Greens Shake-Up New Mexico

By Mark Oswald

Shortly before midnight May 13, a top New Mexico labor official took a call on his cellular telephone at Santa Fe's huge El Dorado Hotel, where Democrats had gathered for what they hoped would be a celebration of state Corporation Commissioner Eric Serna's victory in a special congressional election. A grimace came over the labor leader's face. He clicked off the phone and said, "We've lost it." He had just learned the stunning news—the final election totals showed Serna had lost to Republican Bill Redmond, an evangelical minister from Los Alamos, in a congressional district that had been in Democratic hands since it was first created in 1982. Redmond's victory was one of the biggest political upsets in New Mexico history, and Democrats are still trying to figure out how it happened.

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Serna, a native of Rio Arriba County north of Santa Fe and a longtime figure on the state political scene, outspent Redmond two to one. Voter registration in the sprawling district is about 60% Democratic. And Redmond had attracted little attention in his first try for Congress in 1996, winning only about 30% of the vote compared to 67% for longtime Democratic incumbent Bill Richardson. But when Richardson resigned from Congress in early 1997 to accept a presidential appointment as ambassador to the United Nations, Redmond got a second chance. This time he won by a 3,000 vote margin out of about 100,000 votes cast.

Redmond, a Chicago native, received 43% of the vote compared to 40% for Serna. But it's what happened to the other 17% of the vote that tells the tale of this election. Those ballots were cast for Carol Miller, a public health consultant and former Democrat who was the nominee of New Mexico's Green Party. Miller's surprisingly strong showing—particularly in Santa Fe County, the district's most populous and a traditional Democratic stronghold—dashed Serna's chances of succeeding Richardson.

A Democratic Stronghold Falls to the GOP

Pundits looking for evidence of national or regional political trends in Redmond's victory won't find much in the May 13 election, or typically anywhere in New Mexico. As former New Mexico governor and author Lew Wallace once said, "Everything proven by experience fails in New Mexico." For example, this election did not swing on any big national issues, although Serna and Redmond were split on most of those—abortion, gun control, a balanced-budget amendment, environmental controls—along standard left-right lines.

There's one theory that Serna, as a native Hispanic, ran up against changing demographics in the 3rd District—a huge swath of the West that includes Navajo country and more than 20 other Indian tribes and pueblos, the historic Hispanic plazas of the Rio Grande Valley and the more Anglo "Little Texas" on the border with the Lone Star State. Recent growth of mostly Anglo and more conservative towns like Farmington in the northwest, Clovis on the east, and perhaps most significantly, the booming high-tech Albuquerque suburb of Rio Rancho in the district's southern zone has made the district less Hispanic and less likely to vote Democratic.

But in the end, the biggest issue of the 1997 congressional race was simply the particular Democrat nominated to succeed Richardson—Serna, who came to the campaign with a background of ethical controversies that were easy targets for Redmond's advertising team. It also can be argued that the real race was not between Redmond and Serna.

New Mexico's 3rd Congressional District Special Election Results

Bill Redman (R)	43%
Eric Serna (D)	40
Carol Miller (G)	17

The Greens vs. the Democrats

The crucial contest really was between Serna and Miller, as they fought for the hearts and minds of progressives among the 3rd District's Democratic voting majority. Could Serna keep Miller from peeling away enough votes to give the election to Redmond?

It may surprise outsiders that a Green Party candidate could be such a serious factor in a major election. But the New Mexico Greens, with just a small core of dedicated members

mostly in Albuquerque, Santa Fe and Taos, previously had shown they could deftly exploit the state Democratic Party's weaknesses. In 1994, the Greens shook the Democratic establishment when Roberto Mondragon, a popular two-term Democratic lieutenant governor in the 1970s and 1980s, switched to the Green Party and ran for governor. He drew 10% of the vote and in the view of most political experts helped Republican Gary Johnson defeat three-term Democrat Bruce King, a moderate. The Greens also have elected two municipal officials in non-partisan elections in liberal Santa Fe. The Greens saw another chance to gain ground when it became clear that Serna would be the Democratic nominee in the May special election.

Charges and Countercharges

Serna had strong Democratic credentials going into the congressional race. He'd won four statewide elections to the Corporation Commission, a second-tier regulatory body overseeing telephone service, insurance and the transportation and trucking industries. Serna also had been active in Jesse Jackson's presidential campaigns and was a tireless campaigner for other Democratic candidates. But Serna also had what GOP officials gleefully called "baggage." This consisted of a number of ethical controversies that included accusations that he had pressured commission staff members to buy from his family's jewelry store; his longtime acceptance of campaign contributions from businesses regulated by the commission (legal under state law); and charges that he had used his state car, state phones or employees to campaign.

Redmond, in ads and mailings, used this against Serna, calling him a corrupt politician. The Republicans also hammered repeatedly at what had been a forgotten incident from the 1980s when Serna flew with a racing commissioner on a state plane to the race track at Ruidoso Downs. Redmond called it a taxpayer-financed "gambling trip;" Serna said it had been all business and that the state had been reimbursed. Serna also was damaged when other Democrats complained about the process used to choose Serna as the nominee for the special election. Only about 80 party leaders got to vote, and the fact that Serna had an overwhelming majority wrapped up well before the nominating convention further enhanced his image as a political insider.

Meanwhile, with Miller in the race, Democrats turned off by Serna now had a place to go and avoid voting for the conservative Redmond. Miller previously had managed only a third-place showing in a Democratic state senate primary. But in the high-profile setting of a stand-alone congressional contest and with little money (she spent $37,000, compared to Serna's $657,000 and Redmond's $323,000), she proved to be a tireless campaigner whose articulate answers more often than not showed up her competitors. Miller staked out a position as the clean and true progressive in the race, saying she was right on issues like national health care and the environment long before Serna.

Serna's campaign argued long and hard that a vote for Miller was only a vote to elect a right-wing Republican to Congress. Miller's message: Vote for the best candidate. Just before the election, even Redmond jumped into this internecine warfare on the left. His campaign mailed fliers to every Democratic household in the Rio Grande valley that said nothing about Redmond but which reprinted two articles from a local monthly—one a harshly critical chronology of Serna's ethical controversies and the other a glowing review of Miller.

Democrats howled in protest over the Republicans in effect campaigning for Miller. But Redmond's staff has been unrepentant, writing recently in political trade journals that these fliers were "crucial" to converting Democrats into Miller voters. Miller's campaign also received a boost in the final days when both Albuquerque daily newspapers—including the more-or-less conservative *Albuquerque Journal*—endorsed her. In the end, Miller got more than enough votes to tip the scales in Redmond's favor. She almost won Santa Fe County—where Serna had to do much better to win the election—by taking 34% of the vote, compared to Serna's 39%.

Defeated Democrats Pick Up the Pieces

Since the election, Democrats have been scrambling to pick up the pieces. And among party regulars, there has been a lot of criticism of Serna's campaign. Whereas Richardson won eight elections by running as a moderate, staking out a center-right position on gun control and not talking much about abortion, Serna made liberal stands on those divisive issues a big part of his message. In fact, in a move that puzzled many, Serna's first radio ads were about abortion, attacking the anti-choice Redmond as "a radical right-wing preacher." Political insiders wondered about the wisdom of the front-runner in the race being the first to go negative, especially when Serna had yet to define himself in positive terms by discussing his record or deep roots as a Hispanic native son.

Some Democrats, battered by Serna's defeat and Miller's strong showing, say it's time to make peace with the Greens and try to run "fusion" candidates representing both parties. But reaching such an accord could be difficult. There is simmering resentment among some Hispanic Democrats in northern New Mexico that Greens and Anglo newcomers were anti-Hispanic when they failed to support Serna and voted for Miller. That's the kind of split among his opponents that can only help Redmond again when he runs for re-election in 1998.

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