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## Wilson-Madrid Race Tight

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

Democrat Patricia Madrid is running a close race against incumbent Rep. Heather Wilson in the midst of an already heavy advertising war in the 1st Congressional District.

A Journal poll of 410 registered District 1 voters found Wilson, a Republican seeking her fifth full term, with the support of 45 percent of respondents. Madrid, the second-term state attorney general, had 42 percent.

Ten percent of the registered voters, who said they are likely to vote in the general election on Nov. 7, were undecided. The rest said they didn't intend to vote for either.

The margin of error for the Aug. 25-31 survey by Research & Polling Inc. is plus or minus 4.8 percentage points.

"It is, absolutely, anybody's race," said longtime state political watcher and University of New Mexico political science professor emeritus F. Chris Garcia. "It has major national implications. It was billed early on as one of the races to watch— and it is living up to its billing.

"When a challenger . . . is within a few percentage points, that is seen as very encouraging to the challenger's camp," Garcia said.

The first Journal poll of the season also found the job-approval ratings for Wilson as a congresswoman and Madrid as attorney general were similar among 1st District voters: 46 percent approved of the job Wilson is doing in Washington while 44 percent approved of Madrid's job performance as the state's top lawyer in Santa Fe.

But Journal pollster Brian Sanderoff, president of Research & Polling Inc., said the approval ratings are "nothing to write home about."

"The rule of thumb is: The incumbent wants to have an approval rating of 50 percent to be confident," Sanderoff said. "In this case, neither candidate has that."

### **Edge for Wilson?**

The Journal poll found Wilson might have an edge over Madrid in getting voters to cross party lines: 17 percent of Democrats favored Wilson, while 8 percent of Republicans supported Madrid.

Both candidates had strong support within their own parties— Wilson

in particular. Wilson was backed by 83 percent of Republicans polled and Madrid had the support of 66 percent of the Democrats.

But registered Democrats outnumber Republicans by nearly 39,000 people in the 1st District— a factor that always makes the 1st District seem competitive.

"Heather Wilson has always enjoyed near-universal support among members of her party," Sanderoff said. But as in her past races, "the only way Heather Wilson can win is if she picks up a sizable portion of the Democratic vote as well."

Madrid fared better than Wilson among Hispanic voters surveyed— 54 percent to 35 percent— in the election matchup question. The numbers were reversed among Anglo voters.

### **National interest**

The big-money duel between Wilson and Madrid is being billed as one of the most-watched U.S. House races in the country this election season as Democrats campaign to win back a majority.

Though Labor Day typically signals the beginning of the political season leading up to the November general election, the pair have already spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on TV attack ads. National political figures, including President Bush and House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi of California, have already made appearances in New Mexico in hopes of having an impact in the race.

Wilson's ad barrage has accused Madrid of doing nothing to stop a corruption scandal in the state treasurer's office; Madrid's ads knock Wilson for not questioning Bush on the war in Iraq.

Sanderoff said he believes the advertising crossfire likely played a role in the less-than-rosy job approval ratings for both candidates.

He said one tactic among incumbent politicians in recent years is to go for the "early political kill" with advertising attacks. But he said the Journal poll numbers show Wilson hasn't accomplished that with the ads raising questions about Madrid's role in investigating government corruption as attorney general.

Wilson, a member of the House Intelligence Committee, has been a longtime backer of the U.S. military involvement in Iraq while Madrid has called for a quick-turnaround exit plan. And Sanderoff said what takes place in Iraq in the coming two months— along with the rise or fall of Bush's approval ratings— could have a big impact on the outcome of the Wilson-Madrid contest.

"The mood of the nation is an important barometer in influencing the outcome of congressional races," Sanderoff said.

"What we're looking at here is more than just Heather Wilson and Patricia Madrid," he said.

### **Job performance**

The job-approval rating for Wilson was largely dependent on respondents' political persuasion: 76 percent of Republicans said she was doing a good job, while only 10 percent of the Republicans disapproved of her work as congresswoman.

Sixty percent of Democrats approved of Madrid's job as state attorney general. But 20 percent of Democrats disapproved of her work performance.

"The fact that one in five Democrats disapprove of Madrid is a concern for Madrid," Sanderoff said.

Garcia said the knotted race likely means that even more money and national attention will soon be pouring into the 1st District.

"There's something in the survey to both encourage— and discourage— both candidates," he said.

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