

## Ambassador nominee's ill-fated path is a Senate cautionary tale

By Michael  
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Maria Echaveste

HDO — Photo provided by University of California at Berkeley School of Law

WASHINGTON — Maria Echaveste made it all the way from the San Joaquin Valley to the edge of political glory, as the nominee to serve as U.S. ambassador to Mexico.

But now, instead of highlighting her life's inspiring arc, Echaveste's recently withdrawn nomination sheds light on the increasingly dicey politics of Senate confirmation. Democrats must rethink their choices, as they calculate who can survive scrutiny from the Republican-controlled Senate.

In Echaveste's case, it appears that her liberal affiliations were likely too much baggage.

"I don't want to be in a position of putting someone forward who doesn't have a chance," said Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer, who helps make judicial recommendations for California. "I will be choosing people I think can get through."

Boxer and Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein alternate recommendations to the White House for U.S. District Court positions in their home state. Boxer acknowledged that her future recommendations will take into account Republicans' 54-seat control of the Senate, and the Senate Judiciary Committee chairmanship of conservative Iowa Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley.

Two California vacancies currently exist for U.S. District Court positions. Sacramento-based U.S. Magistrate Judge Dale A. Drozd, at Boxer's recommendation, has been nominated for a seat at Fresno's federal courthouse. An opening in Southern California does not yet have a nominee.

The two senators also trade off recommendations for U.S. Attorney slots, which are not necessarily as politically sensitive as the life-time judicial appointments. Most recently, Feinstein recommended Los Angeles Deputy Mayor Eileen Maura Decker as the nominee for U.S. attorney for the Central District of California, which sprawls from Orange County to San Luis Obispo County.

"Eileen's 15 years of experience as a federal prosecutor and her tenure as the Deputy Mayor for Homeland Security and Public Safety in Los Angeles make her an excellent fit for this position," Feinstein said in a Feb. 4 statement.

Although she has served under two Democratic mayors, Decker's overall resume defies easy partisan categorization. Federal Election Commission records, for instance, do not show that she has made any federal campaign contributions. This removes one potential target from her back.

Echaveste, by contrast, could be cast in a more partisan light.



Born in Harlingen, Texas, to migrant parents, Echaveste moved with her family when she was young to Clovis. When she was 12, the family moved again, to Southern California.

Since her graduation from Stanford University and the University of California at Berkeley School of Law, the 60-year-old Echaveste has risen through Democratic ranks. She previously served in the Clinton administration, eventually as the White House deputy chief of staff, and she has contributed thousands of dollars to Democratic candidates, including Hillary Rodham Clinton, over the years.

A lecturer at Berkeley's law school, she co-founded a lobbying firm called the [Nueva Vista Group](#), also known as NVG. The firm's paying clients have included America Votes, which bills itself as "the central coordination hub of the progressive community;" the American Association for Justice, which used to be called the Association of Trial Lawyers of America; the American Civil Liberties Union and the Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform.

This background rendered her nomination submitted last September particularly vulnerable once Republicans assumed Senate control in January.

"Maria Echaveste cited the prolonged confirmation process and her family's best interests in her request to withdraw from the confirmation process," White House spokesman Eric Schultz said, adding that the president "regrets the long delays in this confirmation process that have led her to this decision."

Echaveste did not respond to an email seeking comment. Obama has not yet named a replacement nominee.

"Senator Boxer is very disappointed because this is such a critical position for our country," Boxer's spokesman Zachary Coile said of Echaveste's withdrawal. "She believes we must get this position filled quickly because Mexico is such an important partner

The Mexico City vacancy, moreover, is not the only one for which the White House may be recalculating odds.

Nationwide, 45 vacancies exist on federal courts; only 12 of them have had nominees proposed, according to the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts.

Sixteen ambassador slots are vacant and have not yet been targeted with a nominee, according to a tally maintained by the [American Foreign Service Association](#). An additional 11 nominees still await action.

"We're still trying to find out what this new Senate is all about," Kristen Fernekes, director of communications for the American Foreign Service Association, said Friday. "It's a bit of a waiting game."

These hopefuls include John L. Estrada, formerly the Marine Corps sergeant major at the Sacramento recruiting station and other locations, who was nominated to serve in Trinidad and Tobago, and Sheila Gwaltney, a Woodland native and graduate of UC Davis who was nominated to serve in the Kyrgyz Republic.

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