

Landau's Guide to the June 3, 2014 Primary Election (Abridged)

Why vote in this election?

Life is busy, time is short, this election—in the form of absentee ballots—has already started. The media, such as it is, has pretty well ignored this election, pausing occasionally to run stories about civic apathy and decline. In the interest of getting this out to you, my faithful readers, I've decided to do an abridged version. I'll cover the statewide races for open offices, the contested local offices, and ballot measures affecting the Inner East Bay (there's only a few). Statewide that gives us Secretary of State, Controller, and Treasurer.

I'll skip the statewide offices where an incumbent (all are Democrats) is running for re-election—Governor (incumbent Jerry Brown), Lieutenant Governor (Gavin Newsom), Treasurer (John Chiang), Attorney General (Kamala Parks), Insurance Commissioner (Dave Jones), and State Superintendent of Schools (Tom Torlakson). Because of California's "top two" voting system, you'll most likely see these contests again in November—with the two top vote getters from any party from June. You'll probably have the Democratic incumbent and the top Republican, at least in statewide races. It's possible, if not likely, that someone could win outright by getting a majority in June, or that, say two Democrats were the top two.

Open Statewide Offices

Secretary of State—Derek Cressman—8 candidates, 4 Democrats. This is the kind of job that people don't tend to know about unless it's done badly—running the state's election system. One Democrat you don't want to vote for is Leland Yee, who could hardly be effective even if he turns out to be innocent of the corruption charges against him. Republican Pete Peterson works at Pepperdine University in Malibu, a place known for churning out right wing propaganda. Republican Roy Allmond is a first year law student, not exactly ready for prime time. Engineer Jeffrey Drobman seems to be running to support internet-based voting. Green David Curtis' statement shows no sign of knowing anything about the specific requirements of being Secretary of State.

The one ostensibly non-partisan candidate, running as such, is a smart guy—Dan Schnur. But he's trying to disguise the fact that he was a key Republican strategist for many years. He re-registered no party in 2011, but his website does not mention the word Republican, though he does note some Republican candidates he worked for. A non-partisan Secretary of State might be good, but Schnur isn't that.

Termed out Southern California Democratic Assemblyman Alex Padilla could no doubt do this job, though elections haven't been a particular focus of his. But Cressman is a vice president of California Common Cause—the election reform organization—and has been working this turf for years. It would be good to see a genuine reformer in this position, especially one from a determinedly non-partisan organization.

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Controller—6 candidates, 3 Democrats. **Betty Yee.** The Controller maintains the state's accounts (as opposed to the Treasurer, who does the investments). Let's start with Republican Ashley Swearingen, the mayor of Fresno, a city of 500,000 people these days. Swearingen actually seems to have some degree of sanity. It's not directly relevant to the Controller's race, but on transportation she's been on the side of angels—supporting High Speed Rail and a recently torpedoed Bus Rapid Transit plan in Fresno. I wouldn't vote for her, but those actually are tough stands in Fresno. The complete statement of David Evans, another Republican, in the voter pamphlet is "Most qualified for Controller." Yeah. Green Laura Wells wants to tax the rich. Good, but run for the legislature to work on this. Tammy Blair, Democrat, filed no statement.

Former Assembly speaker John Perez—highlighting his historic role as California's first gay assembly speaker—could do this job. But the experience of Betty Yee, who had a senior budget post in the Department of Finance and who served on the Board of equalization, seems more directly relevant.

Treasurer—John Chiang—Chiang is seeking to move over from Controller, where he's generally agreed to have done a good job. Chiang helped uncover the scandalous draining of the small, poor city of Bell, by officials who had no hesitancy in paying themselves hundreds of thousands more than normal. Green Party candidate Ellen Brown—who says nothing about her personal qualifications-- is running to champion a state-owned bank . Republican Greg Conlon touts his Pete Wilson era public experience.

State Board of Equalization, 2nd district—Fiona Ma—An obscure but sometimes important body, which oversees administration of, and appeals about, state taxes. Ma is a termed out Democratic legislator from San Francisco, who's got an accounting degree and an MBA. Her sole opponent, Republican (and "organic foods manager") James Theis, did not bother to file a statement.

15th Assembly District (North Oakland-Berkeley-Richmond)—Elizabeth Echols—Nancy Skinner is termed out. This one is a doozy. Only Democrats took the trouble to publish statements in the voters' handbook, so the other three can't be considered very serious. Clarence Hunt and Pamela Price have no public sector experience and little support. Sam Kang works for the well-intentioned, but sometimes simpleminded Greenlining Institute. His heart is clearly in a good place, but as someone who's never held public office it would be more appropriate for him to start at a lower level.

So it comes down to former Richmond City Councilmember Tony Thurmond and former Obama administration official Elizabeth Echols. Thurmond's statement shows big name political support (Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom, West Contra Costa Congressman George Miller) but says almost nothing about what he's done. Among other things, Echols has been Regional Administrator of the Small Business Administration and federal advisor on Clean Tech and Energy Efficiency. She's almost over qualified. Under the top two system, you'll probably see her and Thurmond on the ballot again this fall, especially with the Alameda County Central Labor Council and others endorsing both.

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(I don't tend to have that many readers in the **16th Assembly district** east of the hills, in Central Contra Costa County. If you live there—support Dublin mayor **Tim Sbranti**—someone I've personally seen act as the voice of reason in meetings otherwise given over to posturing. His opponent Steve Glazer, while nominally a Democrat, has built his hugely expensive campaign around bashing public employees).

Alameda County Superintendent of Schools (nonpartisan)—**Karen Monroe**—It's a five way donnybrook to replace the long serving, now retiring Sheila Jordan. The County Superintendent runs schools for kids expelled from their home district, but it's more about reviewing school district budgets and providing training. Most of the candidates seem OK (tech-happy Jeff Bowser excepted), but Monroe's experience as Deputy County Superintendent and her endorsement by well-respected outgoing Superintendent Sheila Jordan are decisive for me.

State Propositions

Prop. 41—Multifamily Veterans Housing Bonds—Yes —Making housing programs work in current conditions: Veterans have not been taking out mortgages very much under the state funding available program. Not many people are buying homes much these days, and veterans have better mortgage options. So this would allow the state to instead sell \$600million in bonds for multifamily housing. The funds could assist developers (for profit or non-profit) or cities to build or rehab housing for low income veterans. This is a good idea, it would be better if it weren't just targeted to veterans, but many veterans are low income and a disproportionate number wind up homeless. They're a needy population.

Prop. 42—Public Records Costs—Yes—This state constitutional amendment would require that local governments follow the state public records and meetings act. These are already law, this proposition would seal them into place in the constitution. The state would not be required to reimburse costs to local governments. That makes me a bit queasy, knowing how fragile local government finance is, but transparent decisionmaking is a very important cause, and often isn't that pricy.

(If you should happen to live in **Piedmont**, **Measure H** would provide \$13.5 million—less than the price of some Piedmont houses—in funding to add and renovate classrooms in the public schools.)

County Proposition: Alameda County Measure AA—Renewal of Health Care Safety Net Tax—Yes—It's well known that Highland Hospital is one of California's true safety net hospitals, where a lot of heroic care for people with serious medical issues (like gunshots) gets done. It's less well known that a ½ cent sales tax in Alameda County helps support that facility and other county hospitals. That sales tax is now on the ballot for renewal—a yes vote would maintain, not increase the levy. It needs a 2/3 vote to pass. 75% of the funding would go to the county hospitals; 25% would go to the following: 1. Critical services provided by community-based health care provider, 2. Cover uncompensated costs for other hospital admissions; 3. "For essential public health, mental health and substance abuse services provided."

You may encounter a purist (my mother warned me about purists) "progressive" position which says that these should be based on income taxes instead of sales taxes, which fall more heavily on the poor. Except that an income tax vote for this is not likely any time soon, and the loss to the poor should there be cutbacks at Highland would be enormous. Vote yes.

Contra Costa

Most of the candidate races in Contra Costa are uncontested. A couple of worthy measures:

Measure E—Education Facilities Bond—Contra Costa community colleges—Yes—55% required to pass. Every level of education in California has been starved for funds, but community colleges have suffered more than most. This would pay for labs, classroom, and facilities upgrades at 5 colleges across the county, from Contra Costa College in San Pablo to the Brentwood Education Center. It would cost up to \$450 million in capital. To pay for this, property taxes would be raised some \$13 per year per \$100,000 of assessed value—hardly a massive amount. 55,000 people attend these colleges, which for many students are the last best hope of getting into a 4 year college or a decent job.

Measure H—School Facilities Improvements—West Contra Costa Unified School District—Yes—55% required to pass--It would be better if this wasn't on the same ballot as the community college ballot, but sometimes things happen that way. There are a lot of safety and disabled access needs in the aging West County Unified School District (Richmond-San Pablo-El Cerrito-Kensington). This \$270 million bond issue would address a lot of them. No official argument against the measure was filed.