



A LONG AND WINDING ROAD
A Political Look Back and Ahead

Post-Election Column of Analysis and Projection
As Submitted to the Denver Post
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While driving down the road, the front windshield offers a much more interesting landscape than does the rear-view mirror. With that in mind, let's glance back at the road just traveled before looking forward at the oncoming terrain.

A quick review: The historic six-year itch of a presidential tenure lived up to its billing. This was compounded by the country's fatigue with the Iraq war and the seeming lack of progress or hopeful news. In state after state, and district after district, narrow Democratic losses during the last few cycles turned into narrow Democratic wins. The political pendulum swung back as it is wont to do.

Here at home, a candidate who almost certainly would have lost a primary to any potential Democratic challenger is now addressed as "Governor-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. Although the national headwind buffeting all Republicans called for some imagination and bold strokes, Beauprez's campaign was lackluster. (*The Washington Post* dubbed it one of the year's ten worst.) He was defined early and fatally by his Republican challenger, Marc Holtzman; and he continued to run against Holtzman's shadow in appeasing the Republican base long after Holtzman had prematurely exited the race stage-right.

A congressional district that had been held up as a national prototype of a competitive seat and that four years ago had provided the closest contest in the country went Democratic by a double-digit margin. While a reliably Republican district in northern and eastern Colorado provided some of the best election night suspense. The juxtaposition of these two districts gave clear evidence of the pronounced tilt of the 2006 playing field.

And to cap it off, for the privilege of exercising their franchise, Denver voters were asked to imitate citizens of the old Soviet Union queuing up for bread.

The look-back is always easier than forward navigation. But let's face forward and consider the implications of the 2006 election both within Colorado and on the broader national scene.

One-party government in Colorado – more burden than opportunity for Bill Ritter.

An old adage advises to be careful what you wish for because you might get it. Colorado Democrats who achieved their sought-after trifecta of the Governor's office and both legislative chambers now face political risk. Bill 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. Adding complication, core Democratic constituencies were asked to be patient and put their agendas aside in favor of TABOR reform in 2005 and political imperatives in 2006. Now coming off successive election victories, these interests are feeling their oats and 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 be forthcoming in Colorado if now-ascendant Democrats govern with any kind of 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 raw 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 increasing 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 – namely 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 onto thin, non-functional majorities. 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. In the Democrats' long domination of Congress that ended in 1994, it took them most of 40 years to grow intellectually and morally bankrupt. Republicans moved down that path at a much faster clip over the last twelve 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 denouement 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. The Democrats' days as sideline critics are over. It is not only healthy but essential for both parties to have a stake and a serious engagement in this struggle.

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

From our border with Mexico to the Canadian line, one can traverse the Rocky Mountain spine of the country through states that, come January, will be led by Democratic governors. This evolving political dynamic is not lost on national political strategists. As Democrats look to the coming Presidential election and seek to shift the seemingly static map of red and blue states, Colorado and neighboring states sit atop the list of opportunity targets. If national Democratic leaders have a brain (and there are sketchy signs of such cerebral activity), the 2008 national convention indeed will be held in Denver. Instead of being regarded as fly-over country between the coasts, 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 already well-positioned (McCain, Giuliani, Romney) while it may embolden Democrats to go with their passionate hearts in the form of more polarizing candidates (Clinton, Obama). Two years is a political eternity and a long, winding road.

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