



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on June 2, 2010

Immigration Issues Fuel New Mexico Gov. Race

A get tough policy to stem illegal immigration will be a key issue in the governor's race in New Mexico, where Dona Ana County District Attorney Susana Martinez will square off against Lieutenant Governor Diane Denish in the race to succeed two-term Democratic Governor Bill Richardson.

Martinez, a conservative Hispanic woman who favors strict enforcement against illegal immigration, won the Republican primary yesterday, handily defeating her nearest rival, former state party chairman Allen Weh in a five-way race. Denish, the only candidate on the Democratic ballot, will oppose Martinez in the November election, virtually assuring that New Mexico will have its first female governor next year.



Martinez, who is backed by former Alaska governor and Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, has called for a repeal of a law signed by Richardson that enables undocumented workers to obtain drivers' licenses. She looks favorably on laws like the one recently adopted in Arizona that gives local law enforcement a role in apprehending people who are in the country illegally.

"Susana Martinez supports the right of any state to ensure the security of its citizens, and today, that means dealing directly with immigration and border concerns," according to her campaign manager, Adam Deguire. Her web site highlights her experience as a prosecutor in dealing with border-related crime.

"While other candidates talk about border security, Susana Martinez is the only one with actual experience taking on the issue," it says, claiming her district attorney's office prosecuted more than 600 cases related to border security each year, including cases against Mexico's drug cartels.

While Denish opposes repeal of the driver's license law, she has called for changes to it, including tightening restrictions to prevent fraud. She said she does not support giving driver's licenses to illegal immigrants.

"Based on evidence that suggests the law has not worked as intended, the law needs to change," Denish said in a written statement. "As governor, I would approach the law with a thoughtful discussion that focuses on fact — not ideology, fear, and divisive rhetoric."

"After the Richardson/Denish administration doled out thousands of driver's licenses to illegal immigrants, now gubernatorial candidate Diane Denish is in favor of making 'changes,' " Martinez campaign manager Adam Deguire said in a written statement to FoxNews.com. "Common sense dictated that this law wasn't smart from the very beginning, yet even now, Denish is against repealing it," he said.



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The Denish campaign has tried to put some distance between the lieutenant governor and Richardson, who is prevented by term limits from seeking a third term. Campaign spokesman Chris Cervini told FoxNews.com that the two Democrats have different positions on a number of issues, despite Martinez's efforts to "corral them together every chance she gets."

Responding in April to a question about Arizona's controversial new law, Denish told NMPolitics.net it is clear that "our immigration laws are broken and that we must do more to secure our borders, but racial profiling is wrong — plain and simple — and the new Arizona law goes too far." The Arizona law requires police during lawful stops to inquire about immigration status when there is "reasonable suspicion" of illegal entry. The law specifically forbids racial profiling, but critics have claimed the profiling will inevitably result when the law is implemented.

"Here in New Mexico, we value our diversity," Denish said. "It's ingrained in our culture and it strengthens us as a people. While I do believe we must secure our borders and pass a comprehensive national immigration reform bill, we cannot give government a free pass to racially profile and infringe upon the rights of law-abiding citizens. We're better than that here in New Mexico."

Comprehensive immigration reform was also an issue in the Republican primary campaign, as Martinez slammed Weh for having supported former President George W. Bush's proposal for a guest worker program and a "path to citizenship" that would allow people now in the country illegally to become citizens if they meet certain conditions, including paying a fine and learning English. The Obama administration has called for similar legislation and proposals for immigration reform are now before Congress.

In the bitter primary battle, Martinez accused Weh of backing amnesty for illegal immigrants, while Weh ran ads claiming her district attorney's office had misspent funds. GOP state chairman Harvey Yates backed Martinez, labeling the Weh ads "dishonest" and "inappropriate." A state financial agency had approved all spending and travel reimbursements, he said.

On Tuesday night, Weh, conceded just two hours after polls closed, as early returns showed him running a distant second in the primary to Martinez, who held a 48 to 31 percent lead by the time half the precincts had reported.

Photo: Susana Martinez, flanked by her husband Undersheriff Chuck Franco (right) and stepson Carlo Franco (left), addresses a crowd in Las Cruces, New Mexico, on June 1: AP Images



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