

Politics

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THE BATTALION

Tuesday, November 13, 2001

Bentsen for Senate seat? Morales, Kirk also pursue Gramm's spot

HOUSTON (AP) — A familiar Texas political name wants to return to the U.S. Senate.

Ken Bentsen, a four-term congressman from the Houston-area's 25th District, is hoping to follow in the footsteps of his uncle, Lloyd Bentsen, who first was elected to the Senate in 1970 and remained there until stepping down in 1993 to become President Clinton's first treasury secretary.

Bentsen began a series of announcements around the state Monday, beginning in McAllen, to kick off his bid to regain for Democrats the seat being vacated by Republican Phil Gramm, who is retiring after three terms.

Gramm's seat, once held by Lyndon Johnson, has not been in Democratic hands since 1961, when Johnson became vice president and Republican John Tower won the seat.

"I want to be the Democrat who reclaims the seat of Lyndon Johnson, sits at the desk of Sam Houston and continues in the proud tradition of Lloyd Bentsen," he said.

The elder Bentsen, confined to a wheelchair and unable to speak, accompanied his nephew at the Houston announcement.

Ken Bentsen, 42, is a former investment banker and congressional aide who had been Harris County Democratic chairman for four years when he was first elected to Congress in 1994.

He joins Victor Morales seeking the Democratic nomination for the Senate seat. Morales is a high school geography teacher who gained attention by campaigning in his white pickup truck en route to a stunning primary victory in 1996 before losing to Gramm.

He is likely to be joined by former Attorney General Dan Morales and former Dallas Mayor Ron Kirk, who have indicated they are planning to run in the March 12 primary. An Austin attorney, Ed Cunningham, also has said he is running.

"I think it's wide open, not only in the primaries but in the general election as well," Bentsen said. "I'm willing to put my record up against anybody."

"I wouldn't get into this race if I didn't think I had a shot to win it."

Texas Attorney General John

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— Ken Bentsen
U.S. Congressman

While Republicans have tried to paint him as a liberal, Bentsen has campaigned as a moderate, favoring a balanced budget, welfare reform, abortion rights and environmental protection.

"I think I've got a very strong record and quite saleable to Texas families all over this state," he said. "I'm the type of candidate who has very deeply held values and principles. But people want you to do something and get things accomplished. They want you to stand for what you believe in but at the end of the day they want a product. I've been the type of candidate who's delivered."

He has survived bruising races against Republicans in his 25th District that covers parts of east and southwest Harris County and northeast Fort Bend County, including his first race in 1994 when he and his GOP opponent spent a combined \$3 million, making it at the time the most expensive congressional race ever conducted in Texas.

Most recently, in 2000 he fended off a more than \$3 million challenge from another Republican who outspent him nearly 3-1.

"I've had a lot of mud thrown at me and I've just tried to persevere and talk about the issues I think are important," Bentsen said Monday after dodging raindrops outside Houston's City Hall.

Bentsen, a senior member of the House Budget Committee and Financial Services Committee, touted his record on helping to balance the budget, pay down the national debt and funnel federal money for education, law enforcement, health care and medical research.

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