

Asian-American up in Hispanic district

By [DAVID MARK](#) | 1/7/09 4:43 AM EST

A splintered field of Latino candidates could lead to the election of an Asian-American in Southern California's majority--Hispanic 32nd District, leaving Hispanics with one less voice in Congress at a time when their share of the population is growing.

In the special House election to succeed Rep. Hilda L. Solis (D-Calif.), who was recently tapped to become the Obama administration's labor secretary, former Monterey Park Mayor Judy Chu stands to gain from a potentially crowded field of prominent Latino officeholders that could divide the Hispanic vote and enable her to capture the solidly Democratic, East Los Angeles-based seat.

All the candidates will run on a single ballot in the special primary election. If any one of them wins a majority of votes, that candidate takes the seat outright. Otherwise, the top two vote-getters will square off eight weeks later in a special general election — essentially a runoff.

While the racially diverse district is about two-thirds Hispanic, it also has an unusually large Asian population — roughly 20 percent. As the only prominent Asian candidate in the race — and one who has drawn support from Hispanic voters in the past — Chu could benefit from a concentrated Asian vote to make it into a special general election if the Latino vote is divided among several candidates.

So far, Chu, a former three-term assemblywoman, and state Sen. Gloria Romero, a longtime officeholder whose legislative territory covers about 95 percent of the congressional district, are the only announced candidates. But state Sen. Gil Cedillo and other lawmakers could still jump into the race.

While the district is friendlier to GOP candidates than most minority-majority Southern California seats, almost no one expects Republicans to be competitive in the special primary, likely to be held in April.

A Chu win is contingent on maximizing the Asian vote and picking off support

elsewhere, said Jaime A. Regalado, director of the Edmund G. “Pat” Brown Institute of Public Affairs at California State University, Los Angeles. She begins with a head start in her hometown of Monterey Park, which is the only majority-Asian-American city in the United States. The non-Hispanic white vote — roughly 15 percent of the population — is concentrated in the eastern part of the district and looms as the wild card.

“The Latino residency population is the predominant one, but it doesn’t mean they will turn out to vote,” Regalado said. “Judy Chu has done well courting Latino votes and Latino votes — those who give money. It’s not a slam-dunk that, because Romero’s in the race, she’ll get 95 percent of the Latino vote.”

Andre Pineda, a Democratic consultant in Southern California, said racial allegiances are not as strong as they might seem. “I don’t think it’s so much ethnicity as it is politics,” he said. “This is a formerly white, working-class district that became Latino and somewhat Asian.”

Organized labor, whose clout will be increased in a low-turnout special election, is expected to play an oversized role. Solis, who was first elected to the seat in 2000, is considered closer to Chu than to some of the other possible aspirants, a potentially important factor.

Chu may also win backing from the business community based on her current role as chairwoman of the state Board of Equalization, an obscure but powerful tax-setting body. “Those who have heard of it are corporate folks, and it’s a position to raise a lot of money for,” said Pineda.

Chu and Romero have already butted heads once: Romero defeated Chu in a 1998 Democratic primary for a state Assembly seat. When Romero moved up to the state Senate in a 2001 special election, Chu captured her Assembly seat.

A former state Senate majority leader, Romero received national attention for her 2006 push for a one-day boycott of schools, jobs and stores by illegal immigrants, which she likened to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. While she has earned enduring support from many Latino voters and labor activists, her confrontational style has at times turned off others.

In the end, however, the special election may be determined by the size and shape of the candidate field. “It would take a cancellation of factors” for Chu to win, said Fred Register, a Los Angeles-area Democratic consultant. “This is an area that’s changing rapidly. The numbers could be moving toward the Asians. Still, all things being equal, the Latino candidate ought to have a significant edge.”