

## **A Crowded Governor's Race**

We are now fewer than three months away from the June 2 primary election and California's gubernatorial race is shaping up to be one of the most consequential and difficult to predict in recent memory.

The filing deadline passed on March 6, leaving the ballot with eight Democrats and two Republicans. According to two recent reputable polls, five candidates make up the top tier and are in a statistical dead heat for the top two positions as the primary ballot takes shape.

### **PPIC Poll**

The latest PPIC Statewide Survey ([Feb 3-11, 2026](#)):

1. Steve Hilton (R, 14%)
2. Katie Porter (D, 13%)
3. Chad Bianco (R, 12%)
4. Eric Swalwell (D, 11%)
5. Tom Steyer (D, 10%)

The remaining candidates, including former LA Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, former Controller Betty Yee, former Attorney General Xavier Becerra, San Jose Mayor Matt Mahan, and current State Superintendent Tony Thurmond, are each polling in the single digits.

### **UC Berkeley/Politico Poll**

A new UC Berkeley Citrin Center for Public Opinion-Politico Poll ([Feb 24-March 3, 2026](#)):

1. Steve Hilton (R, 19%)
2. Tom Steyer (D, 13%)
3. Eric Swalwell (D, 11%)
4. Chad Bianco (R, 11%)
5. Katie Porter (D, 11%)

The remaining candidates polled in the low single digits, led by Xavier Becerra at 5% and descending from there to include Villaraigosa (4%), Mahan (3%), Yee (2%), Ian Calderon (2%), and Thurmond (1%).

### **Top-Two Dynamics**

California uses a "top-two" primary system where all candidates appear on a single ballot, and the top two vote-getters, regardless of party, advance to the November 3 general election. At the time of this writing, with eight Democrats splitting the vote, there is a credible likelihood that Republicans Steve Hilton and Chad Bianco could both advance, locking Democrats out of the general election entirely. Renowned democratic strategist Paul Mitchell estimates a 27% chance of an all-Republican November ballot. Governor Newsom has publicly said the Democratic party has "no margin for error."

## **Democratic Party Urges Low-Polling Candidates to Drop Out**

A few days before the filing deadline, California Democratic Party Chair Rusty Hicks issued an open letter urging low-polling candidates to step aside and if they file, to drop out by April 15 and endorse a rival before voters receive ballots, if they cannot show meaningful momentum. The appeal was largely ignored. The only major Democratic candidate included in the PPIC poll that did not file to run was former Assembly Majority Leader Ian Calderon.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond, who is polling at 1-2% and has less than \$500,000 cash on hand, declined to exit the race and fired back sharply. Thurmond, who is Black, accused the party of racial bias, stating that it is "essentially telling every candidate of color in the race for governor to drop out" while urging white candidates Porter, Swalwell, and Steyer to remain. Thurmond framed his continued candidacy as standing up to "political elites" and subsequently fundraised off the controversy. The California Democratic Party did not respond publicly to his allegation. Whatever one makes of the racial bias argument, the electoral math is straightforward from the party's standpoint: candidates polling in the low single digits with minimal resources are unlikely to advance but are well positioned to siphon enough votes from viable Democratic candidates to tip the top-two outcome toward an all-Republican November ballot.

## **CDE Governance Proposal and the 2026 Political Landscape**

This race matters for public schools: K-12 funding, State Board of Education appointments, the fate of legislation, the state budget deficit, and the future of California's relationship with federal education programs will all be shaped by who sits in the Governor's office come January, 2027.

Making the Governor's race more interesting for schools is the interplay with Newsom's budget proposal to move the California Department of Education under the State Board of Education, effectively consolidating K-12 governance under the Governor's office rather than the independently elected Superintendent of Public Instruction. With five candidates closely bunched in the gubernatorial primary and two Republicans holding a combined 26% among likely voters, some Democrats are quietly asking if this is the right time to make that change. This change could fundamentally alter who holds authority over state education policy, curriculum standards, and district accountability at a moment when the ideology of the state's next governor remains most uncertain. In fact, Assembly Member David Alvarez (D-San Diego) introduced a spot bill ([AB 2117](#)) in this area to provide for a more robust conversation on the issue.

## **What's Next?**

The Secretary of State will publish the official candidate list by March 21. The June 2 primary is now just under 11 weeks away. Democratic Party Chair Hicks has signaled he may intervene more forcefully if the field remains crowded in April. Ballot information guides begin mailing to voters shortly after April 15, the date Hicks set as a voluntary withdrawal deadline for non-viable candidates. Even candidates who withdraw after filing will remain on the printed ballot, meaning votes cast for them could still siphon support from viable Democrats.