

ROLL CALL

California Race May Expose Ethnic Rifts

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By Josh Kurtz

With Rep. Hilda Solis (D) expected to be confirmed as secretary of Labor today, the race to replace her in California's San Gabriel Valley will begin in earnest, even though it has already been under way for several weeks.

At first glance, given the demographics of the district — about half of Democratic voters are Hispanic — state Sen. Gil Cedillo (D) should be favored to replace Solis in a race that, for now, also includes State Board of Equalization Chairwoman Judy Chu (D) and former investment banker Emanuel Pleitez (D). But conventional wisdom in this race could be turned on its head in several ways.

"If people just see it on paper and believe that campaigns don't make a difference, then Cedillo would win," said Victor Griego, a Los Angeles-based Democratic consultant who is not affiliated with any candidate. "But if campaigns do matter, then Chu has a very strong chance of winning."

Chu flexed her political muscle in a significant way Monday, announcing that she had already raised \$380,000 for the race. Cedillo's camp estimates that he has raised about \$200,000 — but it said his fundraising momentum was slowed by the marathon legislative session in Sacramento last week to address the state's massive budget deficit.

That deficit could indirectly become a major factor in the 32nd district race.

The special election is expected to be scheduled for May 19 — the same day California voters will go to the polls to ratify key provisions of the budget deal. That guarantees that the standard miniscule turnout for special elections will increase significantly.

The special election is an all-party primary, with every candidate appearing on the ballot together regardless of party. Voters from all parties are allowed to select the candidate of their choice. If no candidate exceeds 50 percent of the vote, the top vote-getters from each party advance to a runoff one month later. In such a heavily Democratic district, the Republicans will not be a factor in the race.

Cedillo's advisers believe the election date — and the heightened turnout — benefits their candidate immensely. If Solis' nomination as Labor secretary hadn't run into snags, the special election almost certainly would have been held earlier, magnifying Chu's early advantage in fundraising and local endorsements. And the greater turnout from the statewide election almost inevitably means more Latino voters going to the polls.

“Fate has been good to us,” said Leo Briones, Cedillo’s media consultant.

But Chu’s team believes the timing of the special election date is a wash. Parke Skelton, a consultant for Chu, said a relatively large number of union members will turn out for the statewide ballot questions. The powerful Los Angeles County Federation of Labor has endorsed Chu in the special election.

In the most recent special Congressional election in the Los Angeles area, in 2007, the federation’s support of then-state Assemblywoman Laura Richardson (D) was considered critical to her win in the hard-fought race to replace the late Rep. Juanita Millender-McDonald (D).

But when the federation announced its endorsement of Chu late last month, the labor group’s leader told the Los Angeles Times that the unions had not decided how aggressively to campaign for her. Political insiders have been struggling to interpret that statement ever since. Chu’s advisers believe the union will work hard for her; Cedillo’s feel otherwise.

Griego said it would be “unheard of” for the federation to not go all-out for its endorsed candidate. But Allan Hoffenblum, the publisher of the California Target Book, a political tip sheet, said the federation’s stance may simply be an acknowledgement that the two leading candidates have both been friends of labor throughout their careers.

“I can’t see why they’d gear up a huge and expensive voter-turnout operation to prevent Cedillo from going to Washington, who’s going to be a pro-labor vote,” Hoffenblum said.

Rusty Hicks, the political director of the county federation, did not respond to phone messages Monday.

If there is divided sentiment within organized labor about Chu and Cedillo, that is also reflected in the pair’s endorsements from Members of Congress. Chu’s long list of supporters include California Reps. Anna Eshoo, Jane Harman, Doris Matsui, Adam Schiff, Brad Sherman, Jackie Speier, Mike Thompson and Lynn Woolsey, along with Rep. Mazie Hirono (D-Hawaii).

Cedillo’s list includes California Reps. Xavier Becerra, Dennis Cardoza, Grace Napolitano, Lucille Roybal-Allard and Linda Sánchez, as well as former Rep. Esteban Torres.

Solis is highly unlikely to get personally involved in the race, though several members of her political team are working for Chu, and Chu has a big picture of herself with the Congresswoman on her campaign Web site.

But big-name endorsements will matter less than what happens on the ground, and both Cedillo and Chu believe they have the upper hand.

Cedillo does not live in the district, and that could prove a distinct advantage for Chu, even with such a heavy concentration of Latino voters. Chu has previously represented the district in the state Assembly and as mayor of Monterey Park, winning with broad-based coalitions.

“There’s always been a lot of coalition-building in the San Gabriel Valley. There’s a lot of shifting of alliances, and the one who is able to overcome the ethnic boundaries is the one who should win,” Skelton said.

But Briones noted that Chu’s Assembly district covered only one-third of the Congressional district. He said Cedillo is “sort of a household name among Latino voters in L.A. County” and is well-positioned to take advantage.

“You’d really have to have people change their historic voting patterns” for Cedillo to lose, Briones said. “We think that the numbers are pretty favorable to us.”

The question then becomes how overtly Cedillo appeals to Hispanic voters, and whether ethnic tensions come into play.

“Is it a full-scale ethnic fight? I do believe that’s an option,” Griego said. “A lot of times this is the lowest common denominator.”

Whether or not that scenario takes hold, a wild card in the race is Pleitez, a Stanford-educated 26-year-old investment banker. Pleitez served on President Barack Obama’s Treasury Department transition team and once worked for Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa (D) — who is also neutral in the race. Pleitez is running a children’s crusade with dozens of young volunteers, painting himself as an agent of change in a race against two career politicians.

“He’s offering an outsider’s perspective, the perspective of someone who is from outside of Sacramento and not just looking for his next seat,” said Ernie Bustamante, the campaign’s communications director. “I think one of the things we can do is outwork the other campaigns just with serious shoe leather.”

While the political professionals do not believe Pleitez can win, they do think he is running a serious enough campaign to siphon some Latino votes away from Cedillo.

And the field could conceivably grow. Because the election hasn’t been scheduled yet, there is still the outside chance that another strong candidate could get in the race. Former state Assemblyman Ed Chavez (D), for example, has not ruled out a bid.

“It should be a very, very interesting campaign,” Hoffenblum said.