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Ed Markey will face a Senate challenger: high-profile labor lawyer Shannon Liss-Riordan

By [Victoria McGrane](#) Globe Staff, May 20, 2019, 9:30 a.m.



Shannon Liss-Riordan is pitching herself as an outsider who can break the partisan deadlock in Washington and disrupt the grip of wealthy special interests. Above: Liss-Riordan on Monday, in her Boston office. JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

Massachusetts voters officially have a 2020 US Senate primary on their hands.

Shannon Liss-Riordan, a high-profile labor attorney, announced Monday she is running for the Senate, [challenging](#) Senator Edward J. Markey in a Democratic primary next year.

“My experience for the last 20 years fighting in the trenches on behalf of workers is a new perspective that we need in Washington,” Liss-Riordan said in an interview with the Globe at her Back Bay office. “The needs of working people have not been heard in Washington, and I want to go there to be their voice and champion.”

A partner at Lichten & Liss-Riordan in Boston, she has focused her career on representing waiters, fast-food workers, drivers, exotic dancers, cleaners, and other low-

paid workers who allege wage theft and misclassification as independent contractors by their employers. She has gained national attention for her legal crusades on behalf of workers against Amazon, Google, FedEx, and Starbucks.

In an e-mail she sent to supporters Monday morning, she framed her candidacy in populist terms, saying that her years as a workers' rights attorney "have made me realize just how much the rich and powerful have reshaped our country to benefit them. They have been writing the rules for too long — we need to make a change."

Just how vulnerable Markey is remains to be seen. The senator has recently cultivated key liberal alliances, teaming up, for instance, with US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who has reached rock-star status on the left, on the Green New Deal.

And Markey has been building his campaign war chest. The latest federal filings show he has raised close to \$940,000 this year for his campaign and has about \$3.5 million in cash on hand.

Asked about policy differences with Markey, Liss-Riordan, 49, declined to detail any and avoided criticizing or even mentioning the Malden Democrat in the interview. She made no reference to the incumbent in her announcement video or e-mail to supporters on Monday.

But she cast herself as an "outsider" with a "fresh voice," implicitly contrasting herself with Markey, who is 72 and has served in Congress since 1976.

"My focus is more on the energy that I would put into this job," Liss-Riordan said, one of several times she mentioned her energy level in the 20-minute interview.

Liss-Riordan, who was an organizer in the women's movement before becoming a lawyer, also framed her bid in terms of gender, citing her experience as a woman and mother and maintaining that more women should serve in Congress. She said her shock and dismay following Brett Kavanaugh's Senate confirmation as a Supreme Court justice — despite allegations of sexual assault — contributed to her decision to run.

In the Globe interview, Liss-Riordan took a different position from Markey's on impeachment, saying President Trump "should be impeached" and calling Trump "a disgrace to our country." While he has been harshly critical of the president, Markey has stopped short of calling for the House to initiate impeachment proceedings.

Liss-Riordan's candidacy is an unfamiliar challenge for Markey, who hasn't had much primary competition over his nearly four decades in office. Outside of the 2013 special election for former secretary of state John F. Kerry's Senate seat, in which he beat Representative Stephen Lynch in the primary by 15 points, Markey has faced just one primary race in the past 35 years. (In 1984, Markey dropped out of a primary race for the Senate seat eventually won by Kerry, resolving at the last minute to defend his congressional seat.)

And Markey has faced few serious fights with Republicans. He won the 2013 special election by 10 percentage points, beating GOP candidate Gabriel Gomez 55 to 45. He beat Republican Brian Herr with 62 percent of the vote in 2014, winning his first full Senate term.

Liss-Riordan said she drew inspiration for her run from last year's upset primary victories by Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts and Ocasio-Cortez of New York over longtime congressional incumbents. Some analysts say the hunger for change those upsets represented can't be ignored.

"The advantage of being an incumbent is not what it used to be," said Steve Koczela, president of MassINC Polling Group. While Markey is generally popular and well-known, "there's a lot of anxiety and upheaval in the air right now. It's hard to say what's enough to buy you reelection these days."

Massachusetts has had a string of upset elections in recent years, noted the Democratic strategist Mary Anne Marsh. "In a presidential year and in the environment we are in, no one can take any race for granted, including Ed Markey," she said.

But it's harder to knock off an incumbent at the state level than it is in a district-level race, in part because candidates must win at least 15 percent of delegates to the state convention to even get on the ballot for the September 2020 state primary. That involves significant grass-roots organizing and wooing of local activists — all of whom already know and support Markey, said Peter Ubertaccio, a political science professor at Stonehill College.

"Markey has not done anything during his time in the Senate to run afoul of folks who have power at that level" and has been consistent on policies that matter most to this activist base, such as those involving reproductive rights and the environment, Ubertaccio said. "You're not going to get to his left on any of those issues."

What's more, Pressley's upset win in 2018 was aided by a base of support and by electoral experience that Liss-Riordan lacks, he noted.

"With our democracy under assault every day by Donald Trump and his agenda of hate, division, and inequality, we are all called to stand up in the fight for the future of our country," Markey said in a written statement on Monday, announcing key members of his campaign team, including several veterans of his 2013 special election campaign.

"I want to continue helping to lead that resistance in the United States Senate armed with an agenda of jobs and justice and a deep commitment to the freedoms born in the Commonwealth."

Victoria McGrane can be reached at victoria.mcgrane@globe.com.