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In Pilsen, 25th Ward contest straddled 2 generations

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Apr. 6--Cuahutemoc Morfin, a Chicago businessman, was so inspired by his role as an immigration march organizer that he challenged Ald. Danny Solis (25th), one of the city's most powerful aldermen, during February's council elections.

Centered in Pilsen, the race was as much about different generations of Mexicans in Chicago as it was about housing, schools and other issues, though Morfin's campaign stumbled.

For years, the main symbol for Mexican political clout in the city was the Hispanic Democratic Organization, a political action committee closely linked to Mayor Richard M. Daley that has recently been implicated in a federal inquiry into illegal patronage hiring at City Hall.

Its army of hundreds of volunteers helped give rise to leaders such as Solis, 57, a civil-rights-era activist who co-founded the **United Neighborhood Organization**, another Latino powerhouse with deep ties to city government. Solis, appointed alderman in 1996, was an HDO leader before he recently broke ties with the group.

Morfin, 35, a Pilsen health club owner who serves on an advisory council to the Mexican government, cast himself as an alternative to that generation. He argued Solis and others are losing touch with the region's swelling Mexican immigrant population.

Solis held well-attended fundraisers, and his campaign funds dwarfed those of his five opponents. Morfin rode through the ward in his Nissan sedan, his smiling face stretching across the windows on customized sunscreens that are well-known props of elections in Mexico.

Morfin's role as an immigrant council member for Mexico's Institute for Mexicans in the Exterior helped him win financial backing from other immigrants around the U.S. Connections made during the marches helped him win support from the predominantly immigrant Service Employees International Union, which sought to unseat Solis.

"We need one of us to represent the community, someone from El Barrio," Morfin told one voter in Spanish, ignoring the fact that, like him, Solis arrived in Pilsen from Mexico as a young boy. The voter, Marino Gomez, 79, agreed to place one of Morfin's signs on his living

room window after learning he and Morfin were from the same Mexican city, Guadalajara.

But Gomez couldn't resist a cynical dig born from years of watching politicians work, in Mexico and Chicago.

"What we don't want is more robbers," he told Morfin, cocking his head for a better look at the candidate. "You're not a robber too, are you?"

Morfin fell short in his bid, garnering 23 percent of the vote to Solis' 51 percent, just short of a runoff. Morfin's supporters are contesting the result in a federal lawsuit that will be heard this month.

In demanding a recount, the supporters chanted in Spanish: "vote by vote, [ballot] box by [ballot] box," a slogan used in Mexico last fall when presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador narrowly lost his election and thousands of demonstrators marched in the streets.

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