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## Nevada representative's reelection struggle typifies Democrats' woes

**Dina Titus faces a feisty Republican challenger in a district where the economy tanked worse than most and isn't bouncing back.**

By Ashley Powers and Mark Z. Barabak, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Las Vegas

Every few weeks, when Rep. Dina Titus props open a folding table in some corner of her sprawling congressional district, the first-term Democrat is hit by a tidal wave of woes: bankruptcies, job losses, unpaid medical bills, communities emptied of homeowners and hope.

Though Titus' mostly suburban turf is relatively affluent, the recession has ripped apart its neighborhoods with a tornado's fury. After the Las Vegas-area district was carved out after the 2000 census, its population swelled with middle-class transplants scooping up good-paying casino and construction jobs and carbon-copy homes.

The financial crash obliterated southern Nevada's economy — the unemployment rate is 14.5% — and turned Titus' district into a land of thwarted dreams. The home foreclosure rate is triple the national average. Bank of America even took possession of the building that houses Titus' Las Vegas office.

"This unemployment thing is killing us all," said landlord Shirley Ritz, 72, who sat down at

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Titus' folding table on a recent Saturday. Ritz had been struggling to fill her properties — even after shaving rent to \$650 — after tenants were laid off or their hours were slashed.

Amid the ruin, Titus is running — uphill — for reelection in November. Emblematic of a crop of freshmen swept into office with President Obama and campaigning in the wake of the worst economic contraction since the Great Depression, Titus must win over an angry and frustrated electorate.

Do voters trust Democrats to steer the nation back to prosperity? Or have they soured on a diet of federal spending and industry bailouts that, so far, have done little to dent the nation's unemployment rate?

In a year when pocketbook concerns will decide whether Democrats forfeit the House and Senate to Republicans, many wallets are as threadbare as voters' patience.

"Voters who hired Democrats in 2008 desperately hoped that a change in government would bring about a change in the trajectory of the economy," said David Wasserman, an analyst who handicaps House races for the nonpartisan Cook Political Report. "They haven't seen that happen.

"To the extent things have gotten worse, or at least been stagnant," he added, "[Titus] stands to lose her job." □ □

Titus' district is a key theater in the midterm skirmishing. The GOP considers the Y-shaped mass — closely split between registered Republicans and Democrats — a place where it can pick up one of the 39 seats it needs to control the House.

Titus, 60, must contend not only with the sluggish economy but a strong opponent in Joe Heck, 48, who represented some of the district in the state Senate, as well as a flood of national Republican money, which promises to make the contest one of the nation's costliest.

Heck, a physician who lost his seat in the 2008 Democratic wave, said campaigning has involved skipping past bank-owned houses and meeting Nevadans fleeing the state after losing jobs, homes, cars and confidence. While Titus has voted nearly down the line for Obama's agenda, including the 2009 stimulus bill and sweeping healthcare legislation, Heck has mostly lined up with congressional Republicans, who have moved to block — or vowed to repeal — much of what Democrats accomplished.

Though many economists say the stimulus eased the economic downturn and saved millions of jobs, Heck is unconvinced.

"What it comes down to is that, for the people of southern Nevada, it failed," he said. "We're at 14% unemployment, ground zero for foreclosures. So no matter what came out of Washington, what it did in the 49 other states, it's not doing anything for us."

Titus enjoys a commanding financial edge, having raised \$1.75 million to Heck's \$600,000. More significantly, she had nearly four times the cash on hand.

Still, money is hardly determinative, especially in a campaign shaped by such deep-felt economic anxiety. Nothing can resuscitate Nevada's tourism-dependent economy until other states, particularly California, bounce back — and economists don't expect much before 2011.

Obama's waning popularity won't help Titus. Nor will signs that Republican fervor is eclipsing that of Democrats. While the voter rolls of both major parties in Clark County, which includes Las Vegas, dipped over the last 18 months, Democrats lost nearly twice as many registered voters as Republicans.

Though Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who faces his own brutal contest, is expected to pour money into a get-out-the-vote operation, he in no way electrifies the Democratic base. The party's nominee for governor? Reid's son Rory.

"If Democrats look at the governor's race and the Senate race and say, 'I'm putting my earplugs in and going fishing that day,' Dina Titus is a loser too," said Stuart Rothenberg, publisher of the nonpartisan Rothenberg Political Report.

Analysts expect the race to be close and contentious, which is nothing new for Titus. A political science professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Titus served 15 years as minority leader in the state Legislature and ran unsuccessfully for governor in 2006. Though scandals dogged her Republican rival, Jim Gibbons, his campaign seized on Titus' partisan reputation and branded her Dina Taxes — a death knell in this fiercely libertarian state.

Two years later, Titus rebounded from her loss by defeating Republican Rep. Jon Porter, one of 21 seats Democrats gained to fortify their House majority. But even then, there were signs of political weakness. A surge of new Democratic voters — energized by Nevada's early slot in the primary calendar and the nominee's frequent visits — lifted Obama to a 12-point victory in Nevada. Titus, however, carried the district by just 5%.

Since arriving in Congress, Titus has been consumed with economic issues, such as proposing legislation aimed at struggling homeowners. Touting herself online as a "foreclosure fighter," she's also devoted four staffers to working on residents' housing problems.

Titus has also tried to distance herself from Obama and Reid by publicly criticizing, for example, the administration's initial steps to address the foreclosure crisis. She hardly endeared herself when, in January, Politico quoted her as using a sharp expletive in warning fellow Democrats that the party must heed the lessons of Republican Sen. Scott Brown's win in Massachusetts — such as focusing on job creation.

"That got me a lot of respect here in the district," Titus said, allowing a slight smile. "People called and were like, 'You go, girl, you stand up.' "

More significantly, Titus continues to grapple with the human toll of her district's sagging economy.

Ritz, the anxious landlord, appreciated that Titus had vowed to work on creating jobs, which could allow more people to make rent. But even though she planned to vote for Titus, Ritz, a Democrat, fretted about her chances.

Too many voters are trapped in economic misery, something Ritz sees every day. In her once-idyllic mobile-home community, she said, two women share a backyard tent. Someone else lives in a shed.

[ashley.powers@latimes.com](mailto:ashley.powers@latimes.com)

[mark.barabak@latimes.com](mailto:mark.barabak@latimes.com)

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