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Hahn Intensifies Focus on Valley

Battling for a quick comeback, the mayor ratchets up appeals to white conservatives by painting Villaraigosa as a liberal extremist.

By MICHAEL FINNEGAN
Times Staff Writer

Los Angeles Mayor James K. Hahn is turning increasingly to white voters in the San Fernando

Valley to propel his reelection effort, as he battles to make a quick political comeback in the final stretch of the race, strategists say.

Day by day, Hahn has ratcheted up his appeals to Valley conservatives and moderates by casting his rival, Antonio Villaraigosa, as a liberal extremist who has favored gang members over crime victims and opposed tough penalties for child abusers.

In large part, Hahn's pitch targets white voters in an arc

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around the Valley's western rim, from Granada Hills, Porter Ranch and Chatsworth through West Hills to the prosperous enclaves of the Santa Monica Mountains, strategists say. It is part of Hahn's larger struggle with Villaraigosa for support in the Valley, home to 40% of Los Angeles voters.

For Hahn, the Valley is an uphill fight.

Villaraigosa holds a solid Latino base in the central and northeastern sections, along with broad support among liberal and Jewish voters in Studio City, Sherman Oaks and other areas along Ventura Boulevard. He is also strongly favored by Democrats, who dominate the Valley electorate.

If Hahn is to have any hope of winning a second term, strategists say, it is essential that he spur a strong turnout of the Val-

ley conservatives and Republicans, who now form his political base. He also must erode Villaraigosa's edge among moderate Valley whites, they say.

For Hahn, "it's do or die" in the Valley, said Tom Hogen-Esch, an associate political science professor at Cal State Northridge.

"If he's unable to win the West Valley, the whole game is lost," Hogen-Esch said.

High voter turnout rates — especially in the predominantly [See Valley, Page B16]

Hahn Woos Valley Conservatives, Moderate

[Valley, from Page B1]

white areas — make the Valley crucial terrain for any candidate seeking citywide office. For Hahn, it is especially important, because a coalition of whites in the Valley and blacks in South L.A. swept him to victory four years ago. In the 2001 mayoral runoff, Valley voters favored Hahn over Villaraigosa, 55% to 45%.

But last month, a Times poll found Hahn trailing Villaraigosa by 20 points in the Valley. To rebuild support, Hahn, a Democrat, has appealed aggressively to Republicans.

While they live throughout the city, Republicans are most concentrated in the conservative, mainly white communities of the West Valley.

"If you're trying for a center-right coalition, the Valley is where the gold mine is," said GOP strategist Allan Hoffblum.

The centerpiece of Hahn's appeal to Republicans — and a main theme of his overall campaign — is Villaraigosa's record on gang violence. He has zeroed in on Villaraigosa's former leadership of the regional chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

At the ACLU, Hahn reminds voters, Villaraigosa opposed legal injunctions that bar gang members from such activities as using cellphones or gathering in parks.

Villaraigosa, who now supports gang injunctions, says Hahn is trying to scare voters by distorting his record. State Sen. Richard Alarcon (D-Sun Valley), a former mayoral candidate who backs Villaraigosa, said: "To suggest that any elected official is somehow pro-gang is insulting to the voter."

On Friday, Hahn joined top Republican supporters at a Van Nuys hotel to hammer Villaraigosa on gangs and the ACLU. Former state GOP Chairman Shawn Steel called Villaraigosa "pro-gangster."

"When it was the people versus the gangs, Antonio Villaraigosa was with the gangs," Steel said.

Another Republican, former Councilman Hal Bernson of Granada Hills, asked whether Villaraigosa might name an ACLU member to chair the city Police Commission.

"Scares the hell out of me," Bernson said.

Referring to a Valley gang in-



OPPOSING CAMPS: Supporters of Mayor James K. Hahn make a rally at Valley College in Van Nuys. Sen. John F. Kerry of Massachusetts urged

junction, former Rep. Bobbi Fiedler of North Hills added: "There are many people out there who are part of that element of the city of Los Angeles who think that that gang injunction is going to go away if Antonio is elected. You and I both know that that would be a crisis for this city."

"It's not that he's just to the left of the mainstream," Hahn concluded. "He's not in the mainstream. He's not nearby. He's not even on the riverbank of the mainstream."

Hogen-Esch said Hahn's message on gangs — whether intentionally or not — appeals to ethnic stereotypes and could resonate with whites who fear "a Latino takeover."

"These perceptions among voters in Los Angeles exist whether a politician like Hahn is intentionally tapping into them or not," he said. "They exist, and

'If he's unable to win the whole game...

Tom Hogen-Esch, associate professor at Cal State Northridge

they're powerful."

Hahn vigorously denies stoking racial fears, which Villaraigosa supporters accused him of doing in 2001.

In campaign mail targeted to conservatives, Hahn has been more aggressive than in his public remarks. In a piece that mentions "gang" activity 10 times, Hahn's campaign calls Villaraigosa "the only Assembly member to vote no on tougher sentences for child abuse resulting in the child's death."

In a letter sent by Hahn's campaign to Republican voters, county Supervisor Mike Antonovich also brings up Villaraigosa's



GARY FRIEDMAN *Los Angeles Times*

their presence known at a campaign rally for Antonio Villaraigosa led those at the boisterous rally to vote for the councilman.

'in the West Valley, name is lost.'

▷ political science professor
speaking of Hahn

1996 vote against a GOP-sponsored child-abuse measure. He warns that voters might "take a risky gamble on a former ACLU president who has opposed the Los Angeles Police Department again and again."

Villaraigosa strategist Parke Skelton said the councilman had "a very strong record of fighting crime."

"They're trying to create a climate of fear by taking a bunch of votes out of context," he said. Hahn's campaign team ran "one of the sleaziest campaigns of all time" in 2001, Skelton said, and "they're at it again."

Larry Levine, a Sherman

Oaks political consultant unaligned in the mayoral race, said Hahn's "life raft may be the northwest Valley," but it could be harder for him to raise doubts about Villaraigosa than it was four years ago.

"Can he frighten those people about Antonio a second time?" Levine asked. "And can he motivate them to come out and rally around him on election day after they've spent the last two years or so reading about scandals in City Hall?"

Villaraigosa has pounded Hahn relentlessly over corruption investigations at City Hall, but his campaign was thrown off stride last week by questions about his own fundraising in Florida.

For both Hahn and Villaraigosa, a central battle in the Valley is over the tens of thousands of voters who cast ballots for former state Assembly Speaker

Bob Hertzberg of Sherman Oaks in the initial mayoral election March.

Hertzberg won the Valley running especially strong among Republicans and conservatives who have shifted toward Hahn but also among moderates and Jewish voters, who have tilted toward Villaraigosa.

Hertzberg has endorsed Villaraigosa and is one of the top Valley leaders vouching for him.

"The Valley needs a mayor with passion and energy, who is fearless in tackling big problems with big ideas," Hertzberg tells voters in an automated phone call that echoes the themes of his own mayoral campaign.

He also touts Villaraigosa's plans to deal with traffic and improve schools — high priorities for Valley voters — and gives a nod to those who backed Valley secession from Los Angeles, saying Villaraigosa would "make City Hall more responsive to the people."

Hahn's campaign against secession irked many Valley residents, who have grumbled for decades about City Hall neglect of their neighborhoods. In 2002, a slim majority in the Valley voted to leave L.A., but secession was defeated on the citywide ballot.

To shore up his support, Villaraigosa has also deployed former Mayor Richard Riordan, who was popular in the Valley, and Assemblyman Keith Richman (R-Northridge), who was elected mayor of the Valley city that voters declined to carve out of L.A.

Beyond Hahn's attacks on Villaraigosa, the mayor has also touted his record in the Valley. He takes credit for new police stations and libraries, along with neighborhood councils that he says have begun to address the Valley's complaints of neglect.

"Neighborhood councils have brought the neighborhoods much closer to City Hall," said Hahn strategist Bill Carrick. "They're much more plugged in."

But even Hahn supporters say the resentment that drove Valley secession lingers. Among them is Bob Scott, a West Hills public-policy consultant active in Valley civic and business groups.

"We have a tendency to feel like cattle out here that are being milked," he said, "and that's about it."

Times staff writer Daniel Hernandez contributed to this report.