

California needs a controller to challenge Sacramento's establishment. This candidate can

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The pandemic era has been a study in the potential importance of the California controller's office. In the early months of the crisis, the state showered billions on an array of sometimes dodgy vendors promising masks and more with hardly a hand-wringing from Controller Betty Yee — and, in one recently reported case, a degree of cheerleading, which is the opposite of what's expected from the office.

Meanwhile, the state's unemployment agency held up legitimate applications while hemorrhaging money on fraudulent claims, another example of the need for stricter scrutiny of state spending and competence.

It doesn't help that like many obscure political offices, the controller's is viewed as a steppingstone to better-known positions, making its occupants less likely to challenge the establishment amid one-party rule.

More hopefully, Yee's coming exit due to term limits has yielded perhaps the most competitive race on the statewide ballot.

In a relatively strong field, one candidate stands out as possessing the experience and independence to serve as a meaningful check on the behemoth state government: state Sen. Steve Glazer.

A Bay Area Democrat, Glazer shares a party with most of the candidates in the race and all those running California for the past decade and more. But he has consistently demonstrated the capacity to go against the party on principle, an indispensable quality for the office he seeks.

Glazer rightly advocated caution early in the pandemic, criticizing Gov. Gavin Newsom's rush to reopen the economy in the spring of 2020. Last year, he was one of only two Senate Democrats to vote against Newsom's sweetheart deal with the powerful and politically generous prison guards' union. And in 2017, he was the only Democratic senator to vote against the majority's half-baked bill to conjure up single-payer health care without identifying funding.

The senator has also helped make public spending more transparent and accountable, authoring a measure instituting an inspector general for the Bay Area's rickety commuter rail, BART; a 2016 law encouraging more California State University students to graduate on time; and a bill to make public school salaries more transparent.

His experience as a political strategist and an adviser to a canny and fiscally responsible governor, Jerry Brown, would also prove useful.

Glazer's most politically formidable competition for the position may be Malia Cohen, the chair of the tax-setting state Board of Equalization, whose duties were substantially diminished following a corruption scandal that predated her service. A former San Francisco supervisor who championed a city soda tax and a ban on flavored tobacco products, Cohen is the choice of the Democratic Party and most of its officials, which raises questions about her ability to challenge them in office.

Ron Galperin, Los Angeles' Democratic city controller, has the most relevant qualifications in the race, having done the job on a smaller stage, and his extensive knowledge about the position is evident. But he lacks Glazer's Sacramento experience and heft.

Yvonne Yiu, the mayor of the small Los Angeles area city of Monterey Park and a financial adviser who has poured millions of her own money into her campaign, doesn't seem as well prepared.

The lone Republican in the race, Hoover Institution fellow Lanhee Chen, has never been elected to anything. But he has advised several national Republican campaigns, including Mitt Romney's 2008 presidential bid and George W. Bush's in 2004, and served in the Bush and Obama administrations. Chen is a substantial candidate who certainly wouldn't hew to the Democratic line, but his affiliations and talking points suggest he would be tempted to carry water for the party opposite, blurring the line between fiscal officer and perpetual campaign. And while he may well survive the primary, he faces long odds in November thanks to Californians' well-earned distrust of his party.

The state needs a smart, seasoned controller who can challenge the Democratic establishment from within. Glazer has proved he can.