

THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Kelli Ward may have missed her shot in the GOP primary for Senate. Here's why

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On Oct. 24, Kelli Ward acted like she was on top of the world.

Incumbent U.S. Sen. Jeff Flake abandoned his re-election campaign that day, 10 months ahead of Arizona's Aug. 28 Republican primary, leaving Ward, a firebrand conservative and former state senator from Lake Havasu City, as the only contender in the GOP race.

With Flake in Washington dealing with the fallout from his decision, Ward struck a triumphant tone with Arizona media.

"I do think that the voters of Arizona are the ones who are celebrating today," she said at the time. "They have been looking for someone to support the president and his agenda."

At that moment, Ward had the opportunity to close the deal with GOP voters and donors and box out any potential Republican rivals interested in the seat.

However, Ward failed to create that sense of inevitability and has struggled to regain her footing.

U.S. Rep. Martha McSally, a Tucson-area congresswoman, quickly made it clear she intended to join the race, playing up her background as an Air Force combat pilot and suddenly embracing President Donald Trump.

Former Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, a luminary among the far-right conservatives Ward considers her base, also got in.

Ward has been unable to break out of the pack. She stumbled on issues like gun rights and gun control and, while her new GOP opponents were staking their claims of loyalty to Trump, Ward's ties to even more fringe conservatives bubbled up.

Republic reporter Yvonne Wingett Sanchez asks former state lawmaker Kelli Ward about U.S. Sen. Jeff Flake's announcement he won't run again, President Donald Trump, and what Arizona voters want next.

At the same time, Ward failed to consolidate support among high-rolling donors who could fund a sustained media presence.

"If she had taken the window of time when Jeff Flake dropped out to really raise a lot of money and get national supporters, that might have been a great moment for her to consolidate support during the primary," said GOP consultant Chad Heywood, a McSally supporter.

"But she didn't really own that moment."

Ward's campaign bristles at any suggestion she is lagging in the race. The campaign points to an April poll that had her winning the race by 9 percentage points and sees her as the choice of conservatives with the experience of having run statewide before.

"We feel like we are in a pole position to win this race," said Ward strategist Eric Beach. "We are going to start to pivot to more of a general election message because we believe this will be a great contrast campaign between Kelli Ward and (front-running Democratic candidate) Kyrsten Sinema."

Still, her campaign tried to privately persuade Arpaio to quit, a move that signals Ward may not control her political destiny. And, a Ward staffer has pulled Arpaio's petitions from the Arizona Secretary of State's Office, a maneuver that suggests a challenge could be forthcoming that potentially could knock Arpaio off the ballot. The Ward campaign doesn't put stock in another poll, taken days after the other one, that put her in third place.

And despite Beach's talk of looking toward the general election and Sinema, a Ward fundraising appeal that went out on Thursday attacked her usual Republican punching bags, "Fake Jeff Flake" and "Martha 'McAmnesty' McSally."

"Two seminal things happened: Flake got out and Arpaio got in," said Republican consultant Nathan Sproul, a Flake supporter.

"When Flake got out, people were no longer supporting her campaign of who she wasn't. It was, 'Will people support her because of who she is,'" Sproul said. "Once she had to become Kelli Ward, that's when the dynamics of the race changed dramatically."

Ward tried to unseat Sen. John McCain in 2016 and came within 11 percentage points of the six-term incumbent and former GOP presidential nominee in the Republican primary that year.

Buoyed by Breitbart, the conservative media outlet that helped Trump's campaign, Ward had a national megaphone to attack McCain and never really quit running for office. She found the dynamic similar in both campaigns. Ward was the anti-McCain GOP candidate; later, she was the anti-Flake one. The difference was that in 2016 the Republican establishment incumbent didn't drop out and in 2017 the incumbent did.

"She did well (in 2016), but maybe missed the point that almost anybody would've gotten 40 percent in a Republican primary against John McCain," said Jennifer Duffy, who analyzes U.S. Senate races for the influential, nonpartisan Cook Political Report in Washington, D.C.

"Ward and a lot of people around her misunderstood that and took it for some strength that didn't really exist."

Ward set her sights on Flake, whose poll numbers were poor in 2016 and continued to sink throughout 2017. Flake drew national attention — and GOP scorn — as a prominent Republican critic of Trump's tone and policies. Ward's viability seemed to grow though her campaign coffers remained cash-starved.

In a sign of momentum, KelliPAC, a political-action committee that supports Ward's candidacy, landed a \$300,000 check July 27 from Robert Mercer, the hedge fund billionaire and conservative activist who helped fund Breitbart and organizations supporting Trump. Not long after, the PAC hit Flake with ads saying conservatives were "sold out by our senators."

Less than a month later, Trump tweeted an early morning missive: "Great to see that Dr. Kelli Ward is running against Flake Jeff Flake, who is WEAK on borders, crime and a non-factor in Senate. He's toxic!"

The tweet came as Trump was focused on vanquishing Flake, who had published "Conscience of a Conservative," a book seen as a rebuke to the president. Trump said he might put \$10 million into the effort to topple Flake.

Five days after the tweet, Trump headed to downtown Phoenix for an immigration-themed rally that Ward hoped would include an endorsement for her campaign.

It was another opportunity for Ward to get Trump's official blessing and close the deal on the primary.

Instead, Trump and his team gave Ward the cold shoulder.

There was no endorsement.

She was not invited to appear on stage at the Phoenix Convention Center.

And after waiting in line for hours to get in, Ward's small army of red- and yellow- shirted, sign-toting loyalists were forced to cover or remove their campaign shirts before entering. Their pro-Ward signs piled up outside the venue, away from the cameras.

Ward was shunted away from the VIP section.

Sen. Rand Paul and Kelli Ward speak to the press at the Embassy Suites on February 16, 2018 in Scottsdale, Arizona. Patrick Breen/The Republic

Ward couldn't claim the endorsement she wanted, but did cash in on the Trump tweet.

Before Trump mentioned her on Twitter, Ward collected \$10,000 or more in disclosed donations twice in 30 days. After it, she topped \$10,000 four times in nine days.

August proved to be Ward's biggest month for fundraising in 2017.

These days, Ward's campaign wants the president to remain neutral, especially given Trump's relationship with Arpaio.

"I know he likes Kelli," Beach said. "But he also likes Joe. I don't know how much he knows McSally. To us, my expectation is that he will let the best man or woman win this race for the primary and go from there."

From a financial perspective, the Ward campaign should have shifted into high gear in October.

But campaign finance records show Ward got no meaningful bounce from Flake's departure.

He quit on Oct. 24. Up to that point, Ward averaged \$7,500 per day in October for contributions greater than \$200. In the 24 days that followed Flake's announcement, she averaged \$4,400 per day.

From November through January, Ward's campaign failed to raise even \$140,000 monthly in contributions greater than \$200.

By contrast, McSally, whose interest in the Senate was clear early on, averaged \$195,000 per month in the same span.

Ward took in \$7,500 from PACs in the months when she officially had the GOP race to herself. In the same period, McSally averaged \$90,000 from PACs each month.

U.S. Rep. Martha McSally (left) poses for a photo with Kathy Arjaratnam and her son, 9-year-old Anton, of Scottsdale, after McSally's announcement Jan. 12, 2018, that she is running for U.S. Senate. Cheryl Evans/The Republic

From the five-month span that began with Trump's tweet to Flake's October announcement to the January day McSally formally entered the race, KelliPAC took in one disclosed donation.

That was a \$10,000 December check from Jeff Yass, an options trader and board member of the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute.

At the same time, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., named McSally as an example of the strong GOP candidates in the 2018 elections and pledged that his affiliated and well-financed super PAC, the Senate Leadership Fund, would be active in the midterms.

"I and my allies will make every effort to make sure we have a nominee on the November ballot who can appeal to a general election audience," McConnell told the Washington Examiner.

In a competitive primary, Ward may not mind being on the outs with McConnell, the epitome of the GOP establishment.

As a Republican insurgent, she has proven a favorite of endorsements from conservative pundits like Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham, though that support hasn't appreciably changed her fundraising fortunes.

But her past and present association with some controversial and fringe figures on the right could complicate her effort to persuade Republican voters that she is electable in November.

Ward embraced, then distanced herself from Steve Bannon, the one-time Breitbart executive and advisor to Trump whose influence seemingly imploded after insulting Trump's grown children.

Paul Nehlen, a self-described "Pro-White" Wisconsin congressional candidate whose own party has disavowed him, congratulated his "friend" on Facebook.

Ward has posed for pictures with the Patriot Movement AZ. Supporters of the group filmed themselves in March snatching items from a Tempe mosque, leading to criminal charges.

Patriot Movement AZ members distanced themselves from the women following the mosque controversy.

Later that month, Patriot Movement AZ members wore guns and yelled at attendees of the Phoenix March for Our Lives rally against gun violence in schools.

Like Ward, Gov. Doug Ducey posed for a picture with group members at a GOP dinner. Unlike her, he disavowed the group the next day, after learning more about them.

And Ward's most prominent local endorser is Russell Pearce, the author of the state's controversial 2010 immigration-enforcement bill, Senate Bill 1070. Voters recalled him from the state Senate under a cloud of scandal and after a national uproar over his legislation.

Ward has strong support in conservative Mohave County, which borders Nevada and California and includes Ward's hometown of Lake Havasu City.

Laurence Schiff, chairman of the Mohave County Republican Party, says he is staying neutral in the contested race, but said Ward's message on the red-meat issues of immigration and guns will choke off her rivals.

"Every place you go, you hear build the wall," he said. "The second issue up here is guns. ... Everybody in Mohave County carries one. ... Kelli's very pro-Second Amendment, and she shoots."

In Mohave County, "We know her, all over the place here, people know her."

But Arpaio, her rival, is known everywhere.

He has attained folk-hero status in some GOP circles and can instantly summon national attention, especially on border issues, leaving little space for Ward to maneuver.

While Ward has converted some Republicans, others remain skeptical she has enough cross-over appeal to pull in moderates and independents in a face-off against Sinema.

"Her heart is in the right place. Her efforts are certainly there," said Barbara Wylie, 76, a Sun City West voter. "I really like Kelli, but I just don't think she's got the strength."

Across town, Helene Gross has been ruminating over the Republican candidates. Politically active, she's familiar with all their personalities and campaign pitches.

"I've met Kelli Ward, she's a very nice lady, but ..." said Gross, 74, her voice trailing off.

Gross, a Trump supporter, added, "I've heard, mmm, different things from different people."

Both women like what they see in McSally.

With her spitfire, no-frills style, the former combat pilot is driving home to voters her military background and Congressional experience one stump speech at a time. At nearly every event, she recites her encounters with Trump and casts herself as the only candidate who can help enact his "America First" agenda.

She has become a frequent guest on Fox News, and polling suggests she has an edge over her rivals: an April poll of likely general-election voters put her on top of them, with 36 percent of voters. Ward came in behind Arpaio.

And, McSally is proving her fundraising prowess. Last quarter, she hauled in \$2.8 million and in April had nearly \$3.2 million on hand.

Meanwhile, Ward has cycled through at least two rounds of campaign staffers since entering the race.

Staff shake-ups tend to disrupt campaign strategy, messaging and fundraising. Ward's methods have often overshadowed her message.

Shortly after McCain's brain cancer diagnosis last July, Ward told an Indiana radio station the senator should quit and let Ducey, the governor, appoint a replacement. As the person who came in second in the 2016 Republican primary, she should be considered for the job, Ward said.

Hours after Flake survived a gunman's June attack on Republicans practicing for a charity baseball game, Ward sent a fundraising pitch that cited the shooting and referred to him as "Sanctuary Senator Jeff Flake."

Days after 17 people died in a school shooting in Parkland, Florida, Ward said she was "not opposed to increasing the age to purchase a firearm."

It was a gun-control measure at odds with Ward's image as a free-wheeling gun enthusiast. She once encouraged anyone 18 or older to participate in a contest to win a free AR-15 and wanted to make it easier to legally possess sawed-off shotguns in Arizona.

"It's almost like she didn't learn any lessons from last cycle," Heywood said, focusing in particular on her McCain comments. "Did it raise her more money? No. Did it get her more voters in Arizona? No. It shows lack of discipline in messaging and shows donors thinking about making an investment in her race that her campaign doesn't have a discipline or focus."