

Dan Walters: Perez's recount sends politics into uncharted territory

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By Dan Walters

California politics is meandering into uncharted procedural and legal territory with former Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez's go-for-broke decision to seek a vote recount in his duel with Board of Equalization member Betty Yee for a spot on the November state controller ballot.

Although 1.76 million Californians voted for one of the two Democrats on or before June 3, Pérez trailed Yee by just 481 votes when all the ballots had been counted a month later.

Monday was the legal deadline for Pérez to seek a recount, and on Sunday he filed the paperwork, seeking new tallies in 15 counties where he had bested Yee, including the state's largest, Los Angeles.

Pérez couched his move in terms of good government, rather than the ambition of a professional politician to continue his career. He cited "the utmost importance that an additional, carefully conducted review of the ballots be undertaken to ensure that every vote is counted, as intended."

The uncharted territory is what happens over the forthcoming weeks until election officials begin sending out Nov. 4 ballots, starting with those headed overseas to military personnel and others in about two months.

Pérez spent relatively little on his campaign to win a spot on the ballot but now must put up a lot of money for the recount – leading one to believe that if he had spent a bit more on the primary, he might not be facing his current dilemma.

If the recount shows him narrowing the 481-vote gap, Yee would have the right to seek a recount of her own, raising doubts whether the process could be completed in time for those overseas ballots to go out.

That doubt may increase exponentially if there are legal clashes and the courts get involved in disputed ballots, comparable to what occurred in Florida during the 2000 presidential duel between George W. Bush and Al Gore that wound up in the U.S. Supreme Court.

Ultimately, of course, one of the two Democratic politicians will win a spot on the Nov. 4 ballot and face Republican Ashley Swearingin, the mayor of Fresno, for the controller's job.

At that point, it would become a more conventional political contest whose focal point would be whether a Republican can still win any statewide office in California, since the party claims the allegiance of just 28.4 percent of the state's registered voters.

There's little doubt that Swearingin is pulling for Pérez to have a successful recount because he would carry the burden of the Legislature's poor public image in the fall campaign and she could count on more support from female voters than she'd receive if she faced Yee.

No matter which Democrat wins a ballot spot, too, the recount battle itself could divide the party and could be off-putting to independent voters who hold the balance of power in any otherwise close statewide election.

Call The Bee's Dan Walters, (916) 321-1195. Back columns, www.sacbee.com/walters. Follow him on Twitter @WaltersBee.

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