

[back to story page](#)

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URL: <http://www.abqjournal.com/news/state/504930nm10-22-06.htm>

Sunday, October 22, 2006

Madrid Gains, Wilson Slips

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

Democratic challenger Patricia Madrid appears to have pulled slightly ahead of Republican Rep. Heather Wilson in the tooth-and-nail battle for New Mexico's 1st Congressional District seat, a new Journal Poll has found.

With 45 percent of the 1st District voters surveyed backing Madrid and 42 percent supporting Wilson, the result from the Oct. 17-19 poll falls within its margin of error of plus or minus 4.4 percentage points.

But Journal pollster Brian Sanderoff said he's confident the trend over the past three Journal polls— which began in late August— indicates there has been a change in the race for the Albuquerque-based congressional district.

In the poll of 503 registered voters in the district who said they are likely to vote in the Nov. 7 general election, 4 percent backed neither candidate, and 9 percent remained undecided.

It's a race that's had a negative cast since the start, with exchanges of attack ads starting in midsummer. And with the race possibly critical to the Republican hold on the U.S. House, more and more national groups and politicos have come to Albuquerque to help one side or the other.

The Journal poll also found that the recent U.S. House scandal, involving now-resigned Rep. Mark Foley, R-Fla., and his electronic messages to teenage pages, is playing a role in the race.

Although 85 percent of the 1st District voters polled said the scandal won't affect their vote, 12 percent said it has made them more likely to vote for Madrid.

Three percent said the scandal made them more likely to vote for Wilson.

"There may be something historic happening here," Sanderoff said of the race overall. He has been polling in 1st Congressional District contests for two decades and can't recall a time when a Democratic challenger has led a general election race.

No Democrat has won the district since its establishment in 1968.

Sanderoff and longtime state political watcher F. Chris Garcia, a University of New Mexico political science professor emeritus, said the Iraq war— which is seen by an increasing number of Americans as a big mistake

— probably was a big factor in the new poll results.

Wilson has backed the Bush administration on the war, and Madrid has repeatedly blasted Wilson for her stance and wants the administration to form an exit plan.

The anti-Iraq sentiment is "part of the national mood," Garcia said. "Many think, 'It's time for a change. Things are not going well. We have to change course. We have to change direction.' "

Sanderoff said President Bush's low approval ratings also are hurting Wilson in her bid for a fifth full term.

Madrid has tried to paint Wilson as a "rubber-stamp" vote for the Bush White House, while Wilson has worked equally as hard to portray herself as independent and remind voters of the positions on which she has differed from Bush.

Sanderoff noted that Wilson is far from the only Republican House member facing the fight of her political life. By his recent count, 23 Republican incumbents and GOP candidates vying for a seat held by a retiring Republican are either behind in the polls or facing a candidate within "striking distance."

Sanderoff said he doesn't see the current 1st District polling numbers as a statement on whether Wilson is unpopular or whether Madrid is popular. Rather, he said, many voters simply view the Democratic candidate as an agent for needed change.

"What's happening here is not a unique circumstance— it's going on in different moderate districts around the nation," Sanderoff said. "You don't see a lot of Democratic incumbents on defense. It's Republican incumbents on the defense right now."

Support is fading

The Journal Poll numbers indicate that overall support for Wilson, who first was elected to the 1st District seat in 1998, may have declined since polling began late this summer.

The initial Journal Poll, conducted Aug. 25-31, showed Wilson with support from 45 percent of those polled, compared with 42 percent backing Madrid. A month later, a Sept. 25-28 Journal survey showed the pair even with 44 percent apiece.

Wilson continues to have nearly universal backing of fellow Republicans — 84 percent of GOP members in the new poll supported her, while only 10 percent favored Madrid.

However, registered Democrats outnumber Republicans in the 1st District by nearly 39,000 voters, and Sanderoff said a key to Wilson's past

victories was her ability to gain the support of a significant number of Democrats.

Wilson's support among Democrats has dropped in the current race: 11 percent of Democrats backed her in the new poll and the September poll, compared with 17 percent in the August survey.

Wilson's support among Hispanic voters, many of whom are Democrats, has dropped by double digits: 20 percent of Hispanics surveyed in the new poll back Wilson, down from 35 percent in the August polling.

"It's a huge drop," Garcia said.

Meanwhile, 65 percent of Hispanics in the new poll supported Madrid, up from 54 percent in the August polling.

Voters with annual household incomes of less than \$40,000 were about twice as likely to back Madrid.

Those whose education stopped at high school also were more likely to back Madrid, while voters who had done college graduate work or obtained graduate degrees were more likely to favor Wilson.

The Foley effect

The House scandal involving Foley's sexually explicit e-mails and instant messages to boys serving as House pages has played in Democrats' favor as Election Day closes in, Sanderoff said.

Wilson served on the U.S. House Page Board from mid-2001 to 2004. She has said she didn't know about the Foley issues until the scandal hit the news late last month.

Although no one has challenged Wilson's statement, Madrid has accused Wilson of not doing her job protecting pages and says Wilson should have to explain why she didn't know about the problem.

Wilson has said she couldn't be expected to know about the goings-on of one of 435 House members. She said she has not been ordered to testify in the House ethics committee hearings on the Foley matter and does not expect to be.

Sanderoff said that at the least, the Foley scandal has diverted Republicans from trying to play up what they believe to be their strong suits: national defense and their handling of terrorism issues.

"It took the Republicans off their game plan for two weeks," Sanderoff said.

According to the new Journal Poll, 9 percent of Anglo voters— and 19 percent of Hispanic voters— said the scandal has made them more likely to vote for Madrid.

Sanderoff said that could help explain some of the decline in overall

Hispanic voter support for Wilson.

He noted that although the polling shows that the Foley scandal isn't playing a front-and-center role in the 1st District battle, every vote matters in such a close race.

"Every little bit helps— or hurts," Sanderoff said.

Attack over the airwaves

Since this summer, both candidates have swamped voters with a seemingly endless flood of attack television ads.

It's now nearly impossible to talk about the race without someone voicing disgust over what seems to be a race run primarily by attack ads.

"It's never been quite to this extent. Not in television ads. Not in New Mexico," Garcia said. "This is unprecedented— in volume as well as intensity, and certainly in duration."

Garcia said he thinks the attack ads from both sides "tend to sort of cancel each other out."

He added that in such a tight race, the outcome will hinge not on the air war of the TV attack ads, but rather on the "ground war"— making sure supporters get to the polls on Nov. 7.

"Organization is going to be increasingly important," Garcia said.

"I don't recall in recent history when we've had as exciting a race— and certainly not one that has drawn the kind of interest it has."

Endorsements

Wilson has been endorsed by the National Rifle Association, Chicano Police Officers' Association, New Mexico Professional Firefighters Association, IAFF, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, National Federation of Independent Business Owners, VFW PAC, and Fraternal Order of Police.

Other groups are Small Business Victory Fund, All Indian Pueblo Council, New Mexico Native American Petroleum Coalition, New Mexico Indian Gaming Association and Pueblo of Santa Ana.

Individuals endorsing Wilson include U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici, U.S. Sen. John McCain, Brent Scowcroft, Al Hurricane and Al Hurricane Jr.

Madrid has been endorsed by the labor unions AFL-CIO, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Teamsters, American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

The Albuquerque Police Officers Association and the Albuquerque Area Firefighters Local 244, which represents city and Bernalillo County firefighters, also endorse Madrid.

Other organizations endorsing Madrid include the Sierra Club, the

League of Conservation Voters, New Mexico Conservation Voters, EMILY's List and the Women's Campaign Fund.

Top donors in 1st District Congressional race

Patricia Madrid

LAWYERS/LAW FIRMS: \$440,746

RETIREES: \$105,325

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP PACs: \$90,400

CANDIDATE COMMITTEES: \$63,000

BUILDING TRADE UNIONS: \$38,000

Heather Wilson

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP PACs: \$250,622

RETIREES: \$243,571

OIL & GAS: \$84,850

REAL ESTATE: \$80,500

HEALTH PROFESSIONALS: \$77,060

-- *Source: Center for Responsive Politics*

WILSON, MADRID: WHERE THEY STAND ON THE ISSUES

Iraq War

Rep. Heather Wilson voted for the 2002 U.S. House resolution authorizing U.S. military force in Iraq and has backed the Bush administration on the war since.

Challenger Patricia Madrid said she would not have voted for the use of force in Iraq had she been in Congress and had access to the same information Wilson had concerning prewar intelligence. Madrid asserts the intelligence was manipulated by the Bush administration.

Wilson maintains that decisions concerning troop deployments in Iraq should be made by military commanders rather than politicians; she does not support a mandated timeline for troop withdrawal in Iraq.

Madrid has said elected leaders should decide how to end U.S. involvement in Iraq and has repeatedly called upon the Bush administration to set a troop-withdrawal timeline.

She said she will continue that call if elected.

Medicare Part D

Wilson is a strong supporter of the Medicare prescription drug program for seniors, which was passed in 2003 and took full effect last Jan. 1.

Madrid is an ardent opponent of the program.

The program allows Medicare beneficiaries to enroll in private insurance plans that pick up some of the cost of prescriptions. The companies that offer the plans receive federal subsidies.

Wilson has said Medicare D provides drug coverage for thousands of

New Mexicans who didn't have it before.

Madrid has accused Wilson of inflating the number of people helped by the program and contends the program is lining the pockets of pharmaceutical and insurance companies.

Madrid said if elected, she would consider a change to Medicare D that would take insurance companies out of the mix and instead make the government responsible for running the program.

Taxes

Wilson supported President Bush's major income tax proposals in 2001 and 2003, and recently credited them for helping to revive a stagnant U.S. economy. She does not favor repealing any parts of those tax breaks.

She supports eliminating the marriage penalty and estate taxes, and would vote to preserve and make permanent the child tax credit.

Madrid said that, if elected, she would advocate more tax breaks for middle-class Americans— including making the cost of college tuition tax-deductible.

Madrid supports a repeal of portions of the Bush tax cuts as they pertain to breaks for the wealthy.

Madrid also supports eliminating the marriage penalty but does not favor eliminating the child tax credit or the estate tax. She said repealing the estate tax would tack about \$1 trillion onto the national debt over the next decade.

Scandals

Wilson has accused Madrid, the current state attorney general, of ignoring a corruption scandal in the state Treasurer's Office.

A federal prosecution led to a guilty plea from one former treasurer, Michael Montoya, and a single, attempted-extortion conviction for his successor, Robert Vigil.

Madrid said she has never tolerated corruption.

Madrid, meanwhile, has accused Wilson of not doing her job protecting U.S. House pages while serving on the page board from 2001 to 2004.

Wilson has said she didn't know— and couldn't be expected to know— that now-former Republican House colleague Mark Foley of Florida was sending sexually explicit messages to pages until news of the scandal broke last month.

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[Back to story page](#)