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Wilson, Madrid in Dead Heat

By Jeff Jones*Copyright © 2006 Albuquerque Journal; Journal Politics Writer*

Republican incumbent Heather Wilson and Democratic challenger Patricia Madrid are running dead even in a race for New Mexico's 1st Congressional District seat, a new Journal Poll found.

The war in Iraq appears to be weighing on the nationally watched contest that could help decide the balance of power in Congress: 59 percent of the registered likely voters polled said the candidates' positions on Iraq are "very important" factors in how they will vote.

Wilson has defended the war and backed President Bush, while Madrid has criticized Wilson's position.

"The mood of the state and the nation regarding Iraq is hurting Wilson," said Journal pollster Brian Sanderoff, president of Research and Polling Inc. in Albuquerque.

The Sept. 25-28 survey in the Albuquerque-based district found 44 percent supported Wilson for the congressional seat while 44 percent favored Madrid, the state attorney general.

With about a month of campaigning left before the Nov. 7 general election, it is the tightest contest for Wilson since she first won the seat in 1998.

The poll found 7 percent of voters were undecided, while 5 percent—perhaps turned off by a monthslong blast of TV attack ads—said they would not vote for either candidate.

"It doesn't get any more exciting than a neck-to-neck tie," said veteran political watcher and University of New Mexico political science professor emeritus F. Chris Garcia.

Madrid has criticized Wilson's support for the Iraq war and has called on the Bush administration to form a plan to withdraw U.S. troops.

Wilson— a member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence— has said withdrawal decisions should be made by military leaders.

The U.S. conflict in Iraq is now in its fourth year, and more than 2,700 military members have been killed since it began.

In recent weeks, Sanderoff said, "Madrid has been a lot heavier on tying Heather Wilson to Iraq and to the president— and I think that's had an

impact on consolidating her support."

The poll found 73 percent of those supporting Madrid believed the Iraq issue was "very important" to the race, while 47 percent of Wilson backers said it was very important.

Only 7 percent of the Madrid backers and 17 percent of the Wilson supporters said Iraq was "somewhat unimportant" or not important at all in the race.

Madrid gains ground

The latest Journal Poll used a 400-voter sample and has about the same 5 percentage-point margin of error as an Aug. 25-31 Journal survey, which showed 45 percent of respondents for Wilson and 42 percent for Madrid.

Despite both surveys on the head-to-head contest being within the margin of error, Sanderoff said he believes the new poll shows Madrid has gained some ground while Wilson has slipped.

"Madrid's holding on— and Wilson's not gaining. That's good for a challenger in an environment where incumbents, and incumbent Republicans, are at risk," said UNM political science professor Lonna Atkeson. "It's just incredibly competitive."

Madrid has solidified support within her own party, according to the polls: 74 percent of Democrats in the new poll said they favored her, compared with the late-August Journal survey showing 66 percent of Democrats supporting her.

Wilson had support from 11 percent of Democrats in the new poll, down from 17 percent in the previous poll.

Wilson needs to pick up a sizable portion of Democratic voters to keep her seat on Election Day, Sanderoff noted. State voter registration figures show Democrats outnumber Republicans by nearly 39,000 voters in the 1st Congressional District.

"The Democrats are 'coming home' as the election gets closer— and they're obviously not going towards Wilson," Garcia said. "One of the keys in this race is how big the (voting) turnout is among Democrats."

Most Hispanics in New Mexico are Democrats, Sanderoff said, and Madrid has gained ground among them while Wilson has slipped.

Fifty-eight percent of Hispanics polled said they favored Madrid, compared with a 54 percent tally in the previous poll. Wilson had support from 29 percent of Hispanics, compared with 35 percent in the earlier poll.

More liberal voters climbed on the Madrid bandwagon: 78 percent of those who referred to themselves as liberals supported her, compared with 69 percent earlier.

Eighty-five percent of Republicans polled said they support Wilson, compared with 83 percent in the late-August polling.

Two-thirds of voters who called themselves conservatives in the two Journal polls supported Wilson.

Although sample sizes were smaller on education-level demographics, the new poll shows those with college degrees and post-graduate degrees were more likely to support Wilson than Madrid.

Close races are not new to Wilson: An early-October 2004 Journal poll found that the Democratic challenger that year, Richard Romero, had closed the race to within 1 percentage point.

However, Wilson eventually widened her lead and won re-election by 10 points.

Sanderoff said he expects the Wilson/Madrid battle to remain tight barring any major campaign blunders from either candidate.

And, Garcia said, "We're going to continue to be one of the most watched, most publicized, most exciting congressional races at a time there's a big battle going on for control of Congress."

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