

Area flexing new political muscles

By Fred Ortega, Staff Writer
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Former President Bill Clinton's visits last week show the growing importance of the San Gabriel Valley in national politics, according to experts and party officials.

Clinton is not running for office, but he is a practical and effective surrogate for his wife, Sen. Hillary Clinton, the current Democratic front-runner, political observers said.

Changing demographics and the moving of California's primaries have combined to make the state, and the region, more attractive to presidential hopefuls than in the past.

Since the beginning of this year, Hillary Clinton has visited Pasadena once, while her Democratic rival, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, has attended fundraisers in the city twice.

The city also has attracted native son New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, as well as anti-war favorite Rep. Dennis Kucinich, of Ohio.

La Cañada-Flintridge was a fundraising stop for former Sen. John Edwards, who also visited Pomona as a candidate for vice president in 2004.

And Republican candidates also have taken note of the Valley's increasing clout, with Texas Rep. Ron Paul visiting La Cañada-Flintridge earlier this month.

Democratic party attention is relatively new to the area, a longtime bastion of conservative politics that launched Richard Nixon's political career.

Over the past two decades, the Valley has undergone a change as waves of Latino and Asian immigrants altered its demographics.

When veteran political consultant Joe Cerrell worked his first campaign for Adlai Stevenson in 1956, Democratic votes weren't considered a factor in California, much less the San Gabriel Valley.

"The San Gabriel Valley was a solid Republican area," said Cerrell. "The only Hispanics in the area were the domestic help, in terms of numbers, and Democrats were few and far between.

"We couldn't even win with Jack Kennedy in 1960 (in the Valley)," added Cerrell, whose Cerrell and Associates consulting firm has been operating out of Los Angeles for 40 years.

But with the influx of immigrants, the region has become fertile ground for Democrats, particularly those of the moderate variety such as the Clintons, said Republican consultant Allan Hoffenblum

"What Hillary is not getting are the hard-core lefties who really dislike Bill Clinton," said Hoffenblum, a former political director for the California Republican Party and publisher of the California Target Book. "The San Gabriel Valley has gone from conservative Republican to conservative Democrat — (Pasadena Democratic state Sen.) Jack Scott and (Pasadena Democratic Rep.) Adam Schiff are not left-wingers. And that is the constituency she has to lock up."

Hoffenblum added that other factors also make the Valley attractive to Clinton and her rivals, including a vibrant local press and an attentive Spanish language media that caters to primarily Democratic — though generally socially conservative — Latino population.

"You've got a bevy of small local papers that get read in the area, and it gets covered by the Spanish- language press, which covers politics 10 times more than the English-language TV stations," said Hoffenblum. "It is an area where if you spend a little time you get good coverage and a gold mine of potential votes."

The area's diverse population also will act as a draw for other candidates, said Michael Alvarez, a professor of politics at Caltech.

"We will see Obama hitting areas like Altadena and Pasadena, with large African-American populations," said Alvarez. "Edwards will also be tapping some of the same areas for support as he has in the past.

"I think it is going to be an exciting time for the Southland and for the San Gabriel Valley, more exciting than it has been in a while," added Alvarez. "We are going to have lots of presidential candidates on the ground here."

The moving up of the California primary to Feb. 5 also will likely push candidates of both parties to pay much more attention to the state than they have in the past.

Cerrell, the longtime Democratic consultant, said that Bill Clinton's recent visits were likely carefully planned because of the area's, diverse, middle-of-the-road political propensity.

"Some professional has gone through the demographics and figured out that the swing voter would be impressed by having Clinton being around, as opposed to areas where the Hispanic or African-American Democratic vote is solid," he said. "Why waste him in South Central or East Los Angeles when you can have him appear in an area where he can make a difference?"

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