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In Houston, a 'Nonpartisan' Race Is Anything But

By JIM YARDLEY

HOUSTON, Nov. 29 — The winning formula for Democrats running for mayor in this diverse city has long required patching together ethnic coalitions, so the campaign rally at the sports bar had a familiar feel: a mariachi band, outfitted in matching spangled pants, belted out Mexican ballads as the Hispanic candidate shook hands with a smattering of local Asian business leaders.

The only thing missing at the event Wednesday was a Democrat. The mayoral candidate, Orlando Sanchez, a member of the City Council, is a conservative Republican. And to the surprise of political handicappers, Mr. Sanchez, 44, appears to be in a dead heat, or even leading, in advance of a runoff Saturday against the two-term incumbent, Mayor Lee P. Brown.

"It's an absolute cliffhanger," said a University of Houston political science professor, Richard Murray, who helped conduct a poll released this week. "It's going to go down to the last vote."

This was supposed to be a fairly boring race that would bring a third and final term for Mr. Brown, 64, a career public servant who became the city's first black mayor in 1997. But after finishing a close second in the November open primary and forcing the runoff, Mr. Sanchez appears to be tapping into the ire of conservative white voters frustrated with Mr. Brown, as well as the aspirations of the city's large Mexican-American population to elect the first Hispanic mayor.

Because both national parties want to attract Hispanic voters, and because there are no other major elections under way, the mayoral race in the country's fourth-largest city has attracted national attention, particularly from Republicans.

This week, President Bush endorsed Mr. Sanchez, while his parents, former President George Bush and Barbara Bush, who are Houston residents, are appearing in campaign advertisements on Mr. Sanchez's behalf. Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani of New York has also taped radio and television commercials, while Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao attended the sports bar rally.



Photographs by Phillippe Diedrich for The New York Times

To the surprise of the political establishment in Houston, Orlando Sanchez, top, a conservative Republican, is in a dead heat with Mayor Lee P. Brown, at far right talking with Chris Bell, a former candidate. The national Republican and Democratic Parties have been taking a serious interest in the race.

"We'd love to have this guy," said Richard Bond, the former chairman of the Republican National Committee, noting that winning Houston would be significant not only because it is the largest city in the president's home state but also because of its recent history of electing Democrats. Democrats say the Republicans are desperate for a victory after losing the governors' races in Virginia and New Jersey this month.

For Texas Democrats, a loss would be a major blow and could resonate into the 2002 elections for governor and other statewide offices. Republicans hold every statewide office in Texas, but Democrats believe the huge increase in the state's Hispanic population — to 32 percent in 2000 from 25 percent in 1990 — could favor them in the coming decade, assuming the party can continue to hold onto Hispanic voters as part of a broader coalition.

Mr. Brown had figured to ride to victory on that coalition, bolstered by the support of the predominantly white downtown business establishment. A victory would be the capstone of a long public career in which he has been police chief in Houston, Atlanta and New York as well as federal drug czar under President Bill Clinton. As mayor, Mr. Brown has helped win voter approval for building a downtown basketball arena and the city's first light-rail line. Houston's economy, though straining recently with the collapse of the Enron Corporation, has mostly boomed during his time in office.

But Mr. Brown also has many critics — Mr. Sanchez chief among them — who portray him as ineffective. Downtown traffic is often gridlocked, and critics blame Mr. Brown for failing to better coordinate construction projects that have torn up important thoroughfares. Mr. Brown's administration also suffered some embarrassing budgetary mistakes by miscalculating sales tax revenues.

Mr. Brown has countered the criticism by assailing Mr. Sanchez as unqualified. Before his 1995 election to the Council, Mr. Sanchez served in the Air Force and worked three years as a parole officer. On his financial disclosure forms he said he

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