

California gubernatorial debate exposes right-wing character of both capitalist parties

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Six candidates for California governor met Wednesday night in San Francisco in the first major televised debate since former Democratic Congressman Eric Swalwell, previously considered a leading contender, dropped out of the race following a #MeToo-style campaign and accusations of sexual misconduct. No charges have been filed against Swalwell, though an investigation has reportedly begun in New York City.

Current Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom is term-limited, leaving the seat open. Newsom is widely expected to seek the Democratic presidential nomination in 2028.

The debate featured four Democrats, billionaire former hedge fund manager Tom Steyer, former Biden Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra, former Congresswoman Katie Porter and San Jose Mayor Matt Mahan, along with two Republicans, former Fox News host Steve Hilton and Riverside County Sheriff Chad Bianco.

Green Party candidate Butch Ware was not included. Ware's campaign has denounced his exclusion from candidate forums and has claimed that, when included in polling, he receives between 2 and 4.66 percent. His campaign is also fighting a ballot access dispute after a judge rejected his bid to appear on the June ballot, a ruling Ware has said he would appeal.

The primary election will be held Tuesday, June 2, under California's "jungle primary" system, in which all candidates appear on the same ballot and the two highest vote-getters advance to the November general election regardless of party. County officials will begin mailing ballots by May 4, and the deadline to register to vote is May 18.

The race remains highly unstable. A California Democratic Party voter index survey published earlier this month showed the two Republicans, Hilton and Bianco, leading with 16 and 14 percent respectively, followed by Becerra and Steyer at 13 percent, Porter at 10 percent and Mahan at 5 percent. A separate Emerson College/Inside California Politics poll found the largest share of voters, 23 percent, undecided, followed by Hilton at 17 percent and Bianco and

Steyer at 14 percent.

Hilton has increased his support since receiving Donald Trump's endorsement earlier this month. Trump's intervention was aimed at consolidating the Republican vote behind Hilton and preventing a split that could leave the Republicans off the ballot.

Steyer and Becerra have gained the most ground since Swalwell's exit. State Controller Betty Yee dropped out Monday and endorsed Steyer, who has also won the backing of several unions and "Our Revolution," the organization founded during Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential campaign.

The endorsement of Steyer by "Our Revolution" is especially revealing. Founded during Sanders' 2016 campaign to channel leftward-moving voters behind the Democratic Party, the organization now sells stickers declaring "Billionaires are policy failures" while endorsing a billionaire for governor.

Steyer amassed his fortune through Farallon Capital Management, the San Francisco hedge fund he co-founded and managed for 26 years. During the debate, Mahan, repeatedly attacked Steyer over Farallon's investments, including in Corrections Corporation of America, now CoreCivic, the largest private prison operator in the United States. Mahan's attacks were aimed at deflecting from the support he is receiving from tech millionaires. KRON 4 reported that Mahan has raised more than \$12.7 million in donations from tech executives, with large donations from Dropbox CEO Andrew Houston, Snapchat founder Evan Spiegel and Twitch co-founder Kyle Vogt.

The major issues facing workers and youth—war, inequality and the danger of fascism—were not dealt with in any serious manner. Every candidate had their pre-packaged 30-second clips and quips, each as phony as the next. Topics included California's gas tax, a possible electric vehicle tax, how to attract private insurance companies to the state, a social media ban for youth 16 and under and proposals to lower housing costs, all within the framework of capitalism.

The central issue in the debate was not what was said but

what was excluded. There was no discussion of the ongoing genocide in Gaza, US backing for Israel's annexationist war aims in Lebanon, or the escalating US murder spree in the Pacific and Caribbean. The criminal war against Iran, the opening stages of World War III alongside the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, was mentioned only in relation to rising gas prices, not as an illegal and aggressive war. Steyer described the war against Iran as "insane," while Becerra called it "reckless," but neither challenged American imperialism's right to wage an aggressive, illegal war.

One of the most revealing exchanges came on homelessness. In what is no doubt an underestimate, it was reported that some 187,000 people in California are homeless. Asked to grade the current governor's performance, every Democrat on stage gave Newsom a passing grade for his handling of the crisis. Becerra said Newsom had made efforts to "actually go out and clean some of the streets," adding that he would give him an "A." Porter and Mahan gave Newsom a "B," while Steyer gave him a "B-minus."

This praise comes less than two years after Newsom signed a 2024 executive order directing state agencies to remove homeless encampments from state property following the Supreme Court's *Grants Pass* ruling, upholding a municipal ban on sleeping in public. The order marked a sharp escalation in the criminalization of homelessness, empowering the state to sweep encampments instead of addressing the social catastrophe that has left hundreds of thousands without secure housing.

At the time, the WSWS wrote: "The message is clear: The state has no intention to resolve a serious social problem like homelessness because money must be directed to the defense of the interests of the ruling class and, importantly, the preservation of the profit system that has created the most severe levels of social inequality since the 1930s, despite unprecedented wealth produced by workers."

That every Democrat on stage praised Newsom's handling of homelessness underscores the reactionary character of the entire party. The Democrats' supposed "solutions" consist of repackaged police measures, austerity and funneling money to connected non-profits, all while defending the wealth and property of the financial oligarchy.

The Republicans, for their part, blamed every social crisis in California, from wildfires to homelessness and inflation, on Democratic rule and supposedly excessive "regulation" of business operations. Both Bianco and Hilton called for slashing environmental and business regulations, expanding oil production and eliminating alleged "waste, fraud and abuse" in government programs, a formula for gutting social spending and handing still greater power to corporations.

Hilton attacked Becerra for briefly supporting masking during the pandemic, while he was Biden's health and human services secretary.

Bianco's role in the debate was especially significant. The Riverside County sheriff recently seized more than 650,000 ballots from the 2025 referendum on redistricting, as part of a bogus "voter fraud" investigation. State officials and voting rights groups have challenged the seizure, and the California Supreme Court temporarily halted the investigation while it considers the dispute.

This week CalMatters reported that internal emails showed Bianco's investigation was driven by thin evidence and claims from fringe election-denial groups. Newly unsealed warrants did not show direct evidence of vote fraud.

Asked during the debate whether he would launch a similar investigation if he did not trust the results of the upcoming primary, Bianco refused to give a clear answer. He declared that Californians are "never going to know if our elections are secure" because "legitimate investigations" by law enforcement are being stopped by "Democrat one-party rule in California."

The statement amounted to an open threat. Trump and the Republican Party are preparing to challenge any election result they do not like and send immigration Gestapo to the polls. Bianco, a supporter of the fascistic Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, is presenting himself as willing agent for dictatorship.

The debate revealed the dead end confronting workers and youth within the framework of the capitalist electoral politics. The Democrats offer only token reforms, empty phrases and adaptation to Republican policies. The Republicans openly agitate for police repression, deregulation and the destruction of democratic rights.

The alternative is not to be found in any section of the capitalist political establishment. The working class must intervene independently, through the building of rank-and-file committees in workplaces, schools and neighborhoods, and prepare a political and industrial counteroffensive against austerity, war and dictatorship. The fight against Trump and the fascists in Washington must be connected to the struggle against the capitalist system that has produced both parties and the social catastrophe they defend.



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