

Battle royal for open Senate seat in Nevada

By Erica Werner, AP

In a state where the politics can be as raucous as the casinos, the race for U.S. Senate in Nevada is shaping up as a battle royal.

Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid's retirement after three decades has created a rare open seat that offers Republicans their one real shot at winning a state now held by the Democrats. With their slim Senate majority under siege around the country, Republicans are determined to replace Reid with one of their own, Rep. Joe Heck, a wonkish and hard-working Army reservist.

But the canny Reid is just as intent on installing a Democrat to replace him. He recruited a former state attorney general, Catherine Cortez Masto, who would be the first Latina ever to serve in the U.S. Senate. Her candidacy is giving the state's increasingly powerful and overwhelmingly Democratic Latino voting bloc an opportunity to send a message to GOP presidential candidate Donald Trump, who is sowing fear and anger in their community with his threats to build a wall with Mexico and deport more than 11 million immigrants who are in the country illegally.

With special interest money already gushing into the race, the dynamics make for a super-charged throw-down in this state of bright lights and wild contradictions.

"It's not lost on either side of the aisle that the Senate majority in 2017 could very well come down to this race," Heck said in an interview in his clean and orderly campaign office. As volunteers worked the phones, Heck professed confidence, saying he has won three competitive races for his Southern

Nevada House seat and insisted he would do it again for Senate.

“After eight years of Barack Obama and 30 years of Harry Reid people are truly ready for a change, especially in a place like Nevada where we’re still bouncing along the bottom in economic recovery,” Heck said.

Campaigning at El Tarasco Mexican restaurant, where colorful offerings included rose petal ice cream, Cortez Masto played up a different kind of change. She emphasized her Mexican roots, reminding supporters her grandfather emigrated from Chihuahua and she and her sister were the first in their family to graduate from college. In an interview, she was quick to link Heck to Trump.

“It is crazy to me that in this day and age we’re having this discussion about electing somebody who is full of hate and discrimination,” Cortez Masto said. “I have an opponent I’m running against, Congressman Heck, who is supporting him.”

It’s a line of attack that figures to be a staple of Democratic Senate campaigns around the country this year. In Nevada, Democrats are sending two people in parrot costumes and Trump hats to follow Heck around, intending to suggest he parrots Trump’s views. Despite blistering heat topping 100 degrees, the parrots jumped up and down outside a Hyundai dealership where Heck was campaigning one recent afternoon, before getting escorted off the lot.

Heck insisted such attacks won’t work.

“People know who Joe Heck is,” he said. “This idea of identity politics or guilt by association, I think the electorate is smarter than that.”

If Heck faces a challenge in being linked to Trump, Cortez Masto is confronting something similar in her connections to Reid, who is closely involved in her campaign and has put his

still-formidable political machine behind her. Reid, 76, is a polarizing figure in the state, beloved by many Democrats but loathed by Republicans.

Cortez Masto, a cautious campaigner who has not previously faced a highly competitive race, is quick to change the topic when asked about him.

“Sen. Reid’s not on the ballot, and to me this is a race I’m focused on about the issues that people in my state, where I was born and raised, care about, because I will be representing them in Washington, not Sen. Reid,” Cortez Masto said.

Yet for both candidates in Nevada, as in other states with competitive Senate races, the outcome will depend partly on something they can’t control: how the presidential race plays out between Trump and the likely Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton.

Republicans are optimistic Trump could win Nevada, but the state has gone Democratic in the past two presidential elections. Registered Democrats outnumber Republicans by some 65,000 voters, a figure Democrats and labor unions are working hard to increase even more.

With Trump as their nominee, Republicans face the prospect of record Latino turnout. Activists point to increased voter registrations and citizenship applications as evidence Latinos are lining up to prevent Trump from becoming president.

“Heck is doomed,” Reid himself predicted when asked about the impact of the Latino vote.

After greeting supporters at El Tarasco restaurant on a recent afternoon, Cortez Masto headed across the street to an early-voting site where a life-size Elvis Presley cutout beckoned voters to the polls ahead of the state’s June 14 congressional primary.

Neither Cortez Masto nor Heck faces serious opposition in the primary, though in a taste of Nevada's colorful politics one of Heck's opponents is a hard-core conservative named Sharron Angle. She lost a winnable Senate race against Reid six years ago after a series of gaffes, including telling Latino school-children they looked like Asians. Angle doesn't appear to have much money or support this time around, but she recently produced an ad depicting herself as a tiger and Heck as a bunny rabbit, and showing herself gripping Trump's hand.