

State controller's race: GOP rising star vs. Democratic policy wonk

By Josh Richman

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A California Republican rising star -- that rarest of specimens -- is squaring off against a veteran Democratic politician and policy wonk in the race for state controller.

But Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin's run to the political center for an office she says should be nonpartisan -- aimed at attracting crucial voters not on her party's meager rolls -- has caused some within the state GOP to wonder if their rising star is shooting away from them.

Betty Yee, a state Board of Equalization member who lives in Alameda, has sparked no such party drama. Her Democratic Party and the unions that help fund it support her unabashedly, leaving little trace of a divisive and costly primary in which she edged former Assembly Speaker John Pérez by just a few hundred votes.

Ashley Swearingin, left; Betty Yee

Up for grabs is an office that many Californians don't even think about, let alone understand -- yet which wields great influence.

The controller is the state's chief fiscal officer, ensuring that the budget is spent properly and the bills are paid on time while also wielding broad audit powers and helping to administer two of the nation's largest public pension funds. He or she also serves on 81 state boards and commissions, including the Board of Equalization, Franchise Tax Board, California Coastal Commission and State Lands Commission.



Incumbent Democrat John Chiang is term-limited out and is running for treasurer, and Treasurer Bill Lockyer surprised many by announcing in June 2013 that he would retire from public office rather than run to swap jobs with Chiang.

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Who gets the controller's job might come down to what happens in one county.

"Elections are run statewide, but they're won or lost for Republicans in Los Angeles County," said Bill Whalen, a veteran GOP strategist and speechwriter who is now a research fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution.

For example, Republican Steve Cooley lost the attorney general's office to Democrat Kamala Harris in 2010 by 0.7 percentage point statewide but by 14.2 points in Los Angeles County, "even though he was a third-term Los Angeles district attorney," he said.

Swearingin's "only chance is to switch jobs between now and Election Day with (Los Angeles Mayor) Eric

Garcetti," Whalen joked, before adding that it makes sense for her to woo that Democratic stronghold by distancing herself from the GOP "in subtle and not-so-subtle ways."

With Republican registration at 20.7 percent in Los Angeles County and 28.2 percent statewide, "that's not a ticket to ride to victory," he said.

Swearingin made her latest trip to Los Angeles on Tuesday and visited Northern California on Thursday, spending last week's other three days back in Fresno -- the city that underpins her campaign pitch.

She tells voters of her executive experience running a city with 3,200 employees -- steering a billion-dollar budget beyond massive deficits exacerbated by the housing-market crash and recession, and ensuring the city is now building its budget reserve and ranks among the state's top job creators. That -- coupled with her aggressive, energetic personality -- makes her better-qualified than Yee, Swearingin says.

She also stresses that California's mayors all hold nonpartisan offices.

"It is extremely important to be independent as the chief fiscal watchdog for the state," she said last week, "and someone who brings as little bias to the table as possible."

Swearingin made waves at last month's state GOP convention in Los Angeles by declining to say whether she'll vote for fellow Republican Neel Kashkari for governor. In fact, the only fellow statewide candidate she has endorsed is Pete Peterson, the Republican running for secretary of state -- who also eagerly proclaims his independence from party politics.

Her arm's-length relationship with the rest of the ticket could turn off many Republican voters, Jon Fleischman, a conservative commentator and former state GOP vice chairman, wrote last week.

"If Swearingin 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," Fleischman wrote, adding that he also can't overlook her support of the high-speed rail project championed by Gov. Jerry Brown. "There is an adage in politics that might be applicable here: 'Ignore your base at your own risk.'"

Yee might have better name recognition, having represented 21 Northern and Central California counties on the Board of Equalization -- which administers California's sales, fuel, alcohol, tobacco and other taxes -- since being appointed to replace her boss, Carole Migden, who resigned in 2004. Yee won her own term in 2006 and was re-elected in 2010.

Earlier, she was a top budget aide to Democratic Gov. Gray Davis. Before that she was a staffer for various legislative committees.

"My knowledge of state finances and having deep knowledge of the role of the controller has prepared me to take on the job," Yee said last week, adding that she agrees the controller must be above party politics. "We run as partisans, but the job is done with the highest degree of transparency and professionalism."

Whalen said Swearingin benefits from "a very bored electorate and a governor who's not doing much to boost turnout."

Brown, Whalen said, could make life harder for all GOP candidates "if he turned this election into a values discussion of which party is more in touch with mainstream California right now," yet he shows no sign of doing that.

By distancing herself from her party, Swearingin is "rolling the dice," said Sherry Bebitch Jeffe, a University of Southern California professor and political expert. Still, she said, "I don't see any alternative for her."

She said one thing is clear: Swearingin, Peterson, Kashkari and state GOP Chairman Jim Brulte are probably looking beyond November to bolster the party's strength in years to come.

"This will give moderates, centrists, a chance to gain name recognition and perhaps some organization for the future" -- an effort to "mute the conservative voice in the electoral process and at least pull their party a bit more toward the center," Jeffe said.

But for this year, Swearingin "will still be on the ballot with an 'R' after her name," Jeffe said. "And that brand is pretty toxic in California right now."

Josh Richman covers politics. Follow him at [Twitter.com/josh_richman](https://twitter.com/josh_richman). Read the Political Blotter at IBABuzz.com/politics.

STATE CONTROLLER CANDIDATES

Name: Ashley Swearingin Party: Republican

Age: 42

Residence: Fresno

Experience: Mayor of Fresno, 2009-present; chairwoman, California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, 2010-present (board member since 2009, lead executive 2007-08); Fresno State's director of community and economic development, 2000-08; co-founded Regional Jobs Initiative, 2002; director of Central Valley Business Incubator, 1993-2000

Education: Bachelor's in business administration (1994) and MBA (1997), Fresno State

Campaign slogan: "Join me as I work for a better California."

Website: www.ashleyforca.com

Name: Betty Yee

Party: Democrat

Age: 56

Residence: Alameda

Experience: Board of Equalization member, 2006-present, acting member, 2004-06; chief deputy to board member Carole Migden, 2003-04; chief deputy budget director for Gov. Gray Davis, 1999-2003; senior staff positions on several committees in both houses of the Legislature

Education: Bachelor's in sociology (1979), UC Berkeley; master's in public administration (1981), Golden Gate University

Campaign slogan: "Experience matters."

Website: <http://bettyyee.com>

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