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HEADLINE: Villaraigosa Wins Over Crowds in Nation's Capital

BYLINE: Patrick McGreevy, Times Staff Writer

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BODY:

Los Angeles' new political celebrity, Mayor-elect Antonio Villaraigosa, took his victory tour to the nation's capital Wednesday, receiving rave reviews for appearances that included a national conference of Democratic activists and a lunch with some of the nation's most influential Latinos.

The city councilman does not take office as mayor until July 1, which limited the substantive opportunities in his daylong swing but not the reaction he earned. Everywhere he went, supporters fawned, many of them asking him to autograph their copies of this week's Newsweek magazine, which bears his smiling face on the cover.

"He represents the future of progressive politics in America," said Robert Borosage, co-director of the Campaign for America's Future, as he introduced Villaraigosa to an audience of more than 1,000 activists who gave him three standing ovations.

Villaraigosa won over the crowd at the group's Take Back America conference, even as he complained that it was not diverse enough, and that the Democratic Party had not done enough to strike a chord with ordinary Americans. He said neither main political party has made urban issues, including poverty and homelessness, enough of a priority.

"I think we need to look long and hard within our movement," Villaraigosa told the largely white group. "You look at this room today, and you don't see the kind of diversity we need to build a strong movement in America. We are not reaching out enough."

A politician who won by reaching out to conservative San Fernando Valley voters as well as Westside liberals, Villaraigosa told the group he is "an unabashed progressive but I'm not a knee-jerk."

Activists, some of whom were not familiar with Villaraigosa, said they found his speech powerful and refreshing.

"I'm a big fan," said Tony Simone of New York City, who had Villaraigosa sign his copy of Newsweek. "I

completely agree with what he says."

Villaraigosa had planned to make the trip even before he won the runoff election against Mayor James K. Hahn two weeks ago, and the event was one of five public appearances and private meetings for him. The whirlwind visit started when he arrived by red-eye flight Wednesday morning. He was scheduled to fly back to Los Angeles on Wednesday night to meet today with the head of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Villaraigosa also received an enthusiastic reception at a Latino Leadership lunch attended by 200 influential Latinos, including U.S. Treasurer Anna Escobedo Cabral, deputy assistant to the president Ruben Barrales, ambassadors, city council members, corporate executives and labor leaders, including Linda Chavez Thompson, executive vice president of the AFL-CIO. Many stood in line to tell him how much his victory meant to them.

Jesse Rios, a labor leader from Chicago, said Villaraigosa's victory would open the door for others.

"I'm so proud of him. It's a tremendous victory for Latinos throughout the country," said Rios, who is executive director of the Labor Council for Latino American Advancement.

Villaraigosa's lunch appearance drew a surprise visit from Washington Mayor Anthony Williams, a former Los Angeles resident who had counseled Villaraigosa after his loss to Hahn in the 2001 mayor's race.

"He's going to do an incredible job," Williams told reporters as he and Villaraigosa clasped each other on the shoulders.

Barrales, a Californian who is White House director of governmental affairs, told Villaraigosa the Bush administration would work closely with him.

"The White House is open to you," he said. "We are there to work with you on issues important to Los Angeles and the United States of America."

Villaraigosa, who was accompanied by City Council President Alex Padilla, said he owed his election to support from voters across Los Angeles. But he acknowledged its importance for the Latino community.

"This wasn't about me. This was about a great country we live in," he said. "This is about a community that has struggled and contributed to the incredible prosperity that is America. This is about a community that wanted to participate."

The mayor-elect attended the grand opening ceremony for a new headquarters building for the National Council of La Raza, where the group's president, Janet Murguria, said Villaraigosa's victory had reverberated across the country.

"It's historic, it's a landmark; we're very proud of him," she said.

"But more than that, we are excited about the potential for others building similar multicultural coalitions in the future."

Beyond speeches and interviews, Villaraigosa also used the Washington trip to meet with the city's lobbyists to hear about funding and legislative proposals affecting Los Angeles.

In his campaign, the councilman made several promises that probably would require Washington's help, including expanding the police force by 1,000 officers and extending the city's subway system.

Los Angeles has not always fared well in seeking its share of federal assistance. The **Rose Institute** of State and Local Government issued a report in 2001 that found that Los Angeles ranked eighth out of the 88 cities in Los Angeles County in receiving federal funds.

In response, Hahn hired the Washington lobbying firm Patton Boggs, which has been paid \$900,000 in the last few years to supplement the work of the city's lobbyists in Washington.

Villaraigosa emerged from a meeting with the lobbyists saying he would aggressively pursue the city's agenda in Washington. He said he planned to meet with key congressional committee heads soon and would

institute a "Los Angeles Day," when the city's leaders would descend on the nation's capital to press their case.

"Obviously, we are going to continue to make funding for homeland security a priority, addressing issues related to the port as well," Villaraigosa told reporters. He said many appropriations for this year have been set, but that he was looking at next year.

Villaraigosa's visit occurred while Congress was in recess, so the mayor-elect was not able to meet with any of Los Angeles' 14 representatives. But those interviewed by The Times as they headed back to their districts predicted that Villaraigosa would have more success than Hahn in getting Los Angeles attention from the federal government.

"We all liked him; most of us endorsed him. And we all want him to succeed," said Rep. Brad Sherman (D-Sherman Oaks). "He has a certain infectious charisma, which has helped him with everything he has tried to accomplish. He should be able to present our case well."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: POPULAR: Los Angeles Mayor-elect Antonio Villaraigosa speaks to more than 1,000 activists at the Take Back America conference, where he received three standing ovations. He also attended the grand opening for the National Council of La Raza's headquarters. PHOTOGRAPHER: Brendan Smialowski AFP/Getty Images PHOTO: HIGH-PROFILE VISIT: Mayor-elect Antonio Villaraigosa speaks with Monica Lozano of the National Council of La Raza. PHOTOGRAPHER: Brendan Smialowski AFP/Getty Images

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