

Valley Latinos watch with interest as Villaraigosa considers Senate run

By John
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By several accounts, former Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa is considering a U.S. Senate run, taking his time and weighing whether he wants to jump into an election battle that already includes state Attorney General Kamala Harris.

Villaraigosa's deliberations have not gone unnoticed in the central San Joaquin Valley, where Latinos — who are both allies and detractors — are eagerly awaiting a decision in the race to replace retiring Sen. Barbara Boxer.

Some have talked to Villaraigosa, a Democrat and former Assembly speaker, and urged him to run. If nothing else, several local Latino leaders say it probably would energize Latino voters, which would be good for this region, and give Democrats an alternative to Harris.

"I do believe that options are always good and that Antonio probably has the largest and biggest name ID among California voters among other Latino names that have been floated," said former Assembly Member Sarah Reyes, a Fresno resident and Villaraigosa supporter. "He's very charismatic and very engaging, and Latinos remember him as a result of that."

Indeed, a poll of 600 likely Latino voters commissioned by the California Majority Report last week shows Villaraigosa with 23% support, a total ahead of Harris, who came in second with 15%, as well as other possible Latino candidates. Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin was at 2%, second among Republicans to Assembly Member Rocky Chavez, who polled at 3%. More than half of Harris and Villaraigosa supporters said they could change their mind, and 35% of respondents were undecided. The results, pollster Fernand Amandi said, shows the race is "wide open and fluid."

Another poll, paid for by the California Latino Legislative Caucus, also found that a Latino candidate could be strong, and Villaraigosa was the best known of that group.

The Villaraigosa push comes as Harris tries to consolidate power and claim a Democratic Party mandate. Many local Latinos see it as an attempt by Harris to clear the field, and they don't like it. They say such a move would hurt the chances of Democrats next year, and they also say it is time for the state to have a Latino U.S. senator.

Other Latinos disagree — and they smell politics at work.

Both of the state's current senators, Dianne Feinstein and Boxer, are from Northern California, they say. Last year, Northern California Democrat Betty Yee took out former Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez, a Southern California Democrat, on her way to winning the state controller's job.

"I know what the L.A. guys are doing," said Visalia attorney and Democratic Party activist Victor Moheno. "They want one of their own. They're playing the Latino card — if we can be bare-knuckled about it. But Kamala would be a much, much better senator, without a doubt... I see no negatives in her at all."

Moheno, in fact, already has endorsed Harris.

Orange Cove Mayor Victor Lopez hasn't taken that step, but still feels Harris is the more viable candidate.

"Number one, she's a woman," he said. "She's very electable and has shown her leadership is outstanding."

More importantly for local Democrats, Lopez feels Harris could win over Latinos as well as winning support from mainline female Democrats.

The debate over the already-announced Harris and the possibility of Villaraigosa or another Latino entering the race has sparked a lot of local conversation over issues such as who would play better in the Valley, how urban Democrats Harris and Villaraigosa would connect with the region's rural Democrats, how the San Francisco-based Harris could win over Anglo Democrat males in the Valley and the role of the Valley in a possible north-south political clash.

"Regardless of our voter turnout, they're going to need a swing vote, and the Central Valley may become that swing vote," Fresno City Council Member Sal Quintero said. "That's an important hammer we could have here in the Central Valley."

Assembly Member Henry T. Perea, a Fresno Democrat, agreed: "The Valley will play a big role for the first time."

With Villaraigosa, he said, that role could be even bigger because, unlike Harris, he would be an attractive candidate to some Valley agriculture and business interests.

Reyes agreed, saying Villaraigosa's Valley base would go beyond Latinos.

"He's been here," she said. "He knows where Fresno is. He knows where the Central Valley is."

On a bigger level, a true Harris-Villaraigosa showdown could force both candidates to spend time here if this area is seen as a key region with the north and south canceling each other out.

And whether local Latino Democrats support Harris or Villaraigosa, they say the dream scenario would be a November 2016 general election showdown. As it is now, any clash would be in the June 2016 primary. Whether the two could advance under the state's top two primary system depends on how many other viable Democrats enter the race, and whether a strong Republican does as well.

Whatever the case, anything that sparks interest would be good, former Assembly Member Juan Arambula said.

"The voter turnout this last election was horrendous, especially amongst young people and minorities," he said. "I think Antonio could appeal to those occasional voters who might come out in larger numbers, and that would be good for the democratic system."

For Democrats, the benefits in the Valley — considered one of the state's few remaining politically competitive regions — could be higher turnout in the 21st Congressional District, where incumbent Hanford Republican David Valadao has easily dispatched two challengers even though Democrats hold a commanding voter registration edge. Another beneficiary could be Fresno Democrat Jim Costa, who won an unexpectedly close race last year against unheard-of Republican Johnny Tacherra.

The trickle-down effect could even benefit Democrats at the state Assembly or possibly even county supervisor or city council level.

"It would create some pretty long coattails," Arambula said. "It would be good for everybody — but Kamala."

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