

Candidates bracing for battle

By Lisa Vorderbrueggen/Contra Costa Times

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California's lieutenant governor and the son of a former lieutenant governor, two candidates at deeply opposed ends of the political spectrum, set out Tuesday on a highly uneven contest for the 10th Congressional District seat.

Lt. Gov. John Garamendi, a rancher from Walnut Grove, won the Democratic party's nomination in Tuesday's special election. The liberal Democrat will face Republican attorney David Harmer of Alamo and three minor party candidates in the Nov. 3 runoff.

The two have no common ground on the most contentious issues in the national debate. Garamendi undeniably sits atop the pack.

Garamendi, 64, has held public office for three decades, including two stints as state insurance commissioner, seats in both houses of the Legislature, and was deputy secretary of the Interior Department in the Clinton administration.

Garamendi is a prodigious fundraiser running in a heavily Democratic district that political experts on both sides of the aisle view as virtually unwinnable for a Republican, especially an unknown candidate such as Harmer.

Harmer, whose father, John, was a state senator and appointed by Gov. Ronald Reagan to an open lieutenant governor's seat in 1973, has no illusions about the odds.

"I recognize that I will have to outperform Garamendi 7 to 1 at the polls," Harmer said. "I think I can do that."

The 46-year-old attorney said he will focus on his qualifications for the job, and reach out to independents and moderate Democrats dissatisfied with federal health care reform proposals and the faltering economy.

Harmer has never held elected office -- he lost his 1996 Utah congressional primary race -- but he points to his public policy experience.

He was a management-level staff member in both the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives and spent time writing and researching for two conservative think-tanks, the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation.

Harmer moved to Dougherty Valley in 2001 to take a job as first vice president and assistant general counsel for the credit card division of Provident. He lost his job in January after JPMorgan Chase acquired the company and dissolved his department.

On the issues, voters will have no trouble telling the two men apart. They agree on almost nothing.

Garamendi supports single-payer health insurance. Harmer does not.

Harmer opposed the federal stimulus package. Garamendi supported it.

Garamendi wants a strong cap-and-trade system to help cut greenhouse gas emissions. Harmer calls it an onerous burden on consumers.

Harmer said he will continue to deliver a message focused on reducing the federal deficit and reviving

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the economy with tax cuts.

"Mr. Garamendi has a program for every problem and that's great, but I'm saying, 'Who is paying the bill?'" Harmer said. "All (Garamendi's) ideas come with a big price tag attached, and it's my kids who are carrying the freight."

Garamendi may have the upper hand when it comes to fame and party registration, but he says he will mount an aggressive general election campaign.

Not only does Garamendi want to win in November, but he wants a strong showing, chiefly to ward off 2010 challengers. Members of Congress stand for re-election every two years, creating an almost nonstop re-election cycle.

"We are going to run a very comprehensive campaign," Garamendi said. "It's what I have always done and what I will continue to do."

He described Harmer as a "very conservative, right-wing Republican who mouths the same philosophy that has gotten this nation into the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression."

As for voter angst over health care reform -- likely to be a major campaign issue -- Garamendi said that media coverage of raucous protests has created a false impression of voters' views.

"What I see in this district are people who are desperate for health care reform," he said. "I have been at this for 35 years, and I will not give an inch toward what the Republican Party is doing, which is to kowtow to the profiteers of the insurance industry."

"If the Republicans want a fight, come on down, boys."

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