

Tempe Dist. 17 race shows diversity of views

GOP sees seats as key to veto-proof majority

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If voters want a quick primer on the political chasm between the state's Republicans and Democrats, they should tune into the District 17 race for the state Legislature.

Eight candidates -- four Republicans and four Democrats - are jockeying for the two Tempe-south Scottsdale seats in the House of Representatives. During the Sept. 12 primary, voters will narrow the field to two Democrats and two Republicans who will advance to the Nov. 7 general election.

The race to fill the District 17 seats has high political stakes this year. The Republicans hope to gain a veto-proof margin in the state Legislature in case Gov. Janet Napolitano, a Democrat, is re-elected. The Tempe-south Scottsdale seats could be a key battle in that fight.

In Wednesday sessions before *The Arizona Republic's* editorial board, it was clear that the two political camps have a different focus.

When asked to prioritize the state's needs, Republican candidates said immigration reform and tax cuts should be near the top of lawmakers' lists. Democrats almost uniformly put Arizona's education system near the top.

"I think the Number 1 issue, not by choice, but by the immensity of it . . . is immigration," said Dale Despain, a Republican and former Tempe school administrator who unsuccessfully ran for the legislature in 2002. "We have to make sure that we maintain our national security, make sure we prevent unsavory-type people from coming across the border, we need to deal with the people who are here . . . we have to find some way to make them work legally. All of those issues need to be addressed."

Voters are frustrated by lawmakers who are too busy trying to score political points against Napolitano instead of working on a border plan that everyone can agree on, said Chris Derose, a Republican real estate agent and five-year resident of Tempe.

Rep. Laura Knaperek, R-Tempe, who's campaigning for re-election, defended lawmakers' immigration efforts.

"That's not accurate. We worked extremely hard to meet her demands," Knaperek said. The Legislature has moved to put some border issues on the ballot to get them directly to voters, she added.

Earlier Wednesday, the four Democrats running for the House zeroed in on education.

Three of those candidates have worked for schools: Sen. Edward Ableser, D-Tempe, is an Arizona State University instructor; Rhett Wilson is a coordinator for ASU's W.P. Carey School of Business, and business owner David Schapira is a former high school teacher. Angie Crouse, a political researcher, hasn't worked at a school but has pledged to make education a top priority.

Although all the candidates agreed that education is a priority, they supported different proposals.

The state should provide more incentives for schools districts to consolidate, Schapira argued. Crouse and Ableser backed the current system, which they say gives families more local control of schools. Wilson, who served as a Town Council member in Kearny, pledged to focus on Arizona's dropout rate.

The race in the coming weeks and months, political observers say, could produce one of the state's most cutthroat campaigns as candidates try to poach seats from the rival party.

Tempe is at the heart of the fight that could tilt the Legislature further to the right on social and spending issues, or back toward the center.

The district is one of only a few in the state considered statistically competitive, meaning registration numbers for Republicans and Democrats are so close that there are no predictable winners.

District 17 includes most of Tempe and south Scottsdale. There has been a statistical dead heat between the numbers of registered Republicans and Democrats, while most other regions are either so heavily Republican or Democratic that legislative candidates don't face true competition.

Republicans now hold a 39-21 advantage in the House and 18-12 in the Senate. Republicans need 40 votes in the House and 20 in the Senate to override potential vetoes by Napolitano.