

Pleitez says financial experience, background qualify him for Congressional seat

3/16/2008

By Rebecca Kimitch and Tania Chatila

Emanuel Pleitez has been around a lot of politics since graduating from Woodrow Wilson High School in Los Angeles and Stanford University.

But he's never run for office.

Now, this 26-year-old financial analyst from the El Sereno neighborhood has set his sights on a national post.

Come May 19, Pleitez will face a handful of contenders for the 32nd Congressional district seat, recently vacated by Labor Secretary Hilda Solis.

The district encompasses a large portion of the San Gabriel Valley, including Monterey Park, Rosemead, South El Monte, El Monte, Baldwin Park, West Covina, Irwindale, Covina, Azusa, Duarte and East Los Angeles.

"I have friends throughout the whole San Gabriel Valley, played baseball in Rosemead and Covina," Pleitez said. "I have a very good understanding of people here, and what they want."

So far, Pleitez's opponents are state Sen. Gil Cedillo, state Board of Equalization head Judy Chu, Baldwin Park Unified School District Board member Blanca Rubio, West Covina resident Jim Hetzel, Covina resident David Truax and restaurateur Theresa Hernandez.

Pleitez, Chu, Cedillo and Rubio are Democrats. Hetzel, Truax and Hernandez are Republicans.

If elected, Pleitez would be the youngest member of Congress.

"When people talk about this race, there's Cedillo and Chu, then there's Pleitez, and then there's everybody else," said Doug Johnson, a fellow with the Rose Institute of State and Local Government. "The question is how many of the voters know who (Pleitez) is?"

As a Latino who grew up in the area, Pleitez said he identifies with voters.

His supporters agree.

"I think Emanuel has the ability and I think he has the support," said Elsa Gutierrez-Aviles, a counselor at Wilson High School in East Los Angeles who has known Pleitez since he was a student there. "People believe in him. I do too."

Pleitez says his experience qualifies him for the job. He has worked on the Senate Democratic Steering and Coordination Committee, served as a member of Barack Obama's transition team at the Treasury Department, and worked as an aide for Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa when Villaraigosa was a councilman.

Pleitez has also worked as a financial analyst in the securities division at Goldman Sachs.

"I am the only candidate who can say he has worked in the Department of the Treasury ... I have a better sense than any other candidate of how we need to move forward to solve this economic crisis," Pleitez said.

The candidate also said he is uniquely qualified to address financial services issues.

"Growing up in a single parent household, I have lived through an economic crisis since I was born," Pleitez said. His mother is an immigrant from Mexico. "But I also understand high finance," he said.

Like other candidates, Pleitez points to transportation as one of the most important issues facing the region, besides the economy.

But even with his experience and ties to the area, political analysts say Pleitez's chances of winning are unlikely.

"Given the context that he has got two major players who have ran and won elections in the area before - who are very likely to raise lots of money and spend lots of campaign cash - it's going to be very difficult for a political newcomer," said Michael Alvarez, a professor of political science at Caltech in Pasadena.

Both Cedillo and Chu have name recognition, as well as heavy endorsements, experts say.

So far, Cedillo's backers include Los Angeles County Supervisor Gloria Molina and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. Chu's backers include groups like the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor and the Service Employees International Union.

"This race is all about identifying supporters and turning them out," Johnson said, adding that endorsements from large organizations can drive voters. "Without that organizational structure, you're starting from scratch."

Alvarez pointed out the historically low voter turnout in special elections, and the little time Pleitez has to run a ground campaign.

In addition to canvassing and phone banking for more than a month, Pleitez has also been holding meetings in private homes where community members are invited to share their concerns, and hear his plans.

Pleitez said he understands the San Gabriel Valley.

"It's simple," he said. "We are going to talk to more voters than they are. I understand what my strengths are ... I have spent more time in this area than anywhere else."