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The unexpectedly strong candidate for governor

Some feelings are developing for one Democratic contender



CANDIDATES on stage during the gubernatorial primary debate at East Los Angeles College. (Justin Sullivan Getty Images)

What am I looking for in a new California governor?

Like a big chunk of the state's voters, I'm not exactly sure. But I've been watching and listening to their spate of debates in the last week, and I'm actually shocked by who I am leaning toward.

I know who I don't like, though.

Every time I see Republican Riverside County Sheriff Chad Bianco, with his Tom Selleck mustache, I can't help thinking he should play a lawman on TV. A onetime member of the far-right Oath Keepers, just about every political take he has is bad:

A lack of affordable housing has nothing to do with homelessness, [Bianco has said repeatedly](#). "This is not and never has been about homes. It's about drugs and mental illness," he proclaimed Wednesday at the NBC4/Telemundo [debate at the Skirball Center](#).

Bianco wants to get rid of (not reform) the California Environmental Quality Act — dreaded by builders everywhere — and abolish the California Coastal Commission, which for 54 years has ensured public

access to beaches that otherwise would have been blocked by private development. When asked whether he supports finishing the high-speed rail that would link Merced to Bakersfield, Bianco replied, "No, I would rather arrest the people that stole our money."

To which former Democratic U.S. Rep. Katie Porter interjected, "That would be on brand for you, doing something illegal," alluding to the thousands of Riverside County ballots Bianco seized in a bid to gin up fear about nonexistent voter fraud.

I've always liked Porter and her famous white board. I don't believe snapping at your staff or a reporter is disqualifying, and I'm glad she's been able to joke about [the leaked video](#) that damaged her campaign. She [concluded a recent ad](#) by telling the crowd of supporters behind her: "Now could you guys please get out of my shot?"

However, I winced at some of the things Porter said on the debate stage.

Tuesday, [at East Los Angeles College](#), she called her opponents "boys" and chastised them for interrupting one another.

"You are actually interrupting them, too," Bianco complained. "I don't know why you want to act like you weren't."

"Oh, cowboy up, cupcake" [Porter retorted](#).

On Wednesday at the Skirball Center she repeated the insult during a discussion of sanctuary cities, which Bianco opposes. "I think we ought to enforce the existing sanctuary laws so we don't have crazy cowboys taking the law into their own hands."

Bianco suggested she tell that to a mother whose child was killed by an undocumented immigrant. Porter, who's raising three teenagers as a single mom, said she didn't need any lectures from him about being a mother. ["You might," he said](#). The audience gasped.

Steve Hilton, the Trump-endorsed, British-born businessman turned Fox News host, became a U.S. citizen in 2021. Who doesn't love an English accent? He's reasonable sounding, bright and engaging, but deeply misguided.

Last month, [in a radio interview on LAist](#), Hilton revived the creaky welfare queen trope. In a town near Modesto, he told host Austin Cross, "I was talking to some dairy workers there, not making a huge amount of money, 50 grand, something like that. They were telling me that their girlfriends — none of them work — and they all make more money than them on a range of different benefits that are available, both federal and state." And they all drive Cadillacs, too, amirite?

Cross pressed him hard on whether Trump lost the 2020 election and Hilton refused to give a yes or no answer. That alone is disqualifying.

Former Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has been [coming in hot](#) on the debate stage, but he's polling so low that the attacks he unleashed on the presumptive Democratic front-runner, former Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra, probably aren't going to help. It doesn't seem Villaraigosa's 73-year-old heart is in this quest.

I'm not sure what I was expecting from [San Jose Mayor Matt Mahan](#), who at 43 is the youngest contender. A darling of Silicon Valley (and onetime Harvard dorm mate of Mark Zuckerberg) who has made headway against homelessness in his city, I was hoping for someone with Pete Buttigieg star quality.

Instead, Mahan comes across as super competent, not ideological, and a bit rehearsed. ("Oh my god,

he's reciting his lines," said Hilton during Wednesday's debate, in full mean-girl mode. "Hilarious.")

Honestly, it's too bad Mahan can't run for mayor of L.A.

After former U.S. Rep. Eric Swalwell's implosion [amid allegations](#) that he is a serial sexual harasser, Becerra has emerged in polls as the Democratic candidate most likely to end up in a runoff with Hilton.

And so he has become the punching bag for the other Democrats, who've hammered him with accusations about how, on his watch at HHS, the Office of Refugee Resettlement lost track of 85,000 migrant children, most of whom poured into the country from Central America as unaccompanied minors between 2021 and 2023. [The New York Times found](#) that many of the minors, mostly teenage boys, were exploited by sponsors, who illegally put them to work in various factories, food processing plants and as roofers.

In his defense, Becerra has said that HHS's legal authority ends once a child is placed with a sponsor, and the department has no legal way for sponsors to stay in contact.

"Cálmate, Antonio, cálmate," [said Becerra](#) after Villaraigosa lit into him. (Translation: "Take a chill pill.")

This brings me to billionaire Tom Steyer, who, as much as I hate to admit it, has really grown on me. Yes, he's trying to buy the election. And yes, Californians have always [turned up their noses](#) at billionaires with aspirations to run the state.

But, but, but ... Steyer seems to be the most committed environmentalist of the bunch, despite, as his opponents repeatedly point out, having made part of his fortune investing in fossil fuel and coal companies and private prisons. He [swears he's seen the light](#), and Bernie Sanders supports him, though [questions linger](#) about Steyer's ties to Farallon Capital, the hedge fund he founded.

He is the one candidate who actively embraces closing [the real estate tax loophole](#) that has allowed commercial property owners to evade reassessment, thus keeping their property taxes insanely low. [Closing this loophole](#), which voters [narrowly rejected](#) in 2020, would generate billions in new revenue for the state. He said he will vote for the billionaires tax if it qualifies for the ballot.

But he really won my heart last week when he declared at the Skirball debate that "ICE is a criminal organization. They're coming into our state, they're terrorizing people, and they're racially profiling people ... I am in favor of abolishing ICE." He vowed to prosecute ICE agents and its leadership — "including Stephen Miller."

Could it be I'm falling in love?

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