

DEBATE DIVIDES ON IMMIGRATION GOVERNOR HOPEFULS: THREE DEMOS TRIED TO DISTANCE THEMSELVES FROM GOP'S DAN LUNGREN IN BILINGUAL EVENT.

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Byline: PHILIP J. TROUNSTINE, Mercury News Political Editor

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Body

The major candidates for **governor** engaged in a spirited but civilized **debate** on Saturday in which the **three** Democrats, led by U.S. Rep. Jane Harman's pointed remarks, did more to differentiate **themselves** from Republican Attorney General **Dan Lungren** than from one another.

It was the first-ever **bilingual** gubernatorial **debate**, sponsored by KMEX-TV and La Opinion newspaper, and was broadcast live in Spanish by the Univision network although the candidates spoke exclusively in English.

The differences between **Lungren** and the Democrats -- airline tycoon Al Checchi, Lt. Gov. Gray Davis and Harman -- were underscored on **immigration** and economic policy. All of the Democrats opposed 1994's Proposition 187, which sought to eliminate education and health services for illegal immigrants. After wavering on the issue, **Lungren** supported it.

While each of the Democrats agreed with the premise of a question Saturday that the gap is widening between the rich and poor in California, **Lungren** rejected the notion as a suggestion of "class warfare."

Given the Republicans' history of ignoring Latino voters, **Lungren** won points with many in the audience, including Univision President Henry Cisneros, just for showing up.

But among the Democrats, it was Harman who used the forum to most sharply argue her party's differences with **Lungren** on abortion rights, health care reform, tobacco legislation, and especially gun control.

"I believe I'm the best Democrat on this stage to contrast our differences with **Dan Lungren** on issues like guns and the need to ban Saturday-night specials to save kids from violence in schools; on our differences on tobacco; on our differences on a woman's right to reproductive choice," she said.

Harman was first to call attention to **Lungren**'s support for Proposition 187, a measure reviled by most Latinos, according to polling data. She also was the first to challenge **Lungren** on a fundamental economic issue when **Lungren** responded to a question asking how he would address the growing gap between the rich and poor.

"I'm not sure I totally accept the premise of the question," **Lungren** said. "John Kennedy told us that a rising tide lifts all boats. I still believe that." He said the way to lift up the poor is to improve schools, reduce the capital gains tax and nourish small businesses.

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"The gap is growing," Harman replied. "All boats are not rising right now, Dan. John Kennedy's dream has not come true." She, too, pointed to improving education as key to the solution, but she argued that banning cheap handguns and assault rifles is critical to create safe conditions in neighborhoods that most need economic development.

Davis, the Democratic front-runner, said the minimum wage should be reviewed regularly and he mentioned his support for a University of California campus in the Central Valley, a proposal all of the Democrats support. "Ultimately," he agreed, "the solution lies in education."

"You and I have been traveling in a different state, Dan," said Checchi, former co-chairman of Northwest Airlines, noting that half the people in the state have not seen increased wages. But Checchi, who now trails Davis in the polls, turned the question on Davis.

"Gray, you keep saying I spent my life making money. It would have done you well to spend a little time in the private sector." He pointed to Texas Gov. George W. Bush, a former businessman like himself, as a model who "wasn't sitting 25 years in a government position, bumping along."

Davis later responded that while Checchi claims to have created 10,000 jobs running a \$6 billion business, he created 30,000 jobs as state controller through a housing program he established through the state's retirement system.

Held at Loyola Marymount College, the forum was targeted to Latino voters. While they have, historically, made up only about 10 percent of the vote, Latino organizers hope to increase that percentage dramatically this year.

Lungren joined the three Democrats in the debate because the June 2 primary, for the first time, allows voters, regardless of their party registration, to pick any candidate. The winner from each party will advance to the November election.

The only new proposal put forth at the debate came from Davis, who, during a discussion of immigrants' effect on the wages of current citizens, said: "As governor, I would also make the good offices of state agencies available to accelerate the opportunities for people to become citizens. We should encourage, not discourage, people becoming citizens of the state when they come here legally."

But at a press conference following the debate, Davis retracted his proposal when asked how much he expected it would cost. Calling his idea "a very modest step," Davis said he had no cost estimate and that he was only proposing to "explore" the possibility of the state helping the Immigration and Naturalization Service process new immigrants as some counties do now.

If the candidates follow through with statements they made Saturday, the debate marked a new phase of the campaign. Checchi, who aired about \$6 million in negative ads against Harman and then about \$4 million against Davis, said he plans to spend the rest of the campaign talking about education and his own proposals for California.

His campaign manager, Darry Sragow, rejected the notion that this was a tactical shift necessitated by Checchi's disastrously high negative ratings in the polls. Rather, he said, "It's time to focus on what Al wants to do as governor of California."

At a post-debate press conference, Checchi said his rivals' complaints about his negative campaigning were "a sideshow to divert people from the real issues." He also angrily denounced reports in the San Francisco Chronicle that he had mistreated domestic servants as "a fabrication and a smear on my family."

Speaking to reporters after the debate, Lungren defended his stand on Proposition 187 and Proposition 209, which eliminated public-sector affirmative action programs. He repeated his belief that the reason the GOP has done poorly among Latinos is not its positions but the way in which it has communicated its message.

"My party's principles are principles that are dead-bang in the mainstream of the Hispanic community," he said.

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Harman argued that she had demonstrated in the debate that because of her record and her style, she offered Democrats "the strongest contrast" to Lungren and she criticized Davis for failing to fight for the ban on cheap handguns that was recently approved by the Legislature, but vetoed by Gov. Pete Wilson.

Davis told reporters he is "proud of his record on gun control," having been an early supporter of measures to limit weapons.

Asked by a reporter if, having aired an ad in 1992 that compared Dianne Feinstein to Leona Helmsley, he was credible when he complains about negative ads, Davis replied: "I believe, and I hope you do to, in the possibility of redemption."

He pledged to run a positive campaign from here on out. "I don't think people want to see a food fight," he said.

Graphic

Photo;

PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

California governor candidates, from left, Al Checchi, Dan Lungren, Jane Harman and Gray Davis participated Saturday in the first-ever bilingual debate at Loyola Marymount College in Los Angeles.

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