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At forum for California's Senate hopefuls, few policy differences but some fiery jabs



Reps. Katie Porter, Adam B. Schiff and Barbara Lee, left to right, participate in a forum Sunday at the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles for candidates running for the seat of the late Sen. Dianne Feinstein and her appointed successor, Laphonza Butler.

(Dania Maxwell / Los Angeles Times)

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California has a new senator, but she wasn't onstage Sunday with three of the Democratic candidates vying in the 2024 race to serve a full term in Congress' upper chamber.

After a week of [tectonic shifts in California politics](#), the candidate forum that included Reps. Adam B. Schiff, Katie Porter and Barbara Lee showed that the work of campaigning was falling back into a normal cadence. The three rivals aimed to convince a major union of healthcare workers that they're the best person to succeed Laphonza Butler— who was [appointed by California Gov. Gavin Newsom](#) to finish the term of the late Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

When asked by the moderators whether Butler should run for a full term, all three candidates said it was her choice and that they would remain in the race no matter what happened.

"I think competitive elections are good for democracy," Porter told the audience from the National Union of Healthcare Workers, which has 17,000 members in California who were able to vote on which candidate the union would endorse immediately after the forum concluded.

"I'm glad to be running with my wonderful colleagues in this race, and I think this race has galvanized and energized California to have important conversations about whether we're getting what we need from Washington," Porter said.

Schiff and Lee echoed that sentiment. Neither criticized Butler when asked about her time working for Uber when it was lobbying the California state government [to prevent drivers from being classified as employees](#).

"I think all of us are up for scrutiny, and that's what democracy is all about," Lee said.

The union invited Butler to participate, but a spokesman for the senator said she'd be in Washington, D.C., this weekend. On Friday she attended a fundraiser in New York City for Emily's List — her former employer. The previous day, she was in San Francisco alongside Schiff, Lee and many other elected officials and dignitaries [for Feinstein's funeral](#), held on the steps of City Hall.

"As I reflect about my journey here at Emily's List and I think about the opportunity to accept that I will never be able to fill the shoes of Dianne Feinstein, I do get to sit in her seat," Butler said Friday.

Butler has yet to say whether she will run for a full term next year. [Asked by The Times last week, she said:](#) "I have no idea. I genuinely don't know."

That has spawned a frenzy among those who had sought to game out a race in which the dynamics once appeared to be relatively set in stone.

Sunday's forum focused mainly on healthcare issues, housing and the homelessness crisis, with each candidate articulating very few differences on policy but starker contrasts on tone and style.

All three reiterated their support for "Medicare for all," said the state and federal governments needed to build more housing and criticized Newsom for vetoing a state bill that would have allowed striking workers to access unemployment insurance.

At one point, the candidates were asked whether they had a preference for the next speaker of the House after lawmakers, driven by a revolt of the Republican Party's far-right flank, [voted to oust Rep. Kevin McCarthy](#) (R-Bakersfield) from the post.

Schiff said that although he thought his "endorsement would probably not be helpful," there are "Republicans of principle" he could work with — pointing to former Reps. Adam Kinzinger and Liz Cheney.

Porter and Lee disagreed.

"When we say there are Republicans of principle on the other side, I think we have to be clear what those principles are," Porter said. "There is no Republican who will support the right for every American to make their own choice about whether to have an abortion. No Republican. For me that makes all of these candidates unacceptable."

Another fiery exchange occurred when the candidates were asked whether members of Congress should be paid if the government shuts down. Schiff was quick to say that he asked for his pay to be withheld until other federal employees were paid.

"I don't think members of Congress should be [paid] while federal employees and others are going without a paycheck," Schiff said. "I stayed at my post in Washington to vote to keep the government open, and the only reason we came so close to shutting down is we had an incompetent speaker of the House of Representatives."

Porter missed the vote last month to pass a short-term resolution to fund the government for about seven more weeks, which delays another potential shutdown until Nov. 17. A spokeswoman for the Irvine representative [told The Times](#) she "had a family commitment that forced her to head back to California."

Onstage Sunday, Porter said changes need to be made so partisan dysfunction doesn't stop federal workers from being paid. But she forcefully pointed out that if she forgoes her paycheck, then her three children don't eat.

"Does my kid going to bed with an empty stomach ease the pain of everybody else?" she asked.

"We have a Congress made up of rich people — of privileged people — and that's why they're so quick to ask for their paycheck to be withheld," she said. "I'm like each of you. I buy groceries on that paycheck. I pay my mortgage on that paycheck, and I'm proud to be a member of Congress who lives on my paycheck. Paycheck to paycheck — like most Americans."

Porter and Schiff have been neck and neck in recent [public opinion polling](#). The two candidates who get the most votes in the March primary will go to a runoff in the November 2024 general election. Due to the huge cost of running campaigns in California and the rapidly approaching filing deadlines, [Butler must decide soon](#) whether to run in order to be on the ballot and raise money.

At least one deadline has been pushed back, however. The California Democratic Party had previously given everyone [seeking](#) its endorsement in the Senate race until Friday to submit an application. The party, [which endorsed Feinstein's chief opponent](#) in the 2018 primary, now expects to hear from candidates by Oct. 27.

All three of the candidates at Sunday's forum have voiced support for [term limits for U.S. Supreme Court justices](#), but Schiff and Lee disagreed Sunday with the idea that elected officials should have them as well. Porter was undecided.

"You have Marjorie Taylor Greene," Lee said, referring to the Republican representative from Georgia. "We don't agree with Marjorie Taylor Greene, but if her constituents want her voted in, that's the way democracy works."

Lee called for a federal minimum wage of \$50 an hour. Schiff said it should be \$25; Porter said the federal minimum wage should be \$20 but that California should set it at \$25 while tying increases to inflation.

All three candidates also condemned the [recent attacks on Israel](#) by Palestinian Hamas militants, [echoing many elected leaders](#) in California and across the U.S. The death toll has climbed to at least 1,100 amid counterattacks on Gaza by Israel.

Schiff was the most forceful in his anger over the attacks, saying, "The only sentiment I want to express right now when Israel is going through its own 9/11 is unequivocal support for the security and the right of Israel to defend itself."

Porter said she believed in a two-state solution but criticized recent American administrations for not taking "strong enough of a stand against Iran, which is backing Hamas and Hezbollah."

She added: "It's important to remember as we stand against terror and as we mourn that we learn the lessons of our own 9/11, which gave rise to hateful Muslim-phobia and civil rights violations."

Lee said she stood with Israel but that the United States should call for a ceasefire.