

*CNN's Inside Politics with Dana Bash*

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[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: California Clash; GOP Sees Opening With Crowded Dem Field to Win CA Gov. Race]

DANA BASH: It is a wide-open race to be California's next governor and Eric Swalwell's implosion only makes it more uncertain about who is emerging from the upcoming primary. In California, all candidates compete in one primary and the top two, regardless of party, advance to the general election. This year, a Republican, Steve Hilton, is well positioned to claim one of those two spots. He's a former political strategist in the U.K., former Fox host, and was endorsed last week by President Trump. Steve Hilton, thank you so much for being here. Let me start with Eric Swalwell ending his campaign. How do you see that change in the dynamic of your race?

STEVE HILTON: Well, I think as you were discussing earlier, it'll probably lead to some consolidation on the Democrat side, but in the end, I don't think it makes much difference. Because the truth is, after 16 years now of one-party rule, exactly as you were saying earlier, the incumbents in California, the Democrats, who've run everything without any constraint, the record is not great, let's put it that way. We've got the highest poverty rate in the country, the highest unemployment rate, highest cost of living, and so it is obviously time for change. And so, whether it's – whether it was going to be Swalwell, and I agree that it looked like the machine was getting behind him, whether now it's Tom Steyer or Katie Porter, I really don't think it matters because we need some balance in California, and we desperately need change, and no Democrat can provide that.

BASH: Let me just ask you about something I've heard you saying since Eric Swalwell, since the allegations came out that he is still denying. You have said that it's sickening that Democrats endorsed him when you allege this behavior was an open secret and they all knew about it.

HILTON: Mmhmm.

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: California Clash; Swalwell Allegations Transform California Governor's Race]

BASH: I don't – maybe you have. I haven't seen any proof that people knowing about allegations that he raped people. But that aside, as I mentioned, you got the endorsement of President Trump. He was, of course, found liable in a civil suit of sexual abuse and bragged about grabbing women by the you-know-what. You're okay accepting that, but clearly upset about –

HILTON: Well –

BASH: – the allegations of Eric Swalwell?

HILTON: Well, it's really the hypocrisy. I mean, the fact that it was an open secret about his behavior on Capitol Hill, and the extent of it. We'll see where the allegations go, and there's many more accounts, I think, that are going to come forward from all the accounts that I've been hearing, including from many Democrat friends involved in politics in California. As to the President, look, that was all litigated many times, including in two general elections in America, and people came to their view about that. And I think the most important point is that actually that helps really get the energy that we need to get a big Republican turnout, as well as all the other support that we need to build to win a majority here in California. That's why I'm so honored to have his endorsement.

BASH: Well, let me just push you on that, because you used the word hypocrisy, and it is true that the President was re-elected after he was found liable in that civil suit, but it's just a question about you and what you're comfortable with. You're still comfortable with this endorsement, even though you are, understandably, condemning the allegations against Eric Swalwell?

HILTON: Well, I voted for the President, as so many millions of Americans did, so I think that is the clear response to something where you get an endorsement from somebody you've already supported and you've already voted for. I think that speaks for itself. I've not weighed in specifically on the allegations, more on the hypocrisy of the Democrats, who've been lecturing us for all these years about their values and Me Too and how they're there for the fight for women and so on, and yet, knowing about some of this stuff –

BASH: Yes.

HILTON: – they continue to back and endorse Eric Swalwell.

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: California Clash Trump Endorses Steve Hilton in California Gov. Race]

BASH: Yes. Again, unless you can tell me, I have not seen or heard any Democrat who knew about allegations of rape. I do want to ask you about that presidential endorsement, because you were telling me –

HILTON: Mmhmm.

BASH: – before the break that you were surprised.

HILTON: Yes.

BASH: Did you seek it out?

HILTON: No, look, I know the President a little bit. I've interviewed him, and we speak and text from time to time, not very frequently, but we do stay in touch. I never asked him for his endorsement. I didn't expect him to get involved in the California governor's race, to be honest. There's a lot more – a lot of other things going on right now –

BASH: And do you think it's going to help you?

HILTON: – was a complete surprise very well for me.

BASH: Could it –

HILTON: I do because –

BASH: – could it backfire at all in a state like California?

HILTON: I think it's a clear help for two reasons. First of all, as you know better than most, in a midterm election, it's all about turnout. Who can get their voters out to the polls? And this will very much help with Republican turnout. Obviously, that's not enough to win in California, but my message about how we're going to make our state Cal-affordable, \$3 gas, cut your electric bills in half, your first 100 grand tax-free, a home you can afford to buy, that's got broad appeal across the board. But I think getting that Republican turnout energized is a huge help. Secondly, in terms of the Democrat response, of course it's true that they will be using it as an argument in the general election, but they would have been doing that anyway because going on about Trump is basically the go-to argument of Democrats when they don't have anything else to run on. And in California, the record is so bad, they don't have any new ideas. All they've got is to label you as Trump and MAGA, and they would have been doing that anyway.

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: California Clash; Gas Prices Surge in California to \$5.89 Amid Iran War]

BASH: Let me ask you about that platform that you just mentioned, your promising \$3 gas under your leadership. As you well know far better than I, that was already a tall order in California where the gas price is always higher –

HILTON: Yes.

BASH: – than the rest of the country. That's what you're trying to change. But the fact that there's a surge even more because of the Iran war, doesn't it make what you're trying to promise harder? I mean, just for example, I'm putting up on the screen here, the average price of gas in California is \$5.89 a gallon. It was \$4.55 just two months ago.

HILTON: Yeah, exactly. You're seeing the prices of gas in California have been surging for years as a direct result of Democrat policies. That was true before the situation in the Middle East, and it's going to be true afterwards unless we change direction and that's what I'm talking about, is to open up, as long as we're using oil and gas in California, we should be using oil and gas from

California rather than shipping it halfway around the world on giant supertankers spewing out carbon emissions. There's common-sense things we can do to bring prices into line with what's in the rest of the country. You have some states where it's \$3. It has been even during the Iran situation. The spike in gas prices in California as a result of Democrat policies is more than double the spike, which is obviously temporary from the situation in the Middle East, so I think that over time, once that temporary spike is reduced and we can move in a new common-sense direction on energy policy in California –

BASH: Yes.

HILTON: – we can bring costs down to what they are in the rest of the country.

BASH: Steve Hilton, thank you so much for being here. I appreciate it.