

Opinion: Senate race highlights California's differences

By Joe Mathews

Are you a Kamala or a Loretta?

Attorney General Kamala Harris and Rep. Loretta Sanchez – the leading candidates for U.S. Senate next year – confront Californians with a choice. But it's not a choice about competing policies or visions. Californians don't have political arguments about what we believe anymore. Harris and Sanchez are both Democrats in a one-party state, where disputes these days are over just how many resources to devote to the causes we favor.



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No, this is a choice about identity, personality, manners, and culture.

This is about who you are.

And where you live.

The contest between Harris – who grew up mostly in the Bay Area and has made her adult life there – and Sanchez – a Southern Californian to the core – shows how the differences between San Francisco and greater Los Angeles have changed,

and endured.

And while our race- and ethnicity-obsessed media prefer to emphasize that Harris is black and South Asian, and that Sanchez is Latina, the heart of the difference between the candidates, and the two regions, is class.

Harris comes off as a 21st century aristocrat – poised, disciplined, distant. Her shorthand bio: born and raised in the Bay Area by two academics (who also were immigrants), one a professor at Stanford. Then she graduated Howard University – the so-called “Black Harvard” – and got a law degree at Hastings. In all this, she’s representative of the rising Bay Area, an upper middle-class island of advanced education in a struggling state. (Every single Bay Area county has a median income significantly higher than the state average).

Sanchez was born in Lynwood, a poor city in southern Los Angeles County; she graduated high school in working-class Anaheim. One of seven children born to Mexican immigrants, a machinist and a secretary, she earned her degree from Chapman, an underdog college that more recently gained renown. In this, she represents a Southern California that has become more working-class, with education levels stagnant, median income falling, and fewer payroll jobs than two decades ago.

In these two regions, people rise differently. Harris has climbed one of the Bay Area’s many established ladders – in the legal field. Her political rise has been supported by Northern California elites of all sorts – her book, *Smart on Crime*, even acknowledges Reagan treasury secretary, George Shultz.

By contrast, Sanchez emerged out of nowhere to take on Orange County’s entrenched Republicans and knock Bob Dornan out of Congress in 1996.

Harris, with the security of someone who knows where she

stands in the Bay Area's clear pecking order (people there know who their politicians and billionaires are), is direct and decisive. She entered the U.S. Senate race quickly and with a well-articulated plan. Sanchez, from a Southern California where status is far from clear and the powerful can be invisible (Quick: could you recognize billionaire Donald Bren, who built much of Orange County, on the street?), played Hamlet for months before getting in the race.

While you won't find much difference between the liberal positions of Northern and Southern Californians, there are differences in style and speech. Harris follows the Bay Area fashion by inventing jargon to obscure more than explain – her book talks endlessly about “rocking the crime pyramid,” whatever that means. Like her Silicon Valley neighbors, she uses the word “disrupt” as if being disruptive to other people's work and lives were a good thing.

Sanchez is earthy, bawdy, SoCal. She sent holiday cards with illustrations of herself riding a motorcycle and wearing a tank top. Southern Californians are pretty blasé about loose-talking political figures, and Sanchez has gotten away for years with saying impolitic things that touch on race and ethnicity. Now running statewide, she'll need to dial back; she got into trouble for making a “war cry” gesture to describe Native Americans recently.

The reaction to Sanchez's candidacy has split along geographic lines. Northern pundits question whether someone so gravitas-deficient can be considered a serious candidate. But farther south – where people know that politicians practically have to set themselves on fire to get on TV – pundits have responded with versions of, “What's the Big Deal?”

Of course, not all of us are Kamalas and Loretas. You might be a San Diegan Republican from the military (and thus a Rocky Chavez). I had a Kamala education, but, as a bombastic Southern Californian with working class roots, I'm a Loretta

at heart.

For now, the Kamalas are ascendant. (So is Kamala Harris in the polls). Northern California politicians, businesses and unions are in charge because northerners cast ballots far more often than we do in the South, a voter turnout wasteland.

But one day, working class Los Angeles might awaken, and assert itself at the polls. If that happens, California might be a messier place, but more freewheeling and more fun. More like Loretta.

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