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<http://www.latimes.com/nation/sns-bc-us--california-house-special-election-20170529-story.html>

**California House race is a test of Latino, Korean influence**

On the rowdy streets of the Koreatown district a few miles from downtown Los Angeles, it doesn't take long to recognize the favorite candidate for an open U.S. House seat: Blue-and-gold campaign posters for Robert Lee Ahn greet diners at bustling dumpling houses and noodle shops.

The candidacy of Ahn, the son of Korean immigrants, in the 34th Congressional District has become a celebrated cause in a neighborhood where Korean barbecue restaurants and Korean-language signs testify to the neighborhood's name and Asian-influenced history.

"As a Korean-American myself, it's about representation," says Jimmy Chai, who works in a commercial real estate office in the heart of Koreatown and has donated to Ahn's campaign.

In a racially complex city, "you want someone who is from that area, who gets the nuance," Chai said. "He understands the people in that neighborhood."

Ahn is part of what is something of a political breakout for Koreans, who have not had one of their own in the U.S. House since the late 1990s.

Two years ago, David Ryu became the first Korean-American to hold a City Council seat in Los Angeles. Steven Choi, who was born in South Korea, was elected to the state Assembly in 2016. And in New York City, Ronnie Cho, the son of immigrants from South Korea, is running to be one of the first Korean-Americans to serve on the City Council.

David Min, a law professor from the University of California, Irvine, is seeking to unseat Republican U.S. Rep. Mimi Walters in California's Orange County. He said there is "a groundswell of political consciousness nationally among Korean-Americans."

"We are at an age of assimilation when people are starting to feel comfortable enough to enter politics," said Min, the son of Korean immigrants and a former aide to U.S. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York.

The special election June 6 in the heavily Democratic district will not change the balance of power in Congress: Ahn is in a runoff with another Democrat, state Assemblyman Jimmy Gomez, to fill the seat vacated by now-state Attorney General Xavier Becerra, also a Democrat.

With the rivals occupying much of the same policy terrain on health care, immigration and resistance to President Donald Trump, the race could end up being a test of whether an inspired Asian community can elevate their local favorite in a district where half the registered voters are Latino.

Asians make up about 15 percent of the roughly 300,000 registered voters in the district, which was carried by Bernie Sanders in last year's Democratic presidential primary.

A review of vote-by-mail ballots submitted so far shows Asian voters outpacing Hispanics, an encouraging sign for Ahn, according to nonpartisan research firm Political Data Inc. But the early spike in Asian turnout could be somewhat misleading: Gomez was the top vote-getter in the primary.

"We saw that in the (April) primary the Korean vote came in very heavy in the initial returns," said Paul Mitchell of Political Data, which provides detailed voting information for candidates to help them identify potential supporters. "You have to acknowledge that this is a Latino district."

The district that runs through downtown Los Angeles was crafted to favor Hispanic candidates, and Becerra held the seat for over two decades before stepping aside when he was appointed attorney general.

Republicans account for less than 10 percent of voters, a key reason why two Democrats emerged from an April primary that sent the top two vote-getters to the general election, regardless of party. Gomez got 25 percent of the votes and Ahn 22 percent among a field of 23 candidates.

At a forum Thursday, Gomez emphasized his legislative experience and widespread support within party leadership, while Ahn described himself as a fresh voice untainted by corporate money at a time when voters are weary of establishment politics.

Gomez, 42, the son of Mexican immigrants, comes with advantages: His turf in the state Assembly overlaps with the congressional district, and he's lined up endorsements from virtually all of the state's Democratic heavyweights, including Gov. Jerry Brown, Becarra and the state Democratic Party.

He's picked up support from a Bernie Sanders-inspired political group, Our Revolution, and his backing from nurses and other unions could prove decisive given the influence of organized labor in California elections.

Ahn, a 41-year-old lawyer and former Los Angeles city planning commissioner, has depicted Gomez as a foot soldier for corporate interests that have donated to his campaign, including pharmaceutical companies.

In many ways, the 34th District is a microcosm of Los Angeles.

Less than one-third of the voters are white. It ranges from gritty neighborhoods east of downtown, where building walls are splashed with graffiti, to hipster hangouts like Little Tokyo, a haven for foodies. There are pockets of Chinese, Vietnamese and Filipinos.

For Ahn to pull an upset, he'll need a strong turnout from Korean voters while picking off enough support from other racial and ethnic groups to overtake the better-known Gomez.

As is typical in diverse Los Angeles, campaigns must be multilingual to reach voters through the media or the mail, or better, in person.

"This is really boots-on-the-ground," says Ahn consultant Darby Levin. "How many people can you get to and knock on their doors?"

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