

THE HOT SEAT

Senate Race Follows National Script

By David M. Herszenhorn

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DOVER, N.H. — Former Gov. Jeanne Shaheen was on stage with Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton at a half-filled community center gymnasium, basking in the cheers of her supporters as she offered up, yet again, the generic message of change that has served Democrats so well this year — and has put Republican Senate candidates on the defensive in 11 states across the country.

“Everywhere I go, people are struggling,” Mrs. Shaheen, the Democratic candidate for Senate, said on Tuesday. “Health care and the cost of college are increasingly unaffordable. Wages are stagnant. Home values are dropping. Energy costs are still at record highs, and our debt and our deficit are soaring. But we don’t have to stand for it. We can tackle these challenges head on, and we can make a difference.”

Mrs. Shaheen, who is in a bitter rematch with Senator John E. Sununu, one of the most vulnerable Republican incumbents in the country, did not offer much in the way of specifics. For weeks, polls have shown no need for her to do so, and with just days left in the race, she was not taking any risks. All year, her main theme has been to tie Mr. Sununu to President Bush, and it seems to be working.

“I think she looked at the numbers, the same numbers that we were all looking at, and decided that she never, ever, had to go out on a limb this year,” said Dante J. Scala, an associate professor of political science at the University of New Hampshire. “All she had to do this year was present herself as a plausible, suitable alternative to the incumbent.”

“She has run a very low-risk campaign,” Professor Scala added.

But in a state that prides itself on spirited political discourse, lack of specificity can be its own risk. “Shaheen’s campaign has been a vapid series of Democratic sound bites without new ideas or systematic thinking about how the economy, war, health care, the deficit and energy link to one another,” The Portsmouth Herald wrote, endorsing Mr. Sununu on Thursday.

Such endorsements are likely to have minimal impact in this increasingly Democratic state, where recent polls show Senator Barack Obama pulling far ahead in the presidential race.

Mrs. Shaheen’s risk-averse approach to the issues helps explain why a cartoon posted on the politickerNH.com Web site ridicules Mrs. Shaheen as the driver of a car stopped at a green light, refusing to move without knowing what the polls say.

Her campaign is taking every step to prevent slip-ups. When a staff member saw Mrs. Shaheen’s husband, William Shaheen, talking to a reporter after the rally in Dover, the Shaheens’ youngest daughter, Molly, 22, was sent running over. “Daddy,” she said, pulling him away, “I need to speak to you really badly.”



Former Gov. Jeanne Shaheen, Democrat of New Hampshire, who is in a bitter rematch for a seat in the Senate, was joined at a rally this week by Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York.
Jim Cole/Associated Press

The New Hampshire race is emblematic of Senate contests around the nation that have Democrats within reach of the 60-seat majority needed to break filibusters. And in many ways, Mrs. Shaheen, 61, is the archetypal candidate, a seasoned politician with wide name recognition and great fund-raising prowess.

Democratic Senate contenders this year include three former governors (in New Hampshire, Mississippi and Virginia), two well-known representatives (in New Mexico

and Colorado), and a popular mayor (Mark Begich of Anchorage, in Alaska). Polls show Democrats ahead in all of these states except Mississippi.

On the issues, Mrs. Shaheen has hewed closely to the national Democratic agenda. She supports wider domestic oil drilling and more nuclear power but as part of an energy policy focused primarily on renewable sources. She generally supports Mr. Obama's health care plan, and has called for swift redeployment of troops from Iraq. She originally supported Mr. Bush's tax cuts but now favors repealing them.

Some political analysts say it is odd to see Mrs. Shaheen so carefully in line with her party, given that she was elected three times as governor and ran for Senate in 2002 as a centrist, much more in the mold of Bill Clinton than Mr. Obama. If elected, her votes might well reflect those moderate tendencies rather than the more left-leaning politics of the voters who have increased the ranks of New Hampshire's Democrats in recent years.

"The issue for New Hampshire's quirky, flinty voters, is fundamentally who is Jeanne Shaheen?" said James W. Pindell, the managing editor of politickerNH.com. "For many voters, the idea that you are voting for a Democratic agenda is good enough."

Perhaps no issue underscores Mrs. Shaheen's cautious approach more than her position on the \$700 billion financial bailout. She waited until after the package was approved by Congress to announce that she would have opposed it because it lacked sufficient taxpayer protections. Mr. Sununu voted for it.

Mrs. Shaheen's campaign said her opposition to the bailout showed a willingness to break with the Democratic leadership. "She has never shied from disagreeing with her party," said Kate Bedingfield, a spokeswoman.

Still, in a televised debate on Thursday night, Mrs. Shaheen struggled with a question from Mr. Sununu challenging her over independence: "Jeanne, can you give an example of a national issue where you opposed the leadership of your party?" Mrs. Shaheen stumbled a bit as she described her opposition to efforts by President Clinton to ban road construction in forests and limit logging, a view that aligned her with the timber industry and put her at odds with environmental groups.

In a previous debate, Mrs. Shaheen stumbled on a similar question, submitted by

Skipper W. Morris, an independent voter from Nashua who said he favored centrist politicians. “Help me decide which of you will be more independent,” Mr. Morris said.



Senator John E. Sununu is trying to hold on to his seat.

Jim Cole/Associated Press

Mrs. Shaheen restated her main talking points, and in an interview later, Mr. Morris said she had lost his vote. “She basically just spouted the party line,” he said.

Throughout Thursday’s debate, Mr. Sununu accused Mrs. Shaheen of taking politically expedient positions, especially in response to a question about one of his campaign’s advertisements, which quoted her in 2002 expressing support for the Iraq war and Mr. Bush’s tax cuts.

“This isn’t an ad about whether you supported Iraq,” he said. “This is an ad about integrity, about taking one position when it’s politically convenient because you think it’s popular and then changing your position later on.”

But if Mrs. Shaheen can seem less comfortable in front of an audience, Mr. Sununu, 44, often comes across as abrasive. He scolded a moderator for not giving him enough time to answer. When questions about negative advertising began with a clip of one of his opponent’s advertisements, he sniped, “I certainly hope you are charging Jeanne Shaheen for the air time.”

And while Mr. Sununu, an engineer educated at M.I.T., often sounds as if he is lecturing, Mrs. Shaheen is a disciplined campaigner — though stilted and awkward at times — who is rarely ruffled and methodically drives home her points.

She calmly explained why she had changed her views on the Iraq war, a sentiment

shared by many voters in New Hampshire, where intense antiwar sentiment led to a Democratic sweep in 2006. And she quickly returned to tying Mr. Sununu to Mr. Bush.

“Unfortunately, what we have seen from John Sununu is that he has continued to support George Bush’s position on the war in Iraq, down the line with every vote, with every appropriation,” she said.

And when Mr. Sununu demanded to know why 15 newspapers that endorsed her in 2002 were now supporting him, Mrs. Shaheen shot him a rare sly smile.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I hope they help you in the same way they helped me in 2002.”

HOT SEAT: Articles in this series examine the battle for a New Hampshire Senate seat.

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