

# Los Angeles Daily News

## **Revenge-minded Parks could be Hahn's worst enemy**

**By Thomas D. Elias**  
**Guest Columnist**

**Sunday, March 06, 2005** - It's easy enough to see what Tuesday's mayoral election is not about:

It's not about ideology. All five major candidates in this race are Democrats, leaning to the liberal. In an era of sharp national ideological splits, there is none among these hopefuls.

It's also not about reform. The only candidate to float a serious reform proposal was state Sen. Richard Alarcon, who proposed a ban on most political donations to city officials from companies that contract with the city. Like Alarcon's candidacy, his putative proposition elicits little excitement.

The vote in the first round, with the two top candidates advancing to a runoff in May, is really about leadership. Has incumbent James Hahn done enough for the city or could one of the others do more?

So far, indications are the vote on Hahn will be a resounding negative. Yes, he steered the city through a secession drive. Yes, he's seen to it that more than 2,000 potholes got filled in the immediate aftermath of February's record rainstorms.

But no, most voters apparently don't like the way he does his job. That's the only conclusion to be reached from his measly 21 percent showing in a Los Angeles Times poll that last week found Hahn running neck-and-neck with City Councilman Antonio Villaraigosa and former San Fernando Valley Assemblyman Robert Hertzberg, both onetime speakers of the state Assembly.

"If you want leadership in this city, I'm your guy," Hahn proclaimed at the conclusion of the first round's last debate.

But that same poll found only 26 percent of likely voters in favor of continuing Hahn's policies, with 65 percent wanting a change. Even in Hahn's former stronghold of the South Los Angeles area, 66 percent in the survey wanted change.

This doesn't bode well for an incumbent.

One reason Hahn is not as strong in South L.A. as he was four years ago was his 2002 firing of former Police Chief Bernard Parks, an African-American with strong roots in the area who now represents it on the City Council and currently stands fourth in every mayoral poll.

Another is that because of repeated newspaper revelations and current county and federal grand jury investigations, Hahn developed a reputation as a pay-to-play politician. He's been hurt most by repeated accusations of illegal fund-raising against several of his appointees to city commissions.

"What's happened is that all the bad press in Hahn's alleged pay-to-play has taken its toll, in spite of the

fact that a lot of analysts said no one was paying attention," said Arnold Steinberg, a Republican campaign consultant with no horse in the race. "That's best illustrated by the fact that Hahn has put on a huge amount of TV ads the last few weeks and his numbers haven't changed at all."

There's also the possibility that the city as a whole hasn't changed much. Four years ago, Hahn finished second in the mayoral primary after running behind Villaraigosa for months. But he reversed that in the runoff. Poll percentages for both men today aren't all that different from the 2001 primary election results.

The only significant variations are Hertzberg and Parks. Parks drains black support from Hahn, but not enough to make it to the runoff himself. The question is whether it will be enough to knock Hahn out.

At the same time, Democrat Hertzberg, with the implied endorsement of Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who explicitly endorsed Hertzberg's goal of breaking up the Los Angeles Unified School District, is pulling the same Republican and San Fernando Valley votes that went for third-place finisher Steve Soboroff last time.

Hertzberg, though, has a strong shot at the runoff because Parks appears to be eating into the former Hahn vote.

With Villaraigosa leading since the get-go, but not by very much, almost every analyst concedes him a slot in the second round. The question, most believe, is whether he'd be opposed by Hahn or Hertzberg.

If it's Hahn, many expect a repeat of 2001, when Villaraigosa endured a series of grainy TV ads implying he's a drug-crazed radical. That was almost a carbon copy of the strategy three-term Mayor Sam Yorty employed to beat back the candidacy of City Councilman and former police Lt. Tom Bradley in 1969. Yorty portrayed Bradley as a radical black activist, when he was anything but radical and hardly an activist.

When Yorty tried the same tactic against Bradley in 1973, it backfired because voters knew Bradley better and he ousted Yorty by a wide margin.

Like Bradley, Villaraigosa has now served on the City Council and voters across the city know him better. "I don't think the same attacks would work this time," said Steinberg.

If it's Villaraigosa vs. Hertzberg, the most closely watched factor will be where the black vote lands. As always, Villaraigosa's base would be among Latinos and Hertzberg's among Jewish voters and others in the Valley. Hertzberg has never before had to appeal to African-American voters and Villaraigosa has never had much success drawing them.

For sure, labor unions would endorse Villaraigosa. But business groups would go for Hertzberg. "Business and centrists who will vote for Hahn on Tuesday might fear that Villaraigosa would be a radical liberal and raise taxes," said Shawn Steel, a Los Angeles lawyer and former state Republican Party chairman. "That could let Hertzberg build the same kind of coalition that won for Hahn last time."

For Hahn, all pieces of that coalition except blacks would surely fall into place again if he makes the runoff.

But some think blacks no longer feel as much animosity toward Latinos as surveys showed they did



just after the 1992 riots. If true, that would help Villaraigosa.

In the end, though, this round may turn out to be little more than four other Democrats ganging up on a weak incumbent.

"Bottom line, it will be about getting your voters out, as it so often is," said Allen Hoffenblum, a longtime campaign manager and now a television political analyst. "But I think Hahn was a goner when four major fellow Democrats filed against him."

If so, the key challenger may turn out to be the revenge-minded Parks, not because he stands any chance of winning, but because of what he'll take away from the incumbent mayor.

*Thomas D. Elias is a writer living in Southern California. Write to him by e-mail at [tdelias@aol.com](mailto:tdelias@aol.com).*