



California Playbook

Inside the Golden State political arena

By signing up, you acknowledge and agree to our Privacy Policy and Terms of Service. You may unsubscribe at any time by following the directions at the bottom of the email or by contacting us here. This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google Privacy Policy and Terms of Service apply.

EMAIL

Your Email

EMPLOYER

JOB TITLE

Employer

Job Title

* All fields must be completed to subscribe.

SIGN UP

Can TMZ make a mayor?

By DANIEL MILLER, BLAKE JONES, MELANIE MASON and DUSTIN GARDINER | 05/29/2026 09:01 AM EDT

Presented by 

NEWS MAKER — **Harvey Levin** is a lot of things.

Is California political kingmaker one of them?

An answer to that question may be rendered in Tuesday’s mayoral primary in Los Angeles. A top-two finish for **Spencer Pratt** — whose campaign Levin has increasingly promoted in recent weeks — would bolster the TMZ founder’s political ascendancy in the state at the same time his gossip outlet has expanded its sharp-elbowed celebrity coverage to Washington’s corridors of power.

Levin is not new to politics, having previously backed **Donald Trump** in 2016. But his role in Pratt’s rise may represent something distinct from his earlier dalliance with Trump-era politics, in part because TMZ, which launched in Washington in April, now regularly applies its tabloid treatment — though with seemingly less penetration — to the political power set.

“This could be something more substantial and durable — and it may be intentional,” said **David J. Jackson**, author of “Entertainment and Politics: The Influence of Pop Culture on

Young Adult Political Socialization.” “People should not dismiss celebrity-focused content, because there’s research that shows the celebrity framing of politics ... does actually, in some cases, attract audiences who would typically be inattentive to politics.”

Indeed, the convergence of celebrity and outrage has created fertile ground for Pratt’s improbable, insurgent candidacy. A Berkeley Institute of Governmental Studies poll Thursday showed a tight three-way race among likely voters: Mayor **Karen Bass** at 26 percent, City Councilmember **Nithya Raman** at 25 percent and Pratt at 22 percent.

Pratt’s guerrilla campaign materialized this spring amid an avalanche of anger over Bass’ handling of twin crises — Los Angeles’ entrenched homelessness problem and the 2025 wildfires. The latter issue catapulted Pratt, a social media-savvy Republican whose home burned down in the Palisades fire, into the political limelight even before he announced his candidacy in January.

TMZ’s relentless coverage of Pratt — it published three stories about him Wednesday and two the previous day — is hardly an outlier. The California Post, the **Rupert Murdoch**-owned tabloid that launched in January, has also championed the former reality TV star, endorsing him with a cover story last week.

Pratt, 42, whose ascent has been at least partly fueled by over-the-top viral AI videos depicting him as a superhero taking on villainous opponents, has also drawn praise from some of the biggest voices on the American right. Trump said he’d like Pratt to “do well,” while **Joe Rogan** has offered a full-throated endorsement.

For Levin — who has voiced some skepticism about Pratt’s tactics — the moment represents a return to overt political influence after years focused primarily on celebrity coverage. Levin’s political ambitions long predate Trump: He explored launching a Washington-based “gossip venture” in 2007, though the idea was ultimately scuttled, Bloomberg has reported.

While backing Trump in 2016, Levin turned TMZ into what Talking Points Memo called a “pro-Trump propaganda machine.” That year, Levin hosted a one-hour special with Trump on Fox News that he parlayed into his show “Objectified,” in which he interviewed celebrities about their prized possessions. It ran for two seasons starting in 2017. At the time, according to Bloomberg, TMZ staffers were made to understand that Trump-related controversies were off-limits.

But, as The New Yorker reported in April, Levin, who had visited Trump in the White House shortly after his first term began, had a falling out with the president in 2018 over the administration’s position on transgender people serving in the military.

Levin's "reentry" into politics, partly via Pratt, "makes sense because of Pratt's own professional origins" in entertainment, said **Michael Serazio**, a professor of communication at Boston College and author of "The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it 'Real' in Media, Culture, and Politics."

Levin, he said, "is a player in the entertainment space first and foremost ... The allegiance is more to an audience's eyeballs, grabbing attention."

The Pratt campaign did not respond to a request for comment. Nor did Levin or TMZ, which is owned by Murdoch's Fox Entertainment.

While TMZ has provided Pratt — who is seeking elected office for the first time — with invaluable earned media in recent weeks, not everyone is sure Levin deserves recognition for the candidate's rise. "I'm reticent to give anyone credit other than Spencer and his very small team," said **Roxanne Hoge**, chairperson of the Republican Party of Los Angeles County.

"It certainly appears that he's got Harvey's vote," she said. "But the question is, what does that do?"

Hoge noted that Levin's support for Pratt has come later in the campaign: "Getting out in front of a parade that's already happening is different from starting the parade and building the float."

Pratt faces headwinds, even if he does advance past the primary. In Los Angeles County, Republicans make up less than 20 percent of registered voters. And although he has garnered support from some boldfaced names, among them **Jeanie Buss**, many in Hollywood are deeply skeptical of Pratt. On Wednesday, for example, **Jimmy Kimmel** used his namesake late-night show's monologue to skewer the candidate as a "moderately famous person" and "a narcissist looking for attention" who doesn't have solutions to the city's problems. "It's exactly what Donald Trump did," Kimmel said of Pratt's campaign.

Still, like Trump, Pratt is benefiting from the attention in a fragmented media landscape. **Erin Meyers**, author of "Extraordinarily Ordinary: The Rise of Reality Television Celebrity," said that if Pratt "wins or finishes second, that's ... definitely going to make people think about the range of places that people are getting information."

Whether Levin, 75, and TMZ have "actual political power will be something to come out of this moment," said Meyers, a professor of communication at Oakland University.

There appears to be little downside risk to TMZ's broad coverage of Pratt. If he fails to place in the top two on Tuesday, it won't "undo" Levin's ability to "draw attention to certain people" in the gossip space, Meyers said.

“Like the other gossip magazines, he seems to be on the outside of the machinery that makes stars,” she said. “So he can keep this outsider status, even if it doesn’t work out.”

Levin recently offered an oddly specific primary prediction: Pratt would garner 38 percent of the vote Tuesday — much higher than his Berkeley polling number. Speaking on an episode of his “2 Angry Men” podcast, the lawyer-turned-media personality also forecasted that Pratt would face off against Bass in the November election.

Then, as he contemplated whether the mayor would agree to debate Pratt ahead of the general election, Levin shared another take: “I think if she does, he will kick her ass.”

GOOD MORNING. Happy Friday. Thank you for waking up with California Playbook.

Like what you’re reading? Sign up to get California Playbook in your inbox, and forward it to a friend. **Have a tip for Playbook?** Drop us a line at mmason@politico.com, dgardiner@politico.com and bjones@politico.com, or on X — [@melmason](https://twitter.com/melmason), [@DustinGardiner](https://twitter.com/DustinGardiner) and [@jonesblakej](https://twitter.com/jonesblakej). Or you can text us at **916-562-0685** — save it as “**CA Playbook**” in your contacts.

WHO WON THE DAY? NITHYA RAMAN. The new Berkeley Institute of Governmental Studies poll on the Los Angeles mayor’s race shows the city councilmember locked in a tight battle with Bass and Pratt. Both challengers posted gains in the poll, but Pratt has already been dominating the buzz. Now this new poll brings Raman squarely back into the conversation and shows she’s got the best favorability of all three of the leading candidates.

WHERE’S GAVIN? In Sacramento, holding internal meetings.

A message from Google:

Los Angeles is supercharging city operations with Google AI, so it can better serve Angelenos. City workers are using Google AI to streamline planning and improve public services for residents.

GOVERNOR’S RACE

FOSSIL FUNDS — Oil companies are making a cash splash to back **Xavier Becerra** in the final stretch of California’s race for governor. And **Tom Steyer** wants you to know it.

The billionaire climate activist has been hammering his rival ever since Chevron and California Resources Corporation, the state’s largest oil and gas producer, contributed a total of \$1 million to the independent committee supporting Becerra. The messaging underscores Steyer’s

increasingly fervent efforts, as he confronts public polling showing Becerra opening a lead, to yank the conversation back to the environmental issues he's built his reputation on over the past decade.

Read the full story, reported by Noah Baustin, to learn how Becerra is jabbing back at Steyer's oil haymakers, and why fossil fuel companies are backing the former Biden cabinet secretary.

FIRST IN PLAYBOOK: STILL AHEAD — The anti-Steyer PAC California is Not for Sale commissioned a new poll that found Becerra leading the billionaire by four points. Results of the survey, conducted by David Binder Research from May 26-27:

- Steve Hilton, 27 percent
- Becerra, 26 percent
- Steyer, 22 percent
- Chad Bianco, 9 percent
- Katie Porter, 8 percent
- Matt Mahan, 4 percent

The margin of error was +/- 4.1 percentage points.

Also ... A Berkeley IGS survey conducted May 19-24 found Steyer within striking distance of making the top two. It had Becerra at 25 percent, Hilton at 21 and Steyer at 19, the Los Angeles Times reported.

In down ballot news ... Former state legislator **Steven Bradford**, who is running for insurance commissioner, is endorsing Becerra, his campaign told Playbook.

NEWSOMLAND

BLUE BANDWAGON — Key Democrats in blue states are landing on a common idea — if their residents receive payouts from the Trump administration's planned "Anti-Weaponization Fund," they'll tax all of it.

State lawmakers are working together and sharing legislative text in hopes of levying a 100 percent income tax on any payments from the \$1.8 billion fund, created through the settlement of President **Donald Trump**'s lawsuit against the IRS. And their governors are taking interest, with **Gavin Newsom** endorsing the proposal Wednesday and New York's **Kathy Hochul** signaling Thursday she'd be open to it as well.

But it's also an open question if blue-state governors and legislators, in their zeal to hit back at Trump, have crafted policies that won't stand up in court. Read the full story from Bernie Becker, Nick Reisman, Shia Kapos, Tyler Katzenberger and Daniel Han.

CAMPAIGN YEAR

FIRST IN PLAYBOOK: SUPER PAC CLAP BACK — The American Priorities PAC, which casts itself as a Democratic counterweight to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and aligned interests, is putting \$400,000 into broadcasting what is currently a digital spot favorably contrasting **Randy Villegas** against his moderate opponent, Assemblymember **Jasmeet Bains**. That's on top of \$100,000 that it's spending on a similar ad. The Democratic Majority for Israel has spent \$500,000 to attack Villegas, who has labeled Israel's Gaza offensive a genocide. The candidates are in a tight race for the final run-off spot against incumbent Republican Rep. **David Valadao**.

TOP TALKERS

FROM THE GROUND — An unusual number of voters have held onto their ballots late into the primary. The Associated Press talked to a cross section of California voters, and found some still struggling with who to support in the governor's race.

NEWSOM'S POTENTIAL COMPETITION — Michigan Gov. **Gretchen Whitmer** told a local news station that she won't run for president in 2028, removing a marquee name from Democratic primary contention. But a person in her orbit did leave her with some wiggle room, **Gregory Svirnovskiy** and **Adam Wren** report.

"One of the many reasons she would be a great president is because she is very focused," said a person familiar with Whitmer's thinking, referencing her 2014 comments that she would not run for governor. "Sometimes she does change her mind."

AROUND THE STATE

— Major film studios are leaving Hollywood for New Jersey's tax breaks. (Wall Street Journal)

— **Peter Thiel** recently decamped from his homes in Los Angeles and Miami to Argentina. (New York Times)

— A nonprofit supporting police causes has seemingly gained access to top powers within the Los Angeles Police Department by offering small, sporadic donations. (Los Angeles Times)

— A candidate's Christmas card including his family flipping the bird is becoming an issue in a Fresno County judicial race. (GV Wire)

PLAYBOOKERS

BIRTHDAYS — **Beth Miller**, president and CEO of Miller Public Affairs Group ... TV producer **Mitchell Hurwitz** ... consultant **Todd Flournoy** ... **Dayna Geldwert** of Meta ... **Nkiruka Catherine Ohaegbu** ... **Tami Grossglauser**, chief of staff for Assemblymember Rick Chavez Zbur ... **Brody Fernandez**, communications director for Assemblymember Esmeralda Soria

WANT A SHOUT-OUT FEATURED? — Send us a birthday, career move or another special occasion to include in POLITICO's California Playbook. You can now submit a shout-out using this Google form.

***POLITICO Pro:** California policy moves fast, and the stakes are high. POLITICO Pro offers exclusive California policy reporting, expert analysis, and powerful tools to help professionals learn what's happening, understand what it means, and act with confidence statewide — all on the POLITICO Pro policy intelligence platform. Learn more.*

***POLITICO Advertising Solutions:** POLITICO Advertising Solutions helps organizations reach and engage influential California policy and political audiences. Through custom advertising, sponsorships, and content solutions, we connect your message with decision-makers across the state. To learn more, contact Lynn Fine at lfine@politico.com.*

Follow us on X



Dustin Gardiner @dustingardiner
Blake Jones @jonesblakej

Subscribe to the POLITICO Playbook family

Playbook | **Playbook PM** | **California Playbook** | **Florida Playbook** | **Illinois Playbook** | **New Jersey Playbook** | **New York Playbook** | **Canada Playbook** | **Brussels Playbook** | **London Playbook**

View all our political and policy newsletters

FOLLOW US



POLITICO



[About Us](#)

[Advertising](#)

[Breaking News Alerts](#)

[Careers](#)

[Credit Card Payments](#)

[FAQ](#)

[Feedback](#)

[Headlines](#)

[Photos](#)

[Press](#)

[Request A Correction](#)

[Write For Us](#)

[RSS](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Terms of Service](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)