

Class divide in war for Harman's seat

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LOS ANGELES — Washington has largely ignored the special election here Tuesday, focusing instead on a competitive House race across the country in New York. But the winner of California's 36th District contest could reveal who's leading the fight for the soul of the Democratic Party heading into the 2012 cycle.

Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn is an urban Democrat with strong labor backing. She will square off against Secretary of State Debra Bowen, a progressive candidate supported by environmentalists.

Under new California election rules, the top two vote-getters will advance to a July 12 runoff. With 16 names on the ballot, that means a divided Democratic vote won't tip the seat to a Republican.

Hahn, the front-runner, is a "beer-track" Democrat from a political dynasty. She has support from such politically muscular unions as the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, an AFL-CIO affiliate representing 800,000-plus workers in the region, and the California Service Employees International Union.

Bowen, who previously represented most of the district in the state Legislature, is a "wine-track" Democrat who made a name for herself as an environmental crusader, co-authoring one of the country's most ambitious laws to curb global warming. That's earned her strong support from the national Sierra Club and the California League of Conservation Voters.

"Whoever's voters show up on Election Day, that's what's going to win this," Hahn told POLITICO. "The labor piece in this election is key, and particularly, again, because it's a special election. L.A. County Federation of Labor knows how to win these."

Bowen downplays the significance of labor in the district. Her campaign expects a low turnout and gambles that progressives will come out for her in a district Barack Obama carried by 30 percentage points in 2008.

"The district does not have many labor households," Bowen said.

A wild card is anti-war candidate Marcy Winograd. Eleven months ago, she won 41 percent of the vote in her primary challenge against Rep. Jane Harman, who stepped down in February. But this time around, she's struggled to get traction against two women who are also anti-war.

Bowen, not Winograd, is getting buzz on liberal blogs like Daily Kos. Her push for a single-payer health care system helped win the California Nurses Association's support. Equality California PAC, a gay-rights group, and Democracy for America, Howard Dean's progressive organization, are also working for Bowen.

Bowen said she's been ahead of the curve on many progressive causes: mandatory labeling of trans-fats, digitizing state records and restricting the use of Social Security numbers for privacy reasons.

"Sometimes [I'm] so far ahead that it doesn't look sane until a few years later," she said.

The economy might be the most salient issue among independent voters these days, but Bowen hasn't backed off progressive issues. While Hahn works job creation into every answer, Bowen proudly describes past battles with Big Business.

"We haven't gone far enough with energy," she said. "There are lots of things that can be done when your point of view is not in vogue, either because the Democratic Caucus doesn't share it or because you're not in the majority."

For her part, Hahn released a "Green Jobs Plan" that she says will create 25,000 jobs. The Los Angeles Times endorsed her, writing that she's likely to emerge "as a charismatic dealmaker with the ability to advance the district's priorities."

Election handicapper Allan Hoffenblum, a former political director for the state GOP, predicts that, in Washington, Bowen would most resemble the ideological Rep. Jackie Speier, while Hahn would be like Rep. Loretta Sanchez, a pragmatist.

"It's more of a style than a philosophy," he said.

Their stylistic differences were on display during a debate in Hermosa Beach sponsored by Democrats for Israel.

Bowen stood and extemporaneously delivered an opening statement. Hahn stayed seated and carefully read a prepared speech. Responding to questions, Bowen lectured like a law professor; Hahn spoke forcefully, like a basketball coach — she also has a penchant for fist-bumping supporters.

A main fault line in the race is geographic. About 40 percent of the district is located in the city of Los Angeles, but the rest is made up of smaller coastal towns and Torrance, home to many defense and aerospace jobs.

Hahn touts support from L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and 12 of the 14 other members of the City Council.

Bowen has tried to use Hahn's Los Angeles support against her. "Many voters are concerned that they will get short shrift and the city of L.A. will dominate the agenda and the thinking," she said.

Hahn has attempted to tie Bowen to a dysfunctional state government. "I'm the local candidate," Hahn said. "Debra's been in Sacramento for 20 years. While people may not particularly like Los Angeles, they hate Sacramento worse."

Winograd, who doesn't live in the district, derides both women as "Harman Lite" and has focused on boosting turnout in the precincts where she did best last year. That's what brought her to Venice, a beach town she narrowly carried, on a recent afternoon.

No one answered most of the doors she knocked on. Finally, she reached a retired teacher who had voted for her in the past. He's supporting Bowen this time — swayed by the Democracy for America endorsement.

"It's part of the machine," she told him. "A vote for Debra Bowen is a vote to continue the wars."

Winograd spent six minutes at his door, but she couldn't change his mind.