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A note of caution for Colorado Dems

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Guest Commentary

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The itch that historically hits during the sixth year of a presidency lived up to its billing on Election Day, compounded by the country's fatigue with the Iraq war. In state after state and district after district, narrow Democratic losses during the last few cycles turned into narrow Democratic wins.

In Colorado, Gov.-elect Bill Ritter's centrist instincts were tailor-made for the situation and his victory was of a magnitude usually reserved for entrenched incumbents. His challenger, Bob Beauprez, might have been better off listening to the entreaties of Karl Rove and others to keep his Washington gig.

The 7th Congressional District, which had been held up as a national prototype of a competitive seat, went Democratic by a double-digit margin while the reliably Republican 4th District provided some of the best election night suspense.

But let's face forward and consider the implications of the 2006 election both in Colorado and on the broader national scene.

One-party government in Colorado can be more burden than opportunity for Ritter.

An adage advises to be careful what you wish for because you might get it. Colorado Democrats who achieved their long-sought trifecta of the governor's office and both legislative chambers now face political risk.

Ritter's centrist posture and political skills will be tested by the lack of a meaningful Republican foil and legislative stopper to keep over-reaching measures away from his desk. To complicate matters, core Democratic constituencies were asked to be patient and put their agendas aside in favor of TABOR reform in 2005 and the push to win in 2006.

Now, coming off successive election victories, these interests are feeling their oats and are disinclined to defer pet issues. Tuesday's election was largely a reaction against prolonged one-party rule in Washington. A similar day of reckoning could come someday in Colorado if now-ascendant Democrats govern with any excessive ideological tilt.

Colorado Republicans need to ask some hard questions - and the right ones.

To under-perform in one election (2004) can be an aberration. To under-perform twice in a row is a trend. Though still the majority party in registration numbers, Colorado Republicans are a deeply divided lot, hemorrhaging scores of once loyal suburban voters. It is a party divided over tax policy and Referendum C, over immigration and, most notably, over the dominance of its social conservative wing.

Look at what is left of Colorado's diminishing Republican congressional delegation: Marilyn Musgrave, Tom Tancredo and now Doug Lamborn. Are these the faces of a big-tent, inclusive party or of a narrow, retrenched one? Defeat can teach many lessons, but it is important to learn the right ones - how to expand the tent and broaden appeal.

If you are going to lose, it is not always bad to lose big.

With an eye toward 2008, Republicans nationally might be better off out of legislative power than holding on to thin, non-functional majorities. Just as financial markets periodically correct, our political system was due for a market adjustment. Democrats will now share the burden of governing while Republicans will be given the chance to debate and reclaim seemingly forgotten core principles. It took the Democrats most of 40 years to grow intellectually and morally bankrupt before losing Congress in 1994. Republicans moved down that path at a much faster clip, 12 years. Some time in the wilderness can be cleansing for the soul.

No longer the opposition party, Democrats will be forced to govern and to choose.

The crux of the Democratic platform leading up to this election has been simple and total opposition to all things Bush. That was sufficient to unify and animate the party and score a notable victory. But that is no longer enough. Democrats will be compelled to develop a cogent, coherent policy agenda. In so doing, like the Republicans, they will expose their own vulnerabilities and internal divisions.

Fighting a prolonged war takes two political parties.

Whatever the outcome of the Iraq war, there can be little doubt that it is but one significant encounter in a broader, prolonged conflict. Democrats have been politically defined by their opposition to this war. But now that they inherit the shared responsibility of governing, they must develop an affirmative approach to this defining challenge of our time. That must include a well-earned rebuke of the pacifist noise-makers on the party's left flank.

Colorado and the Rocky Mountain West are moving from after-thought to epicenter.

Evolving Democratic strength in the West is not lost on national political strategists. As

Democrats look to the coming presidential election and seek to shuffle the map of red and blue states, Colorado and neighboring states provide opportunities. If national Democratic leaders have a brain, the 2008 national convention indeed will be held in Denver. Instead of being regarded as fly-over country, our state and region are about to be central to the national political equation.

Pendulums swing back.

Though dispirited, Republicans should put away the sharp objects and avoid despair. A message has been sent, but all is not lost. Looking to the coming presidential campaign, now officially underway, the 2006 experience may chasten Republicans and drive them toward more centrist candidates while it may embolden Democrats to go with their passionate hearts in the form of more polarizing candidates. Two years is a political eternity.

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