

# Swarengin backs Jeb Bush; Valley Republican leaders size up first debate

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With many choices for president, most Republican leaders in the central San Joaquin Valley haven't settled on a favorite. But several of the 17 candidates are gaining support, and Thursday's GOP debate could break front-runners from the crowded field.

On the eve of the debate in Cleveland, local Republicans from agriculture leaders John Harris and Manuel Cunha to party leaders Michael Der Manouel Jr. and Steve Brandau to Fresno Mayor Ashley Swarengin spoke about their likes and dislikes.

Most are hedging their bets. Take Brandau, for instance.

"There's five or six people that I'm happy with in this big group of 17, and they're the conservatives," says Brandau, a Fresno City Council member who is also a tea party activist. "From Rand Paul to Ted Cruz to Scott Walker — the whole group of conservatives — I could find myself supporting any one of them."

Cruz, the Texas senator, and Walker, the Wisconsin governor, seem especially appealing to Valley GOP conservatives. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and current Ohio Gov. John Kasich have caught agriculture leaders' eyes.

And Donald Trump has everyone's attention, from those who have found something to love in his shoot-from-the-hip commentary to those who loathe his controversial immigration thoughts.

Already, some candidates are falling behind — only 10 of the 17 were chosen to participate in Thursday night's debate. The remaining seven find themselves stuck in a second-tier candidate forum that starts earlier in the day.

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As the process moves forward, local political leaders hope that California might play a role beyond ATM in deciding the next Republican presidential nominee. For those who can garner backing, the region has proven to be fertile fundraising ground. This could be key for hopefuls who have the support of the region's deep-pocketed business and agricultural leaders — people who can make a difference with their checkbook and encourage others to follow their lead.

Last month, presidential hopeful Carly Fiorina came to Visalia for a fundraiser hosted by businessman Don Gropetti. And Cunha, president of the Nisei Farmers League, is working on bringing Bush to the Valley — possibly for a fundraiser — in the next few months.

Like Cunha, Swarengin has invited Bush to Fresno for a fundraiser and a community event. She says there is a lot to like about him, including that he speaks Spanish.

"I have always been very impressed with Gov. Bush. Way out here on the West Coast, there was enough news and information on the success he was having."

Once he announced his presidential candidacy, Swarengin talked with friends who held elected office in Florida and

“heard such glowing things with people who have worked with him.”

She met Bush in San Francisco in the spring and offered her support.

## **Bush a lightning rod**

Cunha has Bush as his preferred choice, though he says he also could support Florida Sen. Marco Rubio or Walker.

Cunha says he likes Bush’s economic and immigration platforms. Bush favors a path to “legal status” for immigrants, though his immigration plan also proposes to increase U.S. Border Patrol activity and cracking down on so-called “sanctuary cities” such as San Francisco, which have policies that shelter immigrants in the country illegally.

The first plank of Bush’s immigration plan ires leaders like Der Manouel: “It’s disgusting to see these guys like Jeb Bush call illegal immigration an act of love; it’s insulting,” says Der Manouel, a businessman and chairman of the Lincoln Club of Fresno County.

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Der Manouel prefers Trump and Walker.

“Trump doesn’t care about what anybody thinks,” Der Manouel says. “His No.1 attribute is that he doesn’t have a Republican consultant. I love that most GOP elected officials are totally confounded by him, and what that tells me mostly is how out of touch they are with the whole world.”

## **Support for governors**

Der Manouel likes Walker’s record as Wisconsin governor, especially his battles with labor unions: “Walker cleaned up a Democrat mess and what we need in 2016 is someone who can come in and clean up a Democrat mess.”

Der Manouel says Rubio, Cruz and Paul lack that quality, and it is because they’re in the Senate and haven’t served as a chief executive.

Former Secretary of State Bill Jones of Fresno singled out Kasich because he has done a good job leading Ohio, but also has served in the House of Representatives. The relationships Kasich built in Congress, Jones says, would help him as president. Jones says he likes the chief executive qualities of the governors in the race, singling out not only Kasich, but also Walker and former Texas Gov. Rick Perry.

“It’s phenomenal what these governors have done in their respective states,” Jones says.

One contender I like particularly is John Kasich. He has been a successful governor of a pivotal state, served in Congress and comes across as a good, smart person with no baggage. Fresno County farmer and rancher John Harris

John Harris, one of Fresno County’s leading farmers and ranchers, likes Kasich, too: “He has been a successful governor of a pivotal state, served in Congress and comes across as a good, smart person with no baggage.”

## **Too early to commit**

Both Jones and Harris stressed they are uncommitted to any candidate at this point.

So, too, are Republican businessman Tal Cloud, who is political director of the Lincoln Club of Fresno County, and Granville Homes President Darius Assemi.

The perfect candidate doesn't exist, Assemi says. Some are strong on domestic policy, but weak on foreign policy. Others are the opposite. None have the whole package.

"I'm looking for pragmatic solutions," Assemi says. "Nobody has caught my eye so far. I want massive job creation and someone who can bring stability in the world without blowing more things up."

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Audrey Redmond, a longtime rank-and-file GOP activist, says "none of them have shown me anything so far. There's just too many of them, and until it settles down to maybe three, and you can do some investigation and research, I might have a better idea. But right now, no."

Kings County Republican Central Committee Member Prudence Eiland wants somebody who isn't even running — Rudy Giuliani: "He's a fix-it guy, and we need him because we're broken."

## **The Trump factor**

Giuliani has recently defended Trump, but Eiland says she isn't ready to follow his lead.

Council Member Brandau says there are deep divisions within the conservative and tea party movements over Trump, and also a lingering question about his long-term commitment to the race.

"We know there's weaknesses," Brandau says. "The support for Donald Trump within the tea party coalesces around his honest style of combating business as usual. He's unafraid. That's refreshing to a lot of people. Then some folks are anti-Donald Trump because they see him as a wolf in sheep's clothing. He's not one of us, he just sounds like one of us."

Those controversial comments have especially chafed the agricultural community where solving the immigration issue is a top priority.

Cunha says he so dislikes Trump that if The Donald is the frontrunner, "it might make me think about (supporting) a Democratic candidate."

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