

Richardson Is Running on a Résumé Both Local and National

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SANTA FE, N.M. — When a governor runs for president, local issues can suddenly loom large. Take cockfighting. Gov. [Bill Richardson](#) has come out against it after ignoring the question for years.

Concerned that [New Mexico](#) suffers for being the sole state other than Louisiana to permit wagering contests pitting weaponed birds in fights to the death, Mr. Richardson has taken sides in the emotional debate, speaking out for a ban, to be debated on Saturday in the Legislature.

“I believe the people of the state want to abolish it,” the governor, a Democrat, said in his art-bedecked office. “It’s a bad image nationally. I’m putting my weight on it. It’s going to make it pass, and it’s the right thing to do.”

With portfolios as a congressman, global troubleshooter and energy czar, Mr. Richardson, 59, may rightly claim the broadest résumé of the declared presidential candidates.

He served seven terms in the House until joining the Clinton administration as ambassador to the [United Nations](#) and then energy secretary before being elected governor in 2002.

But as he makes his case for the [Democratic nomination](#), he is likely to be judged in large measure by his four years as governor, a record that has won him friends and foes.

He acknowledged being far back in the polls and unlikely to match leading rivals’ fundraising.

“I’m not going to be competitive in that area with the top-tier candidates,” Mr. Richardson said. “But I’m going to have enough to win.”

He said he would wage “an old-fashioned grass-roots campaign” based on his résumé.

“Who’s the best person to get us out of Iraq?” he asked. “Who’s the best person to restore America’s international standing? The best person to create jobs? I believe I have the experience. I’ve done all these things everyone’s talked about.”

Hispanic — his mother was born in Mexico — in one of only three states where Anglos are no longer a majority (California and Texas are the others), Mr. Richardson won re-election as governor in November with a record 69 percent of the vote.

An imposing, exuberant figure with a relish for attention, he enjoys near-celebrity status in New Mexico, where his comings and goings — like being driven around in a speeding S.U.V. and holding court at a popular capital watering hole — routinely dominate the news.

Under Mr. Richardson, New Mexico, long ranked near the bottom of almost every social index, has made advances. With his pressing for higher wages for educators, teachers’ salaries have moved from 46th in the nation in 2000 to 39th in 2006, the highest since the mid-’80s, the [National Education Association](#) says.

Since Mr. Richardson took office, unemployment is down, to 3.8 percent from 5.8 percent, according to the federal Labor Department. New Mexico is 10th in economic growth, according to a report by the Federal Funds Information Service for States, affiliated with the [National Governors Association](#) and the National Conference of State Legislators.

Mr. Richardson has also pushed hard to make New Mexico, with its dust-swept mesas and high-desert peaks, a choice location for Hollywood. According to the New Mexico Film Office, more than 60 movies and television programs have been shot here since he became governor.

And he positioned New Mexico for the private space age by carving a spaceport out of the desert alongside the White Sands Missile Range.

He persuaded Mexican authorities to bulldoze a human-smuggling base across from Columbus and declared the first governor’s state of emergency on the border, freeing \$1 million a year for extra patrols. But the state is also broadly tolerant of immigrants, issuing driver’s licenses without regard to legal residency.

“Richardson has positioned himself as hard to cubbyhole,” Brian Sanderoff, a leading pollster, said. “The minute you think he’s liberal, he does something conservative.”

Critics say Mr. Richardson can be vindictive, penalizing opponents by holding up their projects or grants.

“He rules the roost,” Lonna Atkeson, a professor of political science at the [University of New Mexico](#), said. “He takes things away when people are not so nice.”

Told that some people called his politics rough, Mr. Richardson blurted, “Who’s saying that?”

Then he said: “No, no. Look, I’m aggressive. I get things done. I believe I’m a good manager.”

The governor has also been lucky. State coffers are overflowing, with much of the revenue generated by oil and gas resources. His proposed budget calls for \$123 million in tax cuts, a 9 percent increase in spending for primary and secondary schools and a 7.4 percent increase in teachers’ salaries.

But national studies show New Mexico continuing to lag in categories where the state has historically underachieved, although some of the figures predate Mr. Richardson’s efforts.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation ranked the state 48th in its 2003-4 [Kids Count](#) index of problem indicators. The foundation said more than a quarter of New Mexico children lived in poverty, among the highest rates in the nation.

A [Census Bureau](#) study shows that from 2003 to 2005, an average of 21 percent of New Mexicans went without health insurance. Just Texas had a greater average rate in that period.

“It’s a failure of a systematic way of looking at the problem,” said Kay Monaco, former executive director of [New Mexico Voices for Children](#), an advocacy group.

Although not laid at Mr. Richardson’s door, corruption scandals have also tarnished the state — “pay to play,” in the words of critics. Some of Mr. Richardson’s embarrassing appointees stepped down, including a former state police officer named to a magistrate judgeship who resigned after being caught ordering the release of a friend jailed on a drunken-driving charge.

“One bad judge out of 56,” Mr. Richardson said, acknowledging “our vetting procedures are not the most extensive.”

His ethics package, pending before the Legislature, includes limits on campaign contributions.

Mr. Richardson's physicality and roughhousing have also drawn rebukes. In his autobiography from 2005, "Between Worlds," Mr. Richardson recalled negotiating with [Saddam Hussein](#) in 1995 and, in a gesture of good will, touching President Hussein's arm.

"Saddam started," he recalled, "and along the wall eight hands suddenly touched sidearms."

In late 2005, Lt. Gov. Diane Denish told The Albuquerque Journal that Mr. Richardson "pokes me" when they sit together, calling that more annoying and likely to be misconstrued than improper.

"He pinches my neck," Ms. Denish said. "He touches my hip, my thigh, sort of the side of my leg."

The governor waved that off, telling The Journal: "I tease Diane. I touch guys. It's my way of lessening tension."

In the interview, Mr. Richardson ridiculed blogs' suggesting he acted improperly around women.

"Rumors are always in a politician's life by your opposition," he said. "I've run seven times for Congress. I've been vetted by the [F.B.I.](#) for cabinet posts. I've been confirmed by the Senate. I've run two statewide races. Top security clearance. Kerry vetted me for vice president. Was clean."

He said that he welcomed scrutiny and that he had told his wife of 33 years, Barbara: "You ought to expect this. She said: 'I know. I'm ready for it.'"

Locally, no issue in recent years seems as volatile as cockfighting. State Senator Mary Jane Garcia, a Democrat who is sponsoring the bill, has tried to pass similar bills for nearly 20 years. But Ms. Garcia could never muster enough votes, largely because lawmakers were reluctant to provoke constituents, many of whom say the sport is rooted in the state's Hispanic culture.

But this time is different. Mr. Richardson is running for president.

“I asked him, ‘Are you serious?’ ” Ms. Garcia recalled. “And he told me that he was ready to help, that it was the right thing to do, that it was the right thing for New Mexico.”