Kashkari, are the ones that public opinion surveys say have the best (albeit uphill) shots at winning the offices they seek.

In the case of Peterson, from talking with him, I am convinced his position comes from principle. Moreover, while I don't see eye to eye with him on this, I believe it is heartfelt.

Swarengin's approach appears to me to be much more calculated, and seems to be part of a thought-out plan that she thinks may lead to an unlikely outcome: a Republican State Controller for a reliably blue state.

Looming large for Swarengin and her campaign team is the latest voter registration figures for the largest state in the union: 43.4% Democrat, 28.2% Republican, and 23.1% No Party Preference. And, of course, the recently released results of the latest poll from the Public Policy Institute of California show Brown with a 21 point lead over Kashkari, 54% to 33%.

So, any candidate on the GOP ticket in California, without having to do much math, can figure out that in order to win an election you have to have the overwhelming support of voters of your own party, capture most of the NPP voters, and on top of that get a whole lot of votes from registered Democrats. A very tall order. And if you are down-ticket from the poorly-performing Kashkari, and polls show you doing better than he is — do you really want to be tied to him?

Clearly, Swearengin is pursuing a strategy of hoping that Republicans “come home” on the strength of her party designation and targeted slate-mail cards to GOP voters. Furthermore, she’s pursuing an earned media strategy to try and appeal to NPP and Democrat voters. Her strategy might be working, at least to a limited extent, as demonstrated by Swearengin receiving a general election endorsement from the editorial page of the liberal *Los Angeles Times*, which rarely endorses a Republican.

No doubt Swearengin’s keeping arms-distance-from-Kashkari is also informed by the reality that as California becomes more and more dominated by Democrats, the California Republican Party has greater and greater challenges raising the kinds of dollars that it takes to be able to, among other things, lend substantial and material support to the statewide ticket. When I was Executive Director of the California GOP at the turn of the millennium, (a nifty phrase), it was still common practice for the party to raise funds and put out multiple statewide mailings to Republican voters pushing the entire ticket. The idea was that if the party could help the nominees with the base, it would free them up to focus their energies elsewhere. It’s been a long time since the California GOP has had the resources to provide that kind of assistance to the ticket, and if you are Ashley Swearengin (or even Pete Peterson), running through the pros and cons of whether to endorse the GOP ticket, lack of substantive support from the party might be an important factor.

That having been said, Swearengin’s decision to not endorse Kashkari, and to talk about it with the press at the party convention, may come back to bite her. Swearengin is likely to turn off Republican voters, as she did a lot of the party’s activists at the convention.

For my part, I worry that if Swearengin is not willing to take on the ultra-liberal Governor of California on the campaign trail, I wonder if she would take him on from the office of Controller. And it is impossible for me to divorce this issue from her ardent support of Governor Brown’s high-speed rail boondoggle.

There is an adage in politics that might be applicable here, “Ignore your base at your own risk.”

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