

# CA governor's race becomes proxy fight over education reform



By Reid Wilson - 05/01/18

<http://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/385746-ca-governors-race-becomes-proxy-fight-over-education-reform>

Two of California's most powerful interest groups are colliding in the race to run the nation's largest state, threatening to upend a legislative stalemate between the state's largest teachers unions and charter school advocates.

In one corner stands [Gavin Newsom](#), California's Democratic lieutenant governor, who has corralled support from the California Teacher's Association and the California Federation of Teachers.



In the other stands [Antonio Villaraigosa](#), the Democrat and former Los Angeles mayor who is earning support from wealthy donors who back charter schools as a key component to education reform.

Newsom's institutional support has helped him amass a huge cash advantage in the month leading up to the June 5 primary. He had more than \$17.6 million in the bank as of April 21, according to the most recent campaign finance reports. That's \$10 million more than his nearest rivals, Villaraigosa and state Treasurer John Chiang (D).

But Villaraigosa has benefitted from an outside group, Families & Teachers for Antonio Villaraigosa for Governor 2018, that has received seven-figure contributions from billionaires who support charter schools. Backed by the California Charter Schools Association, the group has raised more than \$12.5 million in recent weeks, much of it from charter school backers like Netflix CEO Reed Hastings, the philanthropist Eli Broad, former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Their contributions are now paying for a barrage of advertising boosting Villaraigosa that's targeted at both Democratic and Republican voters.

“To move California forward, we need to help more Californians get ahead,” the group’s [initial ad](#) says. “That’s why Antonio Villaraigosa brought both parties together to balance the state budget with record investments in public schools and new career training programs.”

One Democratic source watching the race who is independent of both campaigns said the outside group had reserved \$11 million in television advertising set to run between April 17 and May 21.

Polls show Newsom [easily leading the race](#) for governor. Those same surveys show Villaraigosa running neck-and-neck with businessman John Cox, a Republican, for the second spot in November’s top-two runoff. Charter advocates hope their spending can bolster Villaraigosa in the last month before voters cast their ballots.

Both candidates have made access to education cornerstones of their paid media campaigns.

Villaraigosa has proposed a California Students’ Bill of Rights that includes more school funding, higher teacher pay and better school nutrition options. Newsom wants to guarantee two free years of community colleges and college savings accounts. Both support universal pre-kindergarten programs.

But observers said the charter school backers see Newsom as a threat. For the last quarter century, California governors — including outgoing Gov. Jerry Brown (D) — have been favorably disposed toward charter schools. The legislature, though dominated by Democrats, has reached a virtual stasis in which neither the charter school advocates nor the teacher’s union is able to dominate the debate.

To those supporters, Newsom threatens to tip that balance in favor of the unions.

“This is probably the most hostile, the most threatening position that anyone this close to the governorship has ever had,” Jed Wallace, president of the California Charter School Association, [said in a speech](#) last month.

Political observers say Villaraigosa is trading off a reputation he built as mayor, when he picked a fight with teachers unions by trying to take control of the Los Angeles Unified School District. That fight ended with Villaraigosa gaining control of some schools, but it cost him politically.

“Villaraigosa has had a relationship with the charter school folks for a number of years,” said Zev Yaroslavsky, a former Los Angeles County commissioner and now director of the Los Angeles Initiative at UCLA’s Luskin School of Public Affairs.

“He’s a believer that the current system, the status quo, is not working, and that public officials ought to try to think outside the box and to break old conventions.”

Newsom, who backed charter schools while serving as mayor of San Francisco, has more recently aligned himself with the powerful California Teachers Association. Newsom said on the group’s [endorsement questionnaire](#) last year that he did not think there needed to be more charter schools in the state, which charter school backers interpreted as a call for a moratorium.

In an emailed statement, Newsom campaign manager Addisu Demissie said the lieutenant governor “fundamentally believes in [charter schools’] mission as engines of educational innovation.”

“But no governor should be a rubber stamp. Gavin opposes the creeping for-profit privatization of public education,” Demissie said. “He has reasonably suggested that new charter approvals should be temporarily paused until both sides of the debate achieve the consensus they both say they want on ... minimal transparency measures.”

The teachers union has its own beef with Villaraigosa, who, ironically, [got his start](#) as a union organizer for Los Angeles’s largest teachers union. Garry South, the long-time Democratic strategist based in Los Angeles, pointed to a package of school-reform measures backed by then-Gov. Gray Davis (D), which passed while Villaraigosa served as speaker of the state Assembly.

The teachers union “was adamantly opposed to all of the measures, and never forgave him for pushing the package through the Assembly,” South said. “His problems with teacher unions predated his even being mayor.”