



The Real Cooley

Gil Garcetti would like to paint his foe as a right-winger

Bobbi Murray

published: November 09, 2000

Challenger Steve Cooley enjoys an anyone-but--Gil Garcetti mood in his race for Los Angeles County district attorney. The incumbent's disapproval rating is up around 70 percent.

His greatest asset: "Steve Cooley is the un-Garcetti," said Sherry Bebitch Jeffe, political commentator and senior associate at the School of Politics and Economics at Claremont Graduate University.



But how much do we really know about Cooley, whose name recognition was as low as 55 percent in an August poll? Throughout the campaign, he has been dogged by speculation -- including some from the Garcetti camp -- that he is a conservative who has moved to the center to win over liberal-minded voters.

Cooley, born and raised in Los Angeles, attended law school at USC and served as a reserve officer with the LAPD from 1972 to 1977 at the Newton Street Division. His father was an FBI agent, his mother a homemaker. He's a 27-year veteran of the D.A.'s Office, where his work as head deputy of the Welfare Fraud Division got national attention on ABC's 20/20 news show last year. He is widely praised as honest and a straight shooter.

But there's room for doubts in his background. Some police-oversight advocates wonder if a former police-reserve officer with such close law-enforcement ties would vigorously prosecute misconduct. Cooley has been endorsed by virtually every rank-and-file police organization in the county.

Joseph Scott, Cooley's media strategist, calls Cooley "uniquely qualified. He understands both sides. He understands the police side and he's been on the D.A.'s side."

Cooley's position on gun control has also raised questions, with criticism from the Garcetti campaign that Cooley has retreated from earlier, extreme positions and shifted toward the middle; Cooley denies it. In a January interview with KJLA-TV, Cooley said, "There's been very little enforcement of these various registration laws . . . and it's had virtually no impact on the criminal element." In May, on KCET's Life & Times, Cooley said the laws on the books are not enforced and

are therefore irrelevant.

Scott said Cooley favors trigger locks and gun registration. "Every position Garcetti favors, Cooley favors," counters Scott. Scott sneers at what he calls the Garcetti camp's attempts to paint Cooley as a right-winger, regarding them as desperate attempts to claw their way out of defeat. "They are beyond redemption -- politically, they're damned," he says.

His supporters include a number of defense attorneys, their enthusiasm based on Cooley's approach to the three-strikes law.

Garcetti's policy has been to leave prior strikes intact when a potential third-strike offense comes before his office, even though a prosecutor can by law dismiss prior strikes "in the interest of justice." A third strike can mean double the sentence and the end of hopes of probation if an individual is convicted. Cooley favors not filing the third strike if it's not a violent or serious offense.

Garcetti campaign manager Erik Nasarenko points out that Garcetti was the only D.A. in the state to oppose three strikes when it was under consideration, but now that it's law, "He believes that the way his office enforces it is fair and effective," he says.

American Civil Liberties Union board member and defense attorney Michael Yamamoto has supported Garcetti in the past, but has endorsed Cooley this time, calling three strikes -- and not Garcetti's handling of the investigation and prosecution of the Rampart cases -- "the major nail in the coffin" in many defense attorneys' potential support of the incumbent.

"I just don't blame Gil for Rampart," he says. "He had a lot of lying cops that fooled a lot of people . . . I don't know if any D.A. could have detected and investigated what was going on." He adds that any D.A. has an inherent tension when it comes to police: "That's the witness pool they rely on to get their cases to court -- it's difficult to place them under the gun."

That's an issue that's central for Carol Watson, a veteran police-misconduct attorney. She's no Garcetti fan but remains leery of Cooley. "What's needed is the guts to stand up to the LAPD. I'm not sure either one of them [Garcetti or Cooley] has it."