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Domenici - 11/2-4/90

For two days in November 1990, I observed Domenici's third reelection campaign in New Mexico. It was non-competitive and barely visible. Its moments of maximum concern and activity occurred much earlier, in a successful effort to discourage his strongest potential opponent--Democratic Congressman Bill Richardson--from challenging. Domenici hired a part-time professional organizer in August 1988 and began raising money in January 1989. In the first six months he raised \$750,000. From January to June he ''ran against Bill Richardson'', who decided, after some polling of his own, to stay where he was. The man who did challenge Domenici was a state senator severely lacking in accomplishment, money, visibility, seriousness and strategy.

The atmosphere of the campaign, locally as well as nationally, was one of extreme voter concern about the future direction of the country, disenchantment with the Congress and discontent with incumbent politicians. Much of that pessimism and anger had been generated by the lengthy, frustrating, divisive and much criticized season of budget-making, in which Domenici was a prominent negotiator and an eventual supporter. It was, he said, ''the most frustrating six months of my eighteen years in the Senate.''

Between June and late October 1990--largely due to the widely deplored ''budget fiasco''--the number of New Mexicans believing that ''the country was on the wrong track'' had jumped from 40% to 66%. Seventy-one percent of them listed the budget (40%), the economy (23%) or taxes (8%) as the country's number one problem. The ratio of their disapproval to approval

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of Congress stood at an all time low, 75% to 18%. But these opinions had no effect on their attitude toward Domenici.

At the very same time--late October--the ratio of favorable to unfavorable voter opinions of Domenici stood at a remarkable 86% to 6%. His name recognition stood at 99%. Voters we asked to agree or disagree with the statement "'Pete Domenici has been in Washington longer than any other New Mexico politician. He has been there so long that he is now more a part of the problem with Washington than the solution, 21%." Seventy-one percent disagreed, and 21% agreed. When asked to approve or disapprove of "'the job Pete Domenici is doing to solve the budget crisis,'" 64% approved and 18% disapproved. These figures presaged a strong vote of confidence in the budget committee's top Republican.

Domenici's soft, positive television ads never mentioned his budget work or pictured him in Washington. With their slogan "'He Stands for New Mexico,'" they emphasized his contributions to the state--saving 2000 jobs for potash miners, bringing 3 Canadian polar bears to the Albuquerque Zoo, sponsoring math-science training programs for teachers, protecting high-tech industries against unfair Japanese competition.

Editorial endorsements praised him for his blend of local and national service. Calling him "'a towering political figure in New Mexico and nationally prominent to boot,'" the Albuquerque Tribune said "'he is powerful and he has used his power to benefit the state.'" "'He's carried New Mexico to heights of influence in the Senate and the nation seldom seen by a small...state'" echoed the Roswell Daily Record. "'(And) through it all, he's never forgotten New Mexico, its needs and priorities.'" The Albuquerque Journal praised him as "'an expert and a power on matters of federal budget policy (who) keeps close tabs on the

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state's needs and priorities (while) concerning himself with the big problems that face the nation.'" And they added that "'Domenici is New Mexico...He is at ease rubbing shoulders with his friends from all walks of life in New Mexico.'" "'Not since the days of Senator Clinton P. Anderson has a New Mexican been so esteemed both in his home state and on the national scene'" wrote the Santa Fe New Mexican. Nationally, "'he is an acknowledged expert on the intricacies of the federal budget and its relationship to the national economy.'" "'(Locally) a secret of his success is that he is low key...and keeps in touch with New Mexico through many visits and advisers.'" "'He is at ease rubbing shoulders with his friends from all walks of life in New Mexico.'" Pride and respect for his national stature and accomplishments were complemented by satisfaction and affection with his local attachments.

On November 6th Domenici was reelected by another record breaking margin of 73% to 26%. It was a reaffirmation of his remarkably high standing in New Mexico. One week later, he was elected to the position of Chairman of the Republican Senate Policy Committee, the third highest position his Republican colleagues can bestow. The victories signified his continued success at both campaigning and governing. Together, they carried him to a new stage in his political career.