

California's top 3 Senate candidates seek edge in race for Feinstein's old seat

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Senate candidates Barbara Lee, left, Adam Schiff and Katie Porter sought to distinguish themselves from each other during a forum that underscored their similarities.

The top three California Democrats running for U.S. Senate vied Sunday for the endorsement of a major health care union during a forum that underscored the similarities of their policy positions over their differences.

Reps. Barbara Lee of Oakland, Katie Porter of Irvine and Adam Schiff of Burbank fielded questions for 90 minutes from a panel of reporters and moderator Lisa Matthews, a veteran journalist and top editor at the Associated Press, on a range of topics crucial to California

voters, including health care, housing, minimum wage, gas prices and term limits for appointed and elected officials.

The forum was hosted by the Oakland-based [National Union of Healthcare Workers](#), which has more than 16,000 California members and will announce Wednesday which candidate it is endorsing, plus [Roll Call](#) and the progressive grassroots advocacy organization [Courage California](#).

“When we come together in 2024 to vote for our next U.S. senator, we will be making a courageous action for change by electing a person who will serve as the backbone of our democracy,” said Shay Franco-Clausen, board chair of Courage California.

Notably absent on the stage in Los Angeles at the union’s annual leadership conference was California’s new senator, Laphonza Butler, [appointed last week](#) by Gov. Gavin Newsom to finish the term of Dianne Feinstein, who [died on Sept. 29](#).

Butler, whose term ends in January 2025, has not announced whether she will run in next March’s primary. Her spokespeople did not immediately respond to requests seeking comment. When asked whether Butler should run for a full term, all the candidates said they would support her decision either way while also highlighting the work they were doing to win.

In addition to Butler’s recent appointment, the rising death toll from fighting in Israel and Gaza, and a series of unprecedented worker organizing and strikes this year across several industries, including the recent [Kaiser Permanente health worker strike](#), loomed large in the background of the forum.

On health care, all three rivals emphasized their support for the Medicare for All Act, which would establish a universal, single-payer U.S. health insurance system, and applauded Newsom’s signing Saturday of SB770, which was introduced by state Sen. Scott Wiener, D-San Francisco, and [establishes a path to establishing universal health coverage in California](#). They stressed, however, that such a plan shouldn’t result in increased taxes.

“We don’t need a tax increase to afford a single-payer plan because you save money with single-payer,” Porter, 49, who has served in Congress since 2019, said to cheers from the crowd of unionized health care workers. “Let me check the profits of Kaiser — hmmm, enough money.”

They also spoke of their support for increasing the federal minimum wage beyond \$20 an hour (it is currently \$7.25) and securing greater federal resources for housing in California, including through trust funds, vouchers and more fully funding government subsidized housing assistance programs.

“Housing should be a basic human right in this country and this state,” said Lee, 77, who has served in Congress since 1998 and introduced a bill this year that would provide federal funding to low-income renters for their security deposits.

“Why can’t the federal government provide the deposits in a revolving fund to make sure that people are able to move into a safe place to live?” Lee said.

Schiff, 63, who has served in Congress since 2001, also mentioned several bills he is supporting to increase funding and tax incentives for affordable housing.

“We need to incentivize the creation of more affordable housing,” Schiff said. “If we don’t dramatically increase the supply of affordable housing, there’s never going to be enough money to address homelessness. We need to raise incomes, and we need to raise the supply of affordable housing.”

At various points, the candidates were asked about decisions by Newsom, which overlap on the state level with some of their federal efforts. They mostly backed, or didn’t outright disagree with, the governor’s actions, including his support of CARE (Community Assistance, Recovery, and Empowerment) Court, [a program](#) that would refer people with severe mental illness to court-ordered care plans, and his criticism of judges for rules that have [blocked homeless encampment sweeps](#). However, all three questioned Newsom’s [recent decision](#) to veto a bill that would have allowed striking workers to be eligible for unemployment benefits, saying workers should have access to benefits they pay into.

“Gov. Newsom was wrong here,” Porter said. “He did not stand with those who are creating California’s strong economy.”

On the international stage, the candidates were also asked about their support for policies on Israelis and Palestinians in light of Hamas’ weekend attack and Israel’s retaliation, with each condemning Hamas’ actions. Lee, specifically, was asked about her previous support for legislation that would restrict U.S. aid to Israel.

“I have always stood for Israel not having to deal with terrorist attacks and have condemned over and over and over again terrorist attacks against Israel,” Lee said. “I think it’s important also to understand, right now, in this current crisis, our country has a responsibility, I believe, to call for a cease fire ... to try to stop the escalation of what is taking place in the Middle East.”

Schiff and Porter [are leading in polling and fundraising](#), with Schiff garnering 20% support, followed by Porter with 17% and Lee with 7% in a recent L.A. Times-Berkeley IGS poll of likely voters. Schiff has \$29.8 million in campaign cash, followed by Porter with \$10.3 million and Lee with \$1.4 million, according to July federal filings.

While all the candidates have called for term limits of Supreme Court justices, particularly in light of recent revelations about [unreported free luxury travel](#), they have not pushed for the same limits with elected officials. Porter said she had not made up her mind on the matter, while Lee and Schiff said that they do not support term limits for members of Congress and believe that elections provide voters with a means to remove officials they no longer feel are appropriate or fit to serve.

The issue became more pertinent to Californians this year after Feinstein, who turned 90 in June, [declined to resign](#) despite lengthy absences from the Senate and questions about her mental acuity.

“I don’t support term limits for members of Congress,” said Schiff, who also noted that he would support making congressional districts more competitive. “I do think the Supreme Court is different because we can’t hold them accountable with an election.”

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