

# South Texas House Battles Have Sizzler Potential in GOP-Trending Districts that Dems Are Defending

**Capitol Inside Editor**

*By Mike Hailey*

**W**hile speculation on the hottest Texas House fights this fall has centered so far on more than a half-dozen seats in big city suburbs, a couple of South Texas races that haven't been on many radar screens appear to have the potential be realistic opportunities for Republican takeovers as the GOP seeks to expand its majority in the lower chamber this year.

The races that pit State Reps. Abel Herrero of Corpus Christi and Yvonne Gonzalez Toureilles of Alice against Republican challengers Connie Scott and Jose Aliseda respectively may be the two biggest sleeper races on the House battlefield in 2010 in districts where the GOP's candidates at the top of the ticket have claimed a slight majority of the votes in recent elections. The battles in the districts where Gonzalez Toureilles and Herrero are seeking re-election for the third time are critical pieces in the puzzle as Republicans fight to keep control of a chamber where they currently have a four-seat edge after Democratic gains in the last three election cycles.

But while the districts where Gonzalez Toureilles and Herrero are seeking re-election for the third time are similar in ethnic complexion, geographical location and recent voting trends, the Republicans who are taking on the Democratic incumbents in the November 2 general election have cause for optimism based on reasons that are comparable in some ways and individually unique in others.

The House District 34 race - for example - has a wild card that could work significantly to Scott's advantage with the potential to be the deciding factor if the battle with Herrero is as close as partisans on both sides predict it will be. After losing to Herrero two years ago with less than

47 percent of the vote, Scott would appear to be starting off as the underdog in a rematch this fall in a district that contains about 40 percent of Corpus Christi, Robstown and a number of small towns in western Nueces County.

But there's a new twist this time around that could level the playing field with longtime Corpus Christi radio personality Vicente Carranza planning to run for the HD 34 seat as an independent candidate. If Carranza obtains the necessary number of signatures that are required for a place on the November ballot as he expects to do, Republicans speculate that he could pull five percent of the vote or more away from the third-term incumbent as a Hispanic candidate who's well known in the area as a result of a two-hour talk show he's had on Spanish-language radio there for most of the past 15 years. Carranza's commentaries have been conservative at times and liberal at others while generally reflecting the views that the vast majority of Hispanic families in Corpus Christi area share.

With the national political mood favoring the GOP at this stage of the game with more than seven months to go before the general election, Republicans would expect Scott to have a better chance against Herrero this time around even if Carranza hadn't entered the picture. After a respectable showing in 2008, Scott has substantially more name identification now than she did in the early stages of her first House bid and the ability to raise more campaign cash than she did two years ago as a result of the pro-Republican political climate and the credibility she established during the initial race against Herrero. Scott, a former local director for the Citizens Against Lawsuit Abuse, was no slouch in the

fundraising department the last time around when she ended up spending about \$250,000 on her campaign for the House while the incumbent had more than \$400,000 to shell out.

While about 60 percent of the residents in HD 34 are Hispanic, the edge that Herrero would appear to have in that regard could be mitigated to a large degree by significant inroads that the Nueces County Republican Party has made in the Latino community where the GOP has fielded a record number of nominees for the November ballot this year. Since Democrats claimed 52 percent of the HD 34 vote in statewide races in 2002, the GOP's statewide slates have received 51 percent there in the last two election cycles after breaking even with the two parties broke even six years ago when Herrero won his first House race.

Herrero claimed the HD 34 seat when he defeated Republican Terry Arnold with 55 percent of the vote in 2004 after beating Democratic rival Nelda Martinez in a primary runoff earlier that year with 56 percent. The incumbent at the time, Jaime Capello, had been eliminated from the competition in the first primary election that year after coming under heavy fire from trial lawyers as a result of his position in a major tort reform battle the previous year when he'd been an ally of then-Republican Speaker Tom Craddick.

Scott will hope for a significant boost from a national backlash against President Barack Obama and Democrats in Congress as a result of their push for a health care reform package that includes abortion provisions that could alienate some Democrats and independents in a district where many Hispanic voters are pro-life regardless of their partisan affiliations. But the ultimate key to a possible Scott victory could be Carranza's ability to dilute some of Herrero's support among Hispanics who would be inclined to back the incumbent if there were no independent alternative.

In HD 35 to the west, Aliseda will be hoping to ride the same pro-Republican wave that the GOP candidates are counting on in House races across the state that have the potential to be competitive. But Aliseda - unlike Scott - won't have potential help from a third-party candidate as he takes on Gonzalez Toureilles in a district where she knocked off a Democratic incumbent in 2004 and survived challenges from well-funded Republican foes later that year and again in 2006. But Republicans have high hopes for Aliseda as a result of the unique qualifications he brings to

a race in a House district that stretches from Jim Wells County where the incumbent lives to the southern outskirts of San Antonio. GOP strategists think Aliseda will be the most formidable Republican foe that Gonzalez Toureilles has faced so far as an ex-Navy officer and former Bee County judge who made a name for himself while aggressively investigating and prosecuting voter fraud and public corruption during a previous stint as county attorney.

Aliseda, a Beeville resident who served on the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles for eight years as one of Governor Rick Perry's appointees, had been elected to local office initially as a Democrat before President George H.W. Bush persuaded him to switch parties in the early 1990s. Aliseda was easily re-elected as county attorney in his first campaign as a Republican before winning the county judge's job for the first time in 1998.

The GOP's hopes in HD 35 have been fueled as well by shifting demographics in a district that Democratic statewide candidates had carried in 2002 with 54 percent of the vote before Republicans at the top of the ticket claimed 52 percent on average there during the next two election cycles. Republican fared better than ever in the district that Gonzalez Toureilles represents when the GOP's John McCain scored 54 percent of the vote there in his bid for the White House in 2008.

While the incumbent's home base of Alice is still heavily Democratic as the largest city in HD 35, most of the growth in the district in recent years has come in Atascosa County on the southern outskirts of San Antonio in an area where Republican voters have outnumbered Democrats.

But Gonzalez Toureilles - like Herrero - has proven to be a strong candidate herself since ousting embattled Democratic incumbent Gabi Caneles in the 2004 primary election en route to a victory later that year over Republican Eric Opiela with less than 51 percent of the vote. Gonzalez Toureilles, who's an attorney like Aliseda and Herrero, survived a challenge in her first re-election bid in 2006 from Republican Michael Esparza, an Alice City Council member who had substantial funding from the Texans for Lawsuit Reform and major GOP donors such as James Leininger and Bob Perry.

While Herrero and Gonzalez Toureilles will likely be favored until proven otherwise, the HD 34 and HD 35 races are definitely worth watching this fall.