

# THE HILL



## In race for Solis's seat, Democratic Party may prove to be powerbroker

By Jeremy P. Jacobs

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On paper, there is very little that separates the two leading candidates for Labor Secretary Hilda Solis's former House seat.

Both California state Sen. Gil Cedillo (D) and Board of Equalization Vice Chairwoman Judy Chu (D) have raised several hundred thousand dollars. Both have already secured a slew of endorsements. Both have big-name consultants running their campaigns. Both are considered in line with the district ideologically, and both can count on large populations of voters of their ethnicity.

So as the campaigns head toward the Democratic primary on May 19, the candidates are looking for any advantage. The primary is open to candidates from both parties, and if one candidate earns more than 50 percent, he or she takes the seat. If no candidate does, the top Democrat and Republican will face off in the general election on July 14 in this heavily Democratic district.

Local observers say the state party's endorsement, which will be determined at an upcoming caucus, could be the game-changer. And the campaigns, seeing the opportunity, have been utilizing the caucus's complex rules to maneuver for delegates' support.

According to Los Angeles Democratic strategist Hal Dash, both campaigns are going all out to win.

"It's an endorsement you have to have," said Dash, who isn't involved in either campaign. "This will be an all-out war to get the endorsement. I am sure every delegate is getting four, five and six phone calls. It's a miniature national convention scenario."

The California Democratic Party sponsors the caucus, which is tentatively

scheduled for April 18. Its delegate pool will be members of the party's Central Committee living in Solis's 32nd congressional district. One way to join this expansive committee is through an appointment by an official. All Democratic state legislators, statewide officeholders, members of Congress and losing Democratic nominees from the last election are allotted a certain number of appointments to the committee.

In order to win the endorsement, either Cedillo or Chu must garner 60 percent of the more than 500 delegates who will be at the caucus.

Here's the rub: Up until March 10, when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) set the date of the special election, officials could switch their appointments from members living outside the district to members living inside of it. So until that date, Chu's and Cedillo's endorsers could reappoint Democrats to the Central Committee who live in the district and will back their candidate.

And both of the campaigns, which have racked up endorsements at a dizzying pace, instructed their backers to do just that.

Local Democratic sources said the endorsement could be a boost for one of the candidates for several reasons.

The winner could tout the party's endorsement in the heavily Democratic district. The candidate with the endorsement is also likely to get some support from the party, either in the form of mailers, ads, phone banking or a get-out-the-vote (GOTV) operation, according to party insiders. And even though the primary is on the same day that voters will go to the polls to ratify budget proposals, most expect turnout to be low, so getting targeted voters to the polls will be crucial.

A strong GOTV operation and the endorsement could be particularly important to Chu because the ethnic composition of the district works against her. While 18 percent of the Los Angeles district is Asian, 62 percent is Hispanic and may naturally back Cedillo.

Chu's campaign has set its sights on the caucus. Parke Skelton, the chief strategist behind the Chu campaign, said he is confident they have already secured more delegates than Cedillo's campaign. He also said that the campaign will make sure those delegates stick with Chu at the caucus.

"Our counting of the delegates shows that we have more support than Gil," Skelton said. "[And] it's not hard to figure out how to get 300 people to a

meeting.”

Skelton acknowledged that it will be tough to get to 60 percent and said that considerable effort could be spent just trying to block Cedillo. On top of that, a third candidate in the race, investment banker Emanuel Pleitez, could pick up a few of his own delegates.

Nevertheless, Skelton says he thinks they have a shot at it. “I think it’s possible,” he said.

Cedillo’s camp, on the other hand, downplayed the caucus and the likelihood of either candidate winning the endorsement.

Derek Humphrey, Cedillo’s campaign manager, said the campaign has focused on it but is more devoted to reaching out to likely voters.

“We’d like to have the endorsement but we’re not going to break the bank,” he said.

Humphrey acknowledged, though, that Cedillo’s backers have reappointed “a number of delegates.”

Humphrey also said that even if he loses the endorsement, Cedillo can still win the race.

“Everybody knows Sen. Cedillo is a Democrat and everybody knows he’s been a forceful advocate in the legislature,” he said. “We win this race because of his tremendous name recognition and the work he’s done for the district.”

He added: “These endorsements in a Democrat-versus-Democrat election typically don’t play a huge role.”

Because of all the jockeying that has already taken place, both campaigns said that there are probably 25 to 30 delegates left who aren’t already committed to a candidate, a small percentage of the more than 500 who will vote. And since both candidates are well-known among local Democrats, some are having difficulty picking camps.

“It’s tearing the community apart,” said one local Democratic activist who preferred to remain anonymous. “A lot of people feel firmly toward one or the other candidate. And it’s a lot of people that have been on the same side of issues before. It’s something that’s tough to call.”

