

New developments in the New Mexico Senate race.

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Republican hopes of winning the Senate in 2012 took a major hit Tuesday when Maine senator Olympia Snowe announced her retirement. The late notice gave Republicans in the state, as well as those in Washington, D.C., little time to recruit a viable candidate and build an organization that might allow them to hold the seat in November. The unexpected retirement takes a nearly certain Republican seat and makes it a likely Democratic one.

Snowe's departure will increase the attention on another Republican woman—a considerably more conservative one—whose race for the Senate could well determine which party holds a majority at the beginning of 2013—Heather Wilson.

The former New Mexico congresswoman was considered a rising star in the Republican party in 2008. A self-described commonsense conservative, her possible ascension that year to the Senate would have made her the first female from that state to serve in the upper chamber of Congress.

She never got the opportunity.

Wilson lost in a tough Republican primary to Representative Steve Pearce, who ran to her right on, well, pretty much everything. It was a primary that seemed designed to test the Buckley Rule: William F. Buckley's admonition that conservatives ought to vote for the most electable conservative candidate in a given race. Wilson had the endorsements of many in the New Mexico Republican establishment, including retiring senator Pete Domenici, and her supporters argued that Pearce was too conservative to be elected statewide in a purplish-blue state. But intensity matters, and Pearce had the enthusiastic support of the growing conservative movement in the state and national backing from the Club for Growth.

In June, Pearce held off a late surge from Wilson to win the primary 51 percent – 49 percent. Five months later he was trounced by Tom Udall, 61-38, a margin even larger than Barack Obama's 57-42 defeat of John McCain in the state.

Wilson is running again this year, trying to replace retiring Democratic senator Jeff Bingaman. But the odds that she will face a serious challenge from the right seem to be diminishing every day. Earlier this month, Lieutenant Governor John Sanchez, who had been endorsed by Senator Rand Paul, dropped out of the race. Wilson's remaining opponent in the Republican primary, businessman Greg Sowards, has been endorsed by former Nevada Senate candidate Sharron Angle and has indicated some willingness to spend his own money to win.

Sowards speaks the language of the Tea Party, with regular campaign references to the Constitution, the Framers, the overreach of the federal government, and the corruption of runaway spending.

"The free market is the only way. Anything less destroys the American Dream and turns our world into a bureaucratic nightmare," he said in one recent speech. "People of New Mexico are tired of being part of

Washington's spending problem and are ready for leadership that focuses on creating an environment that encourages new businesses to start and grow while creating jobs for our children," he wrote in an op-ed. A TV ad for his candidacy declares: "Sowards will get government off our back and out of our lives." And a posting on his campaign website claims that "stimulus spending" shares "socialism's central tenant [sic]: with the right tools for gathering information and the right people to interpret this data, utopian paradise is attainable with the right plan."

They're the kind of arguments that helped Republicans make gains in congressional elections two years ago. But Sowards may not be the best man to make them.

The vast majority of his income comes from the government. He lists just two sources of income on the personal financial disclosure form he filed with the U.S. Senate to run for office: New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department and New Mexico Child Care Assistance. The taxpayer money goes to Kids' Kountry, a childcare business that he runs with his wife – a total of some \$1.6 million since 1998.

More problematic: **Sowards pushed New Mexico governor Bill Richardson to use stimulus funds – what his campaign website calls an example of "Obama's socialism" – to keep that money coming.** And he did so in the fall of 2010, at precisely the time Republicans around the country were betting their campaigns on arguments against the stimulus and other Obama economic policies.

At that time, New Mexico, like most other states, was in the middle of a pitched debate about the size of state government and politicians from both parties were looking at budgets to cut. Among the targets: funding for early childhood development programs, administered by New Mexico but which often combine state and federal money. By late September, Richardson was poised to cut funding for childcare by some 10 percent – too much for Sowards and his wife, Karen.

On September 30, they wrote to parents with children who attend their five schools in around Las Cruces. "Your child care has not been terminated. Instead Gov. Richardson has given it back and cut the funding for childcare centers by 9%. This is still a serious problem that affects everyone." The letter explained the likely consequences: "The Governor has shifted this budget shortfall from families to Child Care Providers! The problem STILL REMAINS! This 9% cut to our child care center will mean that we get paid less for the quality services we provide for your children."

The Sowards's urged parents to formally protest the cuts. They closed Kids' Kountry schools on October 7 so that parents could join a protest sponsored by the Southern New Mexico Early Childhood Alliance at Apodaca Park. The letter told parents "to talk to your employer so he or she can understand the importance in this day" – that is, why they would be absent from work that day. The letter also instructed parents to contact Richardson. "We need everyone to call the Governor's Office and tell him to use all available stimulus money to fund childcare assistance 505-476-2200."

One month later, on November 2, the secretary of Children, Youth and Families Department, Bill Dunbar, wrote to the Sowards demanding that they reimburse the state of New Mexico for the payments the state made for childcare provided on October 7 – the day the Sowards closed Kids' Kountry to allow teachers and parents to join the rally for more funding. "The state has paid you for services on October 7, 2010, when in fact, you rendered no services and were unavailable to render services on that day."

Karen Sowards wrote back with two different explanations. First, she argued, Kids' Kountry remained open on Columbus Day – a federal holiday – and thus a day on which the centers were scheduled to have been closed. So there was no "lost" day. Then she tried something of a long-shot argument: participating in the rally was consistent with the mission of Kids' Kountry. "Teachers and parents attended the Early Childhood Awareness Day to advocate on behalf of children," she explained, noting that "professionalism" is emphasized in training courses teachers are required to take. "This is a great example of professionalism, and because of that Kids' Kountry teachers were paid for this day of their

work on behalf of children and families across the state of NM.”

Sowards acknowledges that there is some tension between his arguments as a candidate and his business practices. “Absolutely. I think the subsidy should be limited. When you subsidize things you get more of it; when you tax it, you get less.” But he says the state’s increasing involvement in childcare left him little choice. “When you’re in an industry subsidized by the government, if you’re not involved you put yourself at a great disadvantage.”

As a practical matter, he’s right. **But it’s hard to run as an eager budget cutter if you’ve made a living on government funding and pushed for money from the stimulus.** But Sowards says he wasn’t involved in the request for stimulus funding and that his wife was just using a letter that had been drafted by the Southwest Childcare Association. Still, if Sowards had hopes of becoming the Ron Johnson of this cycle, or even the Sharron Angle, it’s hard to believe conservatives won’t be concerned by these inconsistencies.

Still, given the unlikely upsets of recent cycles – most especially the Christine O’Donnell primary victory in Delaware in 2010 – Wilson’s campaign is looking at what’s directly in front of them. “Heather has been campaigning for 11 months, across every single county in New Mexico,” says Chris Sanchez, Wilson’s communications director. “We feel good about where we are today, but are taking absolutely nothing for granted. We are going to campaign hard for every vote in this primary, and won’t stop until we’ve won.”

If Wilson prevails she will likely face Representative Martin Heinrich, a left-leaning Democrat who won an election to replace her as the representative from New Mexico’s First Congressional District when she ran for the Senate. Heinrich must first dispatch with Hector Balderas in a Democratic primary. Heinrich is heavily favored.

Wilson says the contest will provide voters with a stark contrast – on questions about the size and scope of government and on national security. “We have two very different visions about what we need to do to get our country back on track,” she says. “What is the role of government in American life? There is no question that runaway federal spending is threatening our free market economy and our way of life.”

Wilson, who has a doctorate in international relations from Oxford University and worked on the National Security Council staff of George H.W. Bush, says she’s deeply concerned about cuts to the defense budget and, in particular, proposed cuts to our nuclear stockpile in the Obama administration’s latest budget. “They’re not thinking about strategy at all,” she says. “Nuclear weapons have helped keep the peace for sixty years. Thirty-two countries rely on our capabilities and this changes that. The President has apparently gone back on his commitment to modernize our nuclear stockpile. If you’re going to low numbers, you really have to make sure the ones you have actually work.”

Many political handicappers had initially categorized the New Mexico race as one that favors Democrats. And polling from as recently as December gives Democrats an advantage. A PPP poll taken that month showed Heinrich with a 47-40 lead over Wilson. But an increasing number of race-watchers believe the contest is winnable for the GOP. A Rasmussen poll taken in mid-February found that the race is effectively a dead heat – with Heinrich leading Wilson 45-43, well within the poll’s margin of error. The presidential race will also be a factor, with Obama viewed more favorably than not in recent polling.

Still, the New Mexico race looks like a competitive one, something that might give Republicans some solace with the odds of a Senate takeover seeming to diminish by the day.

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Is Greg Sowards a conservative?

I thought so until I read this article about how he makes his money.

I was shocked to learn that Greg begged BILL RICHARDSON to give him OUR money to benefit his business!!!

This is conservative?????

I don't think so. Just like this article says:

"It's hard to run as an eager budget cutter if you've made a living on government funding and pushed for money from the stimulus".

**WE the PEOPLE
are
TAXED ENOUGH ALREADY!**
