

# Democrats and Their Rocky Mountain High (Hopes):

A CLOSE LOOK AT PARTY VOTING PATTERNS IN THE EIGHT-STATE ROCKY MOUNTAIN WEST

## THE 2007 COLORADO COLLEGE STATE OF THE ROCKIES REPORT CARD

By Robert D. Loevy, Thomas E. Cronin, and Jonathan M. Goldstein

For the first time since 1908, the Democratic National Convention will take place in Denver. In 1908, the Democrats nominated William Jennings Bryan for his third nomination and third resounding defeat. One hundred years later, the Democrats are hopeful for success, a hope reflected in their choice of convention location. Political strategists think Democrats could pick up a few of the eight states in the Rockies Region.

A number of factors in the region have encouraged Democrats. First, Bill Clinton won Colorado, Montana, Nevada, and New Mexico in 1992, and Arizona, Nevada, and New Mexico in 1996. However, his wins also reflected the influence of third-party candidate Ross Perot, who also did well in the Rocky Mountain region in both years, especially 1992.

Second, Democrats currently hold the governorships in Arizona, Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, and Wyoming. In 2006, Democrat Bill Ritter won nearly 59 percent of the vote in Colorado, and Democratic governors were reelected in Wyoming, New Mexico, and Arizona, receiving an impressive 70, 69, and 63 percent of the votes, respectively.

Third, U.S. Senator Ken Salazar's election in Colorado in 2004 and Montana's newly elected U.S. Senator Jon Tester have contributed to Democratic control of the U.S. Senate. Senate Majority Leader Harry Ried of Nevada was also easily reelected in 2004.

Fourth, the Rocky Mountain region is the fastest growing region in the nation, led by Nevada and Arizona and followed by Colorado, Utah, and Idaho. Although the region only has 44 electoral votes, as a block, the Rockies have more electoral votes than New England and the Northwest, as well as the recent political battleground states of Ohio and Florida.

Democrats have also won some notable U.S. House of Representatives seats in the region, including three in Arizona and two in Colorado over the past two election cycles. Recent races in Nevada, Wyoming and even in Idaho also ended up unexpectedly close.

Finally, in the last presidential race, John Kerry campaigned hard in Colorado and New Mexico and had a chance in these states. He could have won the presidency had he won Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada. In 2000, Al Gore would have won if he had won Colorado.

Absolutely key in understanding the new Democratic strategy is this: Democratic presidential candidates are going to have to make up for their lost southern electoral votes by trying to pick off a few select Rocky Mountain States. Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico hold promise for the party, as does Montana, however, the Democrats also face significant challenges in the region. Only 5 of the region's 16 senate seats are currently held by Democrats, as are only 11 of the 28 U.S. House seats. Party registration figures in those states that require registration reflect solid Republican

loyalties except in New Mexico. In Utah, registered Republicans outnumber Democrats by about a 4 to 1 margin. In Wyoming, 62 percent of the voters register as Republicans as opposed to just 26 percent as Democrats. Colorado has a higher percentage of unaffiliated voters (30 percent) and a slightly higher percentage of Republicans than of Democrats (36 percent and 30 percent respectively). In Arizona, 40 percent of the voters register as Republicans and 33 percent as Democrats. Voters in Montana and Idaho do not require voters to register a party preference, yet Republicans plainly outnumber Democrats in those states as well – especially in Idaho.

Perhaps the most compelling challenge for Democrats is reflected in the governor, U.S. Senate, and presidential races from 1985 to 2004. As discussed later in this paper, the eight states of the Rocky Mountain West have averaged over 56 percent Republican in statewide partisan elections. These data show the Rocky Mountain West as the most Republican region in the United States, exceeding even the South, which has averaged 52.7 percent Republican votes in statewide elections over the past two decades.

Colorado is the only state in the region that has shifted towards the Democrats, although this shift is so modest that Colorado can be regarded as predominantly stable in statewide partisan voting behavior. Over the past two decades, Colorado's statewide partisan average has favored Republicans. The last Democratic president to win a real majority in Colorado was Lyndon B. Johnson in his 1964 national landslide. Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater has been the only major party nominee for president from this region. However, Goldwater only carried Arizona in the region and won his own state's popular vote by less than one percent.

As of Spring 2007, the Rocky Mountain region has produced serious contenders for each of the major parties in U.S. Senator John McCain from Arizona and New Mexico's Governor and former presidential cabinet member Bill Richardson. However, as the Goldwater case suggests, home region patriotism is not a main predictor of Election Day voting preferences.

In this paper, we examine the place of the Rockies Region in the national political arena, focusing on trends in and within states. As outlined in other essays in this State of the Rockies Report, the Rockies Region is experiencing dramatic changes. One of these changes may be a shift in politics.

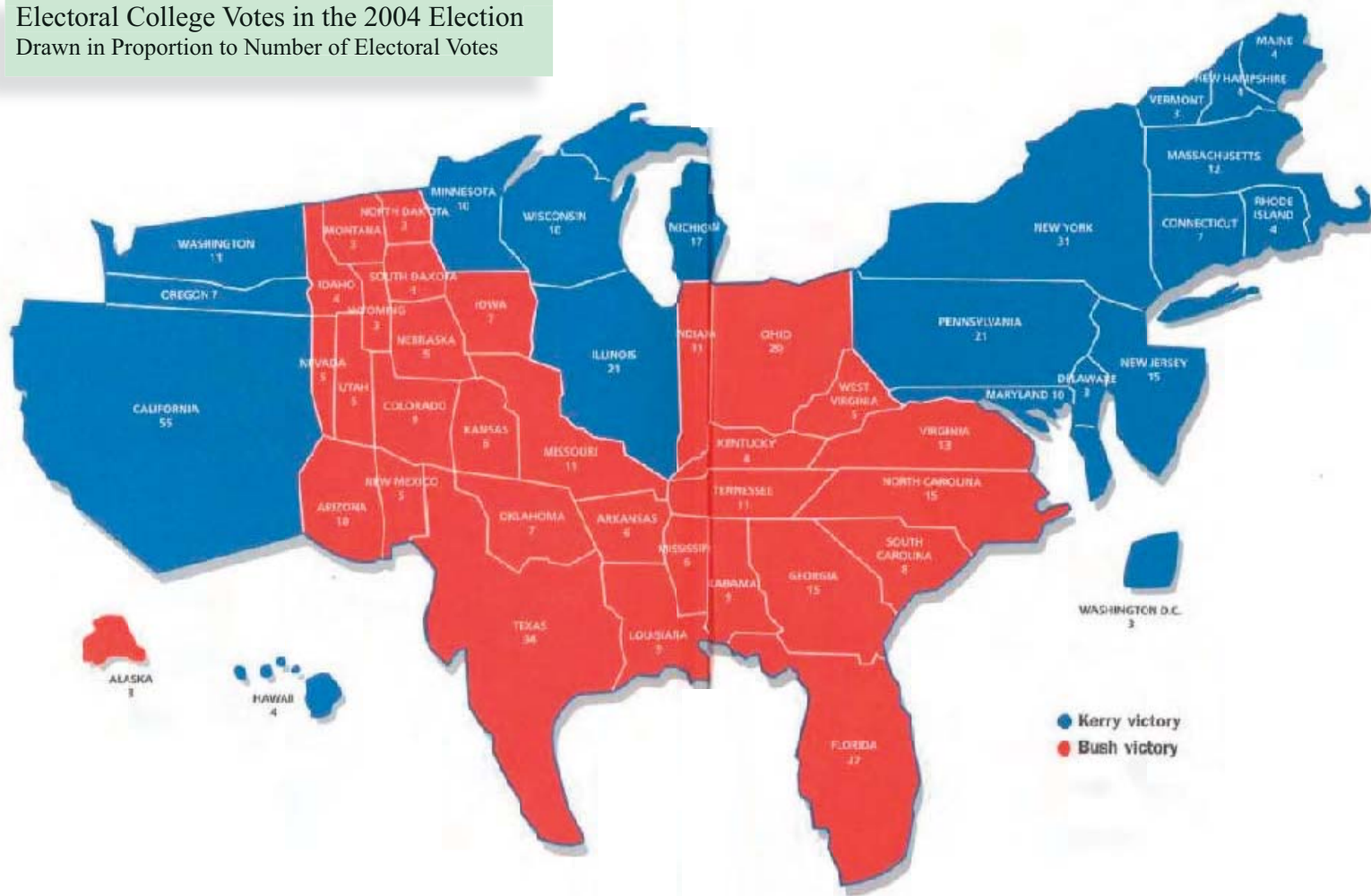
### Voting Behavior in the Rocky Mountain West

As noted, from 1985 to 2004 the eight states of the Rocky Mountain region have averaged 56.1 percent Republican in statewide elections for U.S. president, U.S. senator, and state governor. This percentage makes the region the most Republican in the nation, which as a whole has averaged approximately 51 percent Republican. In presidential elections, the West has solidly supported Republican candidates, with Republicans winning 32 of 40 state votes

*About the authors: Robert D. Loevy is Professor of Political Science at Colorado College. Thomas E. Cronin is the McHugh Professor of American Institutions and Leadership at Colorado College. Jonathan M. Goldstein is a senior International Political Economics major at Colorado College.*

## Electoral College Votes in the 2004 Election

### Drawn in Proportion to Number of Electoral Votes



for president from 1985 to 2004. Over the same period, seven of the only eight Democratic victories occurred in 1992 and 1996, when the Republican presidential candidates were weakened by Ross Perot's candidacy.

Republican strength varies among the eight states. Idaho and Utah are two of the most Republican states in the United States, with both voting more than 60 percent Republican in statewide elections from 1985 to 2004. Nevada, however, averaged 51.7 percent Democratic and is the only state in the Rockies that falls in the Democratic category. Colorado was close behind Nevada in support for the Democrats, averaging 50.7 percent Republican from 1985 to 2004.

As in the nation as a whole, Republicans gained strength in the Rockies from 1976 to 2004. In 1976 the 20-year combined partisan average for the Rocky Mountain West was only 50.1 percent Republican, a figure that had risen to 56.1 percent in 2004. Some states gained more Republican votes than others. For instance, Utah had a notable 16 point shift to the Republicans from 1976 (50.1 percent Democratic) to 2004 (65.9 percent Republican). Colorado, however, dropped slightly from 52.3 percent Republican in 1976 to 50.7 percent Republican by 2004. Colorado is the only state in the Rockies Region to shift even slightly toward the Democrats. Although many observers characterize New Mexico as being more Democratic than Colorado, statewide data suggest otherwise. In 2004, the 20-year figure for Colorado was 50.7 percent Republican while that for New Mexico was 51.3 percent Republican. In addition, from 1976 to 2004 New Mexico shifted slightly Republican. Although Nevada is the most Democratic state in the region, it too

has been trending toward the Republicans. In 1976 the 20-year partisan average for Nevada was 55.8 percent Democratic, a figure that had dropped to 51.7 percent Democratic by 2004.

If 1976 to 2004 trends extend into the future, Colorado should remain stable but continue a slow trend to the Democrats, perhaps even becoming slightly Democratic in its statewide voting behavior. The other seven Rocky Mountain states will continue moving Republican, with even Nevada possibly becoming a narrowly Republican state. Still, as mentioned above, political observers speculate that the Democrats may be able to pick up electoral votes in the Rockies in the 2008 presidential election. Their prospects are best in Colorado and Nevada and fairly good in New Mexico and Montana. The Democratic Party has selected Nevada for early caucuses in their 2008 nomination race for president.

Important political shifts have also taken place within individual states. For example, Denver and its inner suburbs have become increasingly Democratic, while other Colorado cities are becoming more strongly Republican. Throughout the region, population distributions vary widely. Colorado and Utah have large population concentrations in long urbanized corridors stretched along the bases of major mountain ranges. In Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, populations are widely spread out in small to medium-sized cities. New Mexico is a combination of those two distributions, with a large population in the urbanized strip from Albuquerque to Santa Fe, but also substantial populations in small cities throughout the state. In Arizona and Nevada, the overwhelming majority of residents live in Phoenix/Tucson and Las Vegas/Reno, respectively.



## State by State Analysis:

Table 1

Statewide 20-year election averages for U.S. President, U.S. Senator, and State Governor in the Rocky Mountain West

STATE	1976	2004	SHIFT
Arizona	54.5% R	59.8% R	5.3% R
Colorado	52.3% R	50.7% R	1.6% D
Idaho	51.4% R	61.9% R	10.5% R
Montana	54.5% D	52.3% R	6.8% R
Nevada	55.8% D	51.7% D	4.1% R
N. Mexico	51.5% D	51.3% R	2.8% R
Utah	50.1% D	65.9% R	16% R
Wyoming	54.7% R	58.8% R	4.1% R
REGION	50.1% R	56.1% R	6.0 %R

D= Democratic Percentage; R= Republican Percentage

Note, the value for 1976 is the average for all statewide elections for president, U.S. Senator, and governor from 1957 through 1976, while the value for 2004 represents that average from 1985 through 2004. The SHIFT is the percentage point change from 1976 to 2004.

### Arizona

As noted in Table 1 above, Republicans have gained strength in Arizona, the third-most Republican state in the region in 2004. In 11 of 12 presidential elections from 1960 to 2004, Arizona has given its presidential electoral votes to the Republican candidate. The only deviation occurred in 1996, when third-party candidate Ross Perot split the Republican vote and enabled incumbent Bill Clinton to narrowly win Arizona.

U.S. Senator Barry Goldwater was Arizona's leading national politician in the 1960s and 1970s. A champion of conservative economic and foreign policy principles, Goldwater garnered the Republican nomination for president in 1964 but lost resoundingly to President Lyndon Johnson in the national election. Arizona stayed loyal to Goldwater but only barely, as Goldwater won his home state by a mere 4,782 votes.

However, as in other Rocky Mountain states, political upsets occasionally occur in Arizona. Democrat Bruce Babbitt was elected governor in 1978 and easily won reelection in 1982. Democrat Dennis DeConcini served 12 years in the U.S. Senate, following election in 1982 and reelection in 1988. Republicans dominated Arizona elections throughout the 1990s, but the Democrats re-emerged in 2002 when Janet Napolitano won the governorship and an easy reelection in 2006.

In Arizona, most of the voting population is concentrated in only two highly urbanized and suburbanized counties. In the 2004 presidential election in Arizona, 59.3 percent of the votes were cast in only one county, Maricopa County, which contains most of the Phoenix metropolitan area. The only other county casting more than 100,000 votes in that election was Pima County,



which includes Tucson and its suburbs. Maricopa County has a dominance of population, as well as Republicans, producing the largest Republican vote margins in Arizona and one of the largest in the Rocky Mountain West. In the 2000 presidential election, Maricopa County produced a 93,284 vote margin for Republican George W. Bush over Democrat Al Gore. In the most populous Democratic county, Pima County (Tucson metropolitan area), Al Gore held only a 23,109 margin over Bush, nowhere near enough to offset Bush's votes in Maricopa County. In 2004, Bush's margin increased in Maricopa County to 174,606.

The Tucson metropolitan area in Pima County is typical of Democratic areas throughout the Rocky Mountain West. The University of Arizona located in Tucson has attracted highly educated and economically upscale voters more likely to vote Democratic. Even though Pima County remained Democratic from 2000 to 2004, the Democratic vote margin over the Republicans dropped slightly. Al Gore received 23,109 more votes than George W. Bush in Pima County in 2000, but the Democratic margin dropped by 1,090 to 22,019 when John Kerry ran in 2004.

Arizona is one of the most firmly Republican states in the Rocky Mountain region. The prospects for the Democratic Party to win any electoral votes there in a presidential election are quite low.

## Colorado

In partisan terms, Colorado is the most evenly balanced of the Rocky Mountain states. From 1985 to 2004, Colorado averaged 50.7 percent Republican in statewide elections. Although the Republicans have won most of Colorado's presidential votes, the Democrats have won some races at the gubernatorial and U.S. Senate levels. These Democrats, such as current Governor Bill Ritter and current U.S. Senator Ken Salazar, have tended to be ideologically to the right of most Democratic candidates for president.

Of the eight Rocky Mountain states, only Nevada, with a 1985–2004 statewide average of 51.7 percent Democratic, is more Democratic than Colorado. However, while Nevada has become more Republican in recent years, Colorado has trended slightly Democratic, the only state in the region to move in this direction.

County-level voting trends, especially those in Denver, help explain Colorado's slight shift to the Democrats. The city/county of Denver has long been the most Democratic part of Colorado, fitting with the national pattern whereby central cities have tended to be more strongly Democratic and their surrounding suburbs more strongly Republican. In the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, however, the Denver suburbs of Arapahoe and Jefferson counties began to trend toward the Democrats. At the same time, Boulder County, which is home to the University of Colorado, joined Denver in strongly voting Democratic. Thus the Denver metropolitan area had more Democratic votes in 2004, but those votes were offset by equally strong gains by Republicans in populous counties at the outer fringes of Denver and in populous counties in other areas, including Douglas County (Castle Rock), El Paso County (Colorado Springs), Mesa County (Grand Junction), and Weld County (Greeley).

Although having smaller populations, Colorado's counties with major ski areas also tend to vote Democratic. Eagle County (Vail), Pitkin County (Aspen), and Summit County (Breckenridge) all voted for Democrat John F. Kerry in the 2004 presidential election. This trend can be found elsewhere in winter resort areas in the Rockies.

Thus, although Colorado has not changed its overall voting behavior dramatically in recent years, quite dynamic changes have taken place within the state's electorate. The Colorado electorate is becoming more polarized geographically along party lines. More than ever, it is the Denver metropolitan area, voting strongly Democratic, versus the remainder of the state voting predominantly Republican.

## Idaho

Idaho is one of the most Republican states in the United States. In 2004 Idaho had a 20-year statewide voting average of 61.9 percent Republican, second in the Rockies only to Utah's 65.9 percent. Idaho was among just a handful of states, including Alaska, Mississippi, and Utah, with 20-year statewide voting averages in 2004 exceeding 60 percent Republican.

Idaho had not always been as strongly Republican. In 1976, Idaho had a 20-year statewide voting average of 51.4 percent Republican. In the 28 years that followed, however, Idaho's 10.5 point increase for the Republicans was the second highest in the Rocky Mountain states after Utah's 16 point shift.

However, as in other areas of the Rockies, some Democrats have had distinguished political careers in Idaho. One of the best known Idaho Democrats was U.S. Senator Frank Church, a leading liberal Democratic voice in the Senate from the mid-1950s to 1980. Another Democratic star in Idaho was Governor Cecil D. Andrus, who served two terms in the 1970s and then won two more terms in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Republicans have won every U.S. Senate election in Idaho since 1980. In the 2004 U.S. Senate race in Idaho, the Democrats did not even run a candidate against incumbent Republican U.S. Senator Michael D. Crapo. Idaho Republicans have also won every gubernatorial race since 1990. The last time a Democrat won Idaho's presidential electoral votes was in 1964 for incumbent Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Unlike Colorado with Denver, Idaho lacks a major industrial city with large urban Democrat populations. The largest county in Idaho is Ada, which contains Boise, its suburbs, and a population of only about 300,904 according to the 2000 U.S. Census. All other cities in Idaho had less than 150,000 residents each in 2000.

Although there is no single major metropolis in Idaho, as in much of the Rocky Mountain West, the majority of Idaho residents live in urbanized areas. By county, Idaho is strongly Republican. In the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, the Democrats won only one of Idaho's 44 counties, Blaine County, which contains the upscale Sun Valley resort. Among the other counties voting Republican in 2000, small Madison County voted 90.7 percent Republican.

However, there remains a glimmer of hope for Democrats in Idaho. As Frank Church and Cecil Andrus demonstrated, highly qualified Democratic candidates can win and then use the powers of incumbency to stay in office. The likelihood of a Democratic candidate for U.S. president winning Idaho's electoral votes, however, is remote.







## Montana

Montana's small population qualifies it for only one member of the U.S. House of Representatives and three electoral votes. Although Montana contains vast areas of relatively empty territory, more than 60 percent of the state's population resides in the nine counties that contain or are near seven small cities. The majority of Montanans live in urban lives but do so in relatively small cities.

Montana has a 20-year statewide voting average of 52.3 percent Republican, making it fourth in the region after Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico in its tendency to vote Democratic. Montana has a long history of supporting Democrats. In 1976 the 20-year statewide voting average was 54.5 percent Democratic, second only to Nevada (55.8 percent Democratic) in the Rocky Mountain West at that time. Like other states in the region, Montana steadily shifted toward the Republicans from 1976 to 2004, giving that party a 6.8 point gain, comparable to the region-wide average shift of 6 points Republican.

Montanans elected Mike Mansfield as U.S. senator in 1952. Mansfield rose to become Senate Majority Leader from 1961 to 1977 and is most famous for maintaining civility in the Senate when northern liberals broke southern filibusters and enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

As with all the Rocky Mountain states, Montana votes strongly Republican for U.S. president, but Democratic candidates have won the state governorship and U.S. Senate seats. In 2004 Democrat Brian Schweitzer was elected governor, while in 2006 Montanans narrowly elected a second Democratic U.S. Senator to join incumbent Democrat Senator Max Baucus in Washington.

The most populous county in Montana is Yellowstone County, containing the city of Billings. Although populous by Montana standards, Yellowstone County only cast 14.4 percent of the statewide vote in the 2000 presidential election. Because it includes both the city of Billings and its surrounding suburbs, Yellowstone County votes Republican in presidential elections, and George W. Bush captured 62.5 percent of the vote in 2000.

Democratic strength is centered in Butte in Silver Bow County, the only populous county in Montana to vote (58.7%) for Democrat Al Gore in the 2000 presidential election. Only four other counties (Big Horn, Deer Lodge, Glacier, and Roosevelt) voted for Gore in 2000.

For the Republicans, Yellowstone County (Billings) and Flathead County (Kalispell) have produced large vote margins over the Democrats: George Bush had margins of 13,552 in Yellowstone County in 2000 and 16,783 in 2004 and of 14,190 in Flathead County in 2000 and 14,432 in 2004.

Yellowstone County (Billings) and Flathead County (Kalispell) are the only two counties in Montana that produced vote margins for the Republicans in excess of 10,000 votes. The Democrats' best prospect is Silver Bow County (Butte), but it only produced a 2,668 Democratic vote margin in 2000, which grew to a 2,926 Democratic vote margin in 2004. Missoula County was the only county in Montana that voted Republican in 2000 (a 4,233 Republican vote margin) but Democratic (a 2,994 Democratic vote margin) in 2004. That shift of 7,227 votes from the Republicans to the Democrats in Missoula County (Missoula) was the largest Republican-to-Democratic shift for any county in Montana between 2000 and 2004.

Lewis and Clark County (Helena) voted Republican in both 2000 and 2004, but the Republican vote margin dropped from 5,109 in 2000 to 3,777 in 2004. In Gallatin County (Bozeman), Bush won in both 2000 and 2004, but his vote margin over Gore in 2000 dropped by 2,837 votes when he faced Kerry in 2004.

If Democrats in Montana can solidify their past strong support in Silver Bow (Butte) and Missoula (Missoula) counties and can continue to make gains in Lewis and Clark (Helena) and Gallatin (Bozeman) counties, then the party may be able to win more elections in the state. Montana is a possible target for the Democratic presidential nominee in 2008, but likely only if the nominee is a moderate candidate who can appeal to Montana's middle-of-the-road voters.

## Nevada

As described in Table 1, above, Nevada has been the most Democratic of the eight Rocky Mountain states for about three decades. While it too has seen shifts toward the Republicans, this 4.1-point shift in the 20-year statewide voting average from 1976 to 2004 is slightly less than the overall 6-point shift of all eight Rocky Mountain states.

Nevada presidential electoral votes have been up for grabs over the past 40 years. Democrat John F. Kennedy bested Republican Richard Nixon in Nevada in the 1960 presidential election, one of the closest in U.S. history. In another close election eight years later, however, Nevada supported Republican Nixon over Democratic candidate Hubert H. Humphrey. In 1976 Nevada voted for incumbent Republican President Gerald R. Ford over Democratic challenger Jimmy Carter. In 1992 and 1996, though, Nevada twice voted for Democrat Bill Clinton. Yet in the last two presidential elections Nevada voted for George W. Bush. The Republican margin of victory was exceptionally close in each election, with Bush winning 51.9 percent of the two-party vote in 2000 and 51.3 percent in 2004. These factors make Nevada the Democratic Party's best chance for presidential electoral votes in the Rocky Mountain West in 2008.

At the county level, Nevada in some ways resembles Arizona. While voting in Arizona is dominated by Maricopa County (Phoenix) and its Republican dominance, voting in Nevada is dominated by Clark County (Las Vegas), which strongly supports Democrats.

Clark County is large in both area and population, encompassing the southern “point” of Nevada and the cities of Las Vegas and Henderson and their suburbs. The 2000 U.S. Census placed more than 1.3 million (68.8%) of Nevada’s almost 2 million residents in Clark County, and the county continues to grow rapidly.

The key question is: “Can Democrats accrue large enough margins in Clark County to offset Republican votes in the remainder of the state?” In the 2004 presidential election, John Kerry held a 26,430 vote margin over incumbent President George W. Bush. All of Nevada’s 16 other counties voted for Bush, however, and those combined tallies enabled Bush to eke out a narrow victory statewide. Like Colorado with the Democratic Denver metropolitan area versus a Republican remainder of the state, Nevada has the Democratic Las Vegas metropolitan area versus a Republican remainder of the state.

In the 2004 presidential election, the Republican center of strength was Nevada’s other major population area, the Reno area. Washoe County (Reno), Carson City County (Carson City), Douglas County (Lake Tahoe), and Lyon and Storey counties (eastern exurbs of Reno and Carson City) are located in the greater Reno area. The 2000 U.S. Census reported 471,702 people, or 23.6 percent of Nevada’s total population, living in these areas. In the 2004 presidential election, these five counties produced a Republican vote margin of 23,232 votes, almost enough to match the 26,430 Democratic vote margin in Clark County (Las Vegas).

If the population of the five counties that comprise the Reno area are combined with the population of Clark County (Las Vegas), the total constitutes 92.4 percent of Nevada’s population. Even more than Maricopa County (Phoenix) and Pima County (Tucson) dominate Arizona voting, Clark County (Las Vegas) and the five counties in the Reno area dominate Nevada voting.

Outside the Reno area, one other county produces significant vote margins for the Republican Party. Elko County in northeastern Nevada contains the city of Elko and voted 79.7 percent for George W. Bush in 2004, for a margin of 8,888 votes—the highest Republican vote margin for any county in Nevada in that race.

For Democrats, one bright spot from the 2000 presidential election to the 2004 election was the decline by nearly half in the Republican vote margin in Washoe County (Reno). While George W. Bush had an 11,543 vote margin over Al Gore in Washoe County in 2000, Bush’s margin dropped to 6,704 in 2004.

If the Democrats in Nevada can maintain their stronghold of Clark County (Las Vegas) and continue to make gains in Washoe County (Reno), the party may have a more promising future in Nevada. Despite its 4.1 percent drift toward the Republicans from 1976 to 2004, Nevada remains the best place in the Rockies for Democrats to look for electoral victories.

## New Mexico

New Mexico is nicknamed “The Land Of Enchantment,” but to the voting behavior analyst, it might better be styled “The Land Of Contrast.” New Mexico has seven counties that voted more than 60 percent Democratic in the 2000 presidential election. However, it also has 14 counties that voted more than 60 percent Republican in

the same election. It is unusual to find a state in the Rocky Mountain region with such strong support for both major political parties. In most of the other Rocky Mountain states, only the Republicans can boast a significant number of counties voting more than 60 percent for their party in a presidential election. In contrast to other states in the region, New Mexico also has a number of less-populated rural counties that vote strongly Democratic.

Political observers also look to New Mexico for its strong record of voting for the winner of the popular vote in presidential elections. From 1948, when it voted for national winner Democrat Harry Truman, to 2004, when it narrowly sided with national winner George W. Bush, New Mexico has missed voting for the popular presidential winner only once. That one time was in 1976, a close national race in which New Mexico voted for incumbent Republican President Gerald R. Ford but Democrat Jimmy Carter won the national popular vote and the electoral vote.

Note that New Mexico’s strong record of voting for the winning presidential candidate applies only to the popular vote winner, not to the Electoral College winner. In the hotly contested presidential election of 2000, New Mexico voted for Democratic candidate Al Gore by a mere 366 votes, a margin of less than one-tenth of one percent of the vote. Democrat Gore won the popular vote in that election but lost the Electoral College vote, and the presidency, to Republican candidate George W. Bush.

In 1976, New Mexico had a 20-year statewide voting average of 51.5 percent Democratic. By 2004, that average had shifted only 2.8 points in a Republican direction. Given this near balance between the major parties, New Mexico is considered up for grabs in presidential elections, as well as gubernatorial and U.S. Senator races. Republicans and Democrats have shared the New Mexico governorship fairly equally in recent decades. Republican Gary Johnson was elected New Mexico governor in 1994 and reelected in 1998. In 2002, the Democrats won the governorship with Bill Richardson, who was easily reelected in 2006 and promptly announced his candidacy for president in 2008.

In the U.S. Senate, New Mexico voters have recently been returning a popular Republican Senator, Pete V. Domenici, to Washington, just as they have popular Democratic Senator, Jeff Bingaman. Republican Domenici, first elected to the U.S. Senate in 1972, is one of the most popular Republicans in New Mexican history and has been reelected to the U.S. Senate five times. Democrat Bingaman has almost as impressive a record. He was first elected to



Gov. Bill Richardson addressing the 2005 State of the Rockies Conference



the U.S. Senate in 1982 and has been re-elected four times.

At the county level, 50 percent of the voting population resides in only three counties. The largest is Bernalillo County, which contains the central city and inner suburbs of Albuquerque, the most populous city in New Mexico. Next in size is adjacent Santa Fe County, which comprises the Santa Fe metropolitan area. The third center of voting strength is Dona Ana County, which includes the city of Las Cruces and the portion of New Mexico closest to El Paso, Texas. Dona Ana County, although much less well-known, casts almost as many votes as Santa Fe County.

In the 2000 presidential election, Bernalillo, Santa Fe, and Dona Ana counties cast 50 percent of the vote in New Mexico and also were centers of Democratic strength. Santa Fe County delivered a Democratic vote margin of 18,043 votes to Al Gore, while Bernalillo County (Albuquerque) and Dona Ana County (Las Cruces) added Democratic vote margins of 4,212 and 2,649, respectively.

A number of small rural counties also voted Democratic in the 2000 presidential election. Principal among these was Taos County (Taos City and Taos Pueblo) which provided the Democrats with a 4,295 vote margin despite its relatively small population. Other counties in the Democratic column in the 2000 presidential election were Cibola, Grant, Guadalupe, McKinley, Mora, Rio Arriba, San Miguel, and Socorro counties, all of which have relatively small populations, in rural and small town areas.

Because Bernalillo County includes the city of Albuquerque and its suburbs, it is not exclusively Democratic in its voting behavior. Republicans can win elections in New Mexico by using suburban votes to cut into Democratic margins in Bernalillo County and by doing well in the more rural areas to win the state. Popular Republican candidates in New Mexico often carry Bernalillo County on their way to statewide victory.

Good news for Democrats in New Mexico is that Bernalillo County voted more strongly for Democrat John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election than it did for Al Gore in 2000. The Democratic vote margin of 4,212 in Bernalillo County in 2000 more than doubled to 10,798 in 2004.

Republican voting strength in New Mexico is found in a number of less-populous rural counties scattered around the state. Foremost among these is San Juan County, which is in the northwest corner of New Mexico and contains the city of Farmington. San Juan County had a Republican vote margin of 9,454 in the 2000 presidential race, which increased to 14,682 in 2004.

The second most Republican county in New Mexico is Lea County (Hobbs), located in the southeast corner of the state along the Texas border in an area known as “Little Texas.” Lea County gave George W. Bush a 6,302 vote advantage in 2000 and upped that substantially to a 10,784 Republican vote margin in 2004.

Other small rural counties that produced Republican vote margins



of more than 1,000 votes in both the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections were Chaves (Roswell), Curry (Clovis), Eddy (Carlsbad), Lincoln, Otero (Alamogordo), Roosevelt, Sierra, and Torrance counties, all located in southern and southeastern New Mexico. In every one of these counties, George W. Bush's vote margins increased from 2000 to 2004.

The general trend in New Mexico is for increased Democratic voting in the Albuquerque–Santa Fe corridor and for continued Republican dominance in the remainder of the state. This Democratic Albuquerque–Santa Fe versus other Republican parts of the state gives New Mexico an almost even balance between the two major political parties and its legendary ability to “swing” with the national winner. New Mexico has long been a “battleground state,” a status that should continue in the future.

## Utah

Utah is one of the most Republican states in the United States. From 1985 to 2004, its statewide voting average was 65.9 percent Republican, 4 points higher than the second most Republican Rocky Mountain state, Idaho, and also exceeding Mississippi, the most Republican of the southern states. Utah was not always so Republican. From 1957 to 1976, Utah had a nearly perfect balance between the two major political parties of 50.1 percent Democratic. From 1976 to 2004, Utah's 20-year statewide voting average moved 16 points in favor of the Republicans. Only southern states such as Mississippi (34.4 points Republican) and Alabama (19.6 points Republican) made such dramatic shifts between 1976 and 2004.

The Republicans have long dominated in Utah at the presidential level. The last time Utahans voted Democratic in a closely contested presidential election was in 1948 for President Harry S. Truman over Republican challenger Thomas E. Dewey. In the ensuing 56 years, the only other time Utah voted Democratic for president was in 1964, when incumbent Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson routed Republican U.S. Senator Barry Goldwater. In the 2004 presidential election, George W. Bush defeated John Kerry in Utah with a thumping 73.3 percent of the vote.

The bright spot for Utah Democrats used to be the governorship. From 1964 to 1984, two Democrats, Calvin L. Rampton (1964–1976) and Scott M. Matheson (1976–1984), occupied the governor's office. Since 1984, however, Republicans have occupied Utah governor's chair, all elected by comfortable majorities in excess of 55 percent or more Republican. The current Republican governor, John Huntsman, Jr., won with 58.3 percent of the vote. In the U.S. Senate, the most recent Democratic U.S. senator from Utah was Frank Moss, who left office in 1982.

Utah resembles Colorado in that the vast majority of the state's population is located in an urbanized strip running along the foot of a long north-to-south mountain range. In the 2000 presidential election, 81.1 percent of the vote in Utah was cast in this corridor running from Provo in the south to Ogden, Brigham City, and Logan in the north and spanning the counties of Utah (Provo), Salt Lake (Salt Lake City), Davis (Farmington), Weber (Ogden), Box

Elder (Brigham City), and Cache (Logan).

Democrats are more likely in the Provo-to-Logan urbanized strip, where city Democratic votes are counterbalanced by suburban Republican votes. However, even Salt Lake County, which contains Salt Lake City, the largest metropolis in the state, voted 61.5 percent for George W. Bush in 2000. The rest of the counties in the Provo-to-Logan strip were even more Republican in 2000, and all of the corridor counties increased their Republican vote margins from 2000 to 2004. In Garfield County in south-central Utah, 90.6 percent of voters voted Republican in the 2000 presidential election.

For the Democrats, the strongest county is Carbon (Price), located across the mountains to the east of Provo. Still, this railroading and mining center voted 53.3 percent for George W. Bush. The Republican vote margin of only 460 votes in Carbon County (Price) in 2000 increased to 1,535 in 2004. Democrats can hope to carry this strongly Republican state only in the case of a national Democratic presidential landslide.

## Wyoming

In 1976, Wyoming was the most Republican of the eight Rocky Mountain states, with a 20-year statewide voting average of 54.7 percent Republican. By 2004, this average had increased to 58.8 percent Republican. Yet large Republican gains in other Rockies states have now placed Wyoming as the fourth "most Republican state" in the Rockies.

As in a number of other Rocky Mountain states, the last Democrat to win Wyoming in a presidential election was Lyndon Johnson over Barry Goldwater in 1964. However, as in other Rockies states, Democrats have enjoyed electoral success in Wyoming in the governor's office. Ed Herschler served as governor from 1974 to 1986. He was followed by another Democrat, Mike Sullivan, from 1986 to 1994. The Republicans took over the governorship for the next eight years, but then the Democrats reclaimed it with Dave Freudenthal in 2002.

The Democrats have had no such luck when it comes to the U.S. Senate in Wyoming. The last Democrat to serve Wyoming in the U.S. Senate was Gale McGee, who left office in 1976. Wyoming's best-known political celebrity is Republican Richard Cheney, who served 12 years as the state's lone member of the U.S. House of Representatives, starting in 1978. Cheney went on to become the U.S. Secretary of Defense in the first Bush Administration and Vice President in the second Bush Administration.

In terms of population distribution, Wyoming resembles the two adjoining states of Idaho and Montana in that it has no major metropolis or highly populated urban corridor. The state's citizens are spread out in nine small cities in nine counties that contained 72.6 percent of Wyoming voters in the 2004 presidential election.

The most populous city is the state capital, Cheyenne, located in Laramie County, but that county contained only 16.5 percent of the state's population at the time of the 2000 U.S. Census. Cheyenne thus in no way dominates the state's voting. Laramie County (Cheyenne) voted 66.3 percent Republican in the 2004 presidential election. Similar to most other counties containing small cities throughout the Rocky Mountain West, Laramie County (Cheyenne) is decidedly Republican.

Although Cheyenne is in Laramie County, the city of Laramie is in Albany County. As home to the University of Wyoming, Albany County has a somewhat less Republican character than Laramie County (Cheyenne). Whereas Laramie County (Cheyenne) voted 66.3 percent Republican in the 2004 presidential election, Albany County (Laramie) voted only 55.9 percent Republican in that election.

Teton County, location of the Grand Teton Mountains and the sophisticated resort city of Jackson, is the only Wyoming county that voted for Democrat John Kerry in 2004. As noted above, other Rockies resorts, including Vail, Aspen, and Breckenridge in Colorado and Sun Valley in Idaho, also have a large Democratic base. Table 2 summarizes the 2004 presidential election results in Wyoming's most populous counties

More than any other state in the Rocky Mountain West, Wyoming remained steadily Republican from 1976 to 2004. It will most likely continue to be one of the most Republican states in the Rocky Mountains as well as nationwide.

Table 2

The Nine Most Populous Counties in Wyoming with their Percentage Two-party Vote in the 2004 Presidential Election

Albany	55.9% Republican
Campbell	83.4% Republican
Fremont	68.2% Republican
Laramie	66.3% Republican
Natrona	68.6% Republican
Park	78.4% Republican
Sheridan	70.4% Republican
Sweetwater	67.2% Republican
Teton	53.8% Demoractic







### Metropolitan Areas and Notable House Seats in the Rocky Mountain West

While romanticized notions of the Rocky Mountain West portray its people as farmers, cowboys, and ranch hands, 83 percent of the region's population lives in and around a handful of sprawling metropolitan areas. As these cities expand—many at some of the fastest rates nationwide—they increasingly define the politics of their respective states. A look at recent presidential voting trends in seven large metropolitan areas dramatizes the changing politics of the Rocky Mountain West and may help predict the region's future political landscape. This section examines presidential election results in Phoenix, Tucson, Denver, Colorado Springs, Las Vegas, Albuquerque, and Salt Lake City for the three general elections from 1996 to 2004 (Figure 1). It also looks at six of the region's most hotly contested 2006 congressional races to suggest possible 2008 general election outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, the electorate of the seven targeted metropolitan areas shifted four percent to the Republican Party nominee. On average, Republican presidential candidates could rely on roughly 52 percent of the vote from these voters. The most conservative of the seven metropolitan areas is Colorado Springs, which on average voted 67 percent Republican. Conversely, the most liberal urban area was Tucson, where Republican nominees on average garnered only about 45 percent of the vote. Overall, four of these metropolitan areas leaned Democratic and three Republican.

Not a single metropolitan area shifted towards the Democrats between 1996 and 2004, as anticipated when Ross Perot abandoned his presidential aspirations and traditional Republicans flocked back to GOP nominees. Nonetheless, some cities were more re-

sistant than others to this rightward trend, most notably Denver and Albuquerque which both shifted less than one percent to the Republican column. Interestingly, the Denver suburbs shifted only 1.3 percent to the right during this time. To some analysts, this tiny shift suggests a greater statewide leftward shift in Colorado. While the presidential vote may not yet support the argument for an increasingly “blue” Colorado, the state's 2006 congressional results provide more hope for Democrats.

The most pronounced shift in voter sentiment occurred in Salt Lake City, which in 1996 gave Bob Dole only 52 percent of its vote but in 2004 sided with George W. Bush by 62 percent. In three election cycles, the Salt Lake metropolitan area, including Summit and Tooele counties, experienced a 10 percentage point shift to the right, with the GOP going from earning just over half of the city's total vote to nearly two-thirds. This shift can be attributed largely to the popularity of George W. Bush and his very public championing of the religious principles embraced by city's socially conservative Christian voters. Predictably, Salt Lake's large socially and religiously conservative populous has been increasingly attracted to Republican presidential nominees as the GOP has drifted rightward from moderate Bob Dole to conservative George W. Bush.

Like Salt Lake, the Phoenix metropolitan area has also experienced a substantial, though more gradual, shift to the right. Arizona's largest city gave Dole 51 percent of its vote in 1996, 55 percent to Bush in 2000 and 57.5 percent to Bush during his 2004 reelection bid. Overall, the city and its suburbs moved about 6.5 percentage points to the right, the second largest shift among metropolitan areas in the Rocky Mountain West. This shift reflects an increasing number of retirees migrating to the Scottsdale–Phoenix–Mesa area. Lured by warm weather, green fairways, and scenic developments, this



group is certain to grow as more Baby Boomers reach retirement age and affect Arizona's future political landscape.

No analysis of dramatic change would be complete without mentioning Las Vegas, one of America's fastest growing areas. Between 2000 and 2005, the Las Vegas metropolitan area (roughly defined as Clark County) has grown a stunning 25 percent as nearly 400,000 new residents have moved to this desert metropolis. For all its growth, Las Vegas is also one of the West's most liberal areas. Since 1996, only 46 percent of its votes on average have gone to Republican presidential candidates. With more than 1.7 million people (70 percent of the state's total population), Las Vegas increasingly dominates Nevada politics. Furthermore, the new early timing of the Nevada caucuses in the upcoming 2008 presidential nominating process has heightened its significance and will push it further into the national political spotlight.

In 2006, the seven metropolitan areas examined here—Phoenix, Tucson, Denver, Colorado Springs, Las Vegas, Albuquerque, and Salt Lake City—had some of the nation's most hotly contested congressional races. We conclude with an analysis of six of these election contests and their implications for the 2008 election cycle. Before considering these races, it is important to note a few ana-

lytical benchmarks. First, although it is tempting to compare 2006 congressional election results to the presidential results of 1996, 2000, and 2004, congressional and presidential races differ greatly. Generally, voters may feel a more personal relationship with their members of Congress; unlike presidential candidates, congressional candidates are "locals" and thus more often immunized from national political trends. Moreover, congressional redistricting over the past few decades has increasingly locked in Democratic and Republican strongholds, rendering more and more districts non-competitive.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we assess the 2006 midterms mainly to suggest possible future trends.

Second, because of the strong disapproval of both the current Bush administration and the war in Iraq, 2006 was a dominant Democratic year nationwide. Analysts have identified several off-year elections over the last few decades in which opposition parties (defined as either the party in the congressional minority or the party not in control of the White House or both) were able to successfully nationalize election campaigns, as in 2006.<sup>3</sup> Nationwide, Democrats gained six Senate and 31 House seats for control of both chambers of Congress. Thus, because the 2006 numbers may have represented more of a disapproval of Republicans than a swing toward Democrats, the data from that race may be more of an anomaly than prologue. However, the six House races analyzed may still suggest larger trends shaping the Rocky Mountain West's political landscape.

Of these six races, two were in Arizona, two in Colorado, and one each in Nevada and New Mexico; all of these districts encompass large chunks of suburban counties. Demographically, each of these districts is closely representative of the Rocky Mountain West as a whole, with mostly suburban constituencies and a roughly 15–20 percent Hispanic population base. As some of the most competitive races in the country, these districts also were some of the most expensive.<sup>4</sup> Such ultra-competitive high-stakes races are similar to competitive presidential campaigns. Finally, it is highly likely that many of the same hot-button issues that shaped 2006 congressional races—among them the Iraq War and immigration reform—will likely remain key issues for voters in 2008.

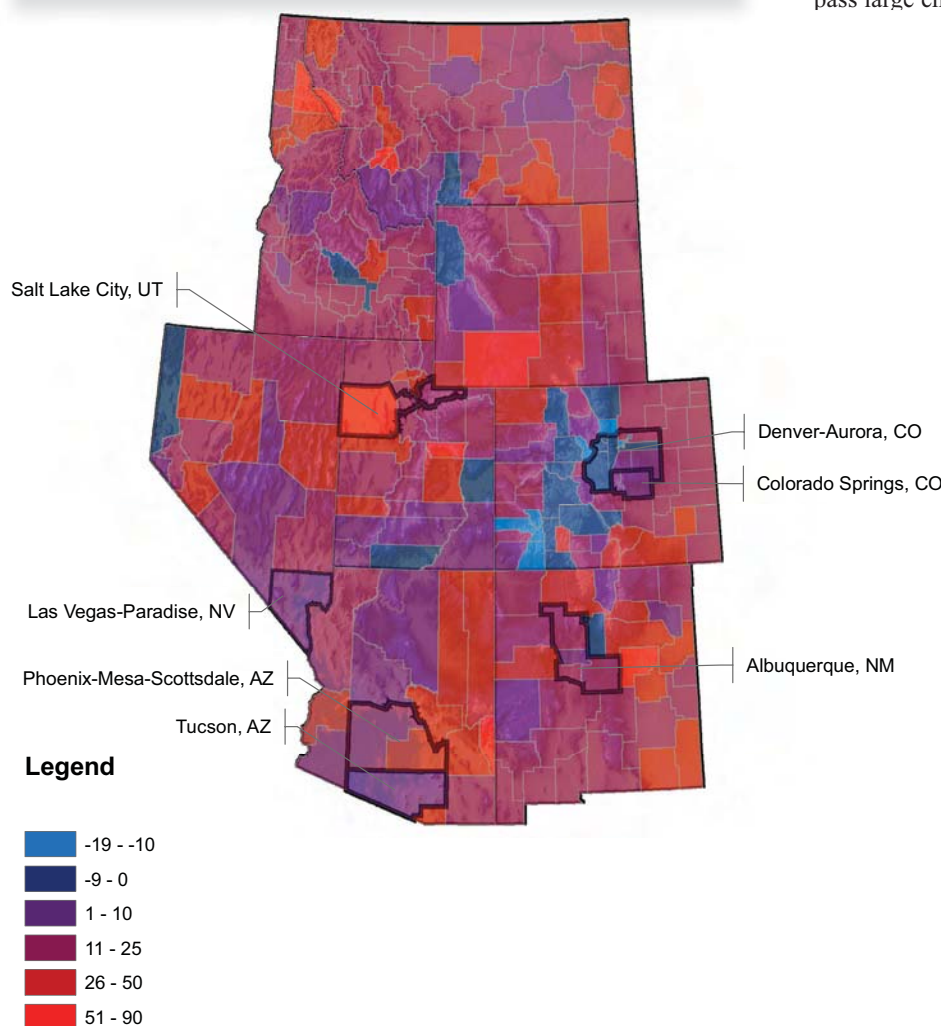
### In Colorado...

Three of these six House races suggest that the West is increasingly turning towards the Democratic Party. In Colorado's 7th congressional district, state representative Ed Perlmutter defeated Rick O'Donnell to gain the seat previously held by Republican gubernatorial candidate Bob Beauprez. Although John Kerry won Colorado's 7th in 2004, his 3 percent win margin paled in comparison to Perlmutter's impressive 13 point (nearly 23,000 vote) margin of victory. In 2002, the Democratic candidate lost this House seat by only 121 votes and the 7th gained a reputation as Colorado's most competitive district. Nonetheless, Perlmutter's impressive performance in 2006 bodes well for Democrats hoping for Colorado's electoral votes in 2008.

At the same time, Democrats did not fare as well in Colorado's 4th congressional district (which includes some of Denver's outer northeastern sub-

**Figure 1**  
County and MSA Percent Change in Votes for a  
Republican Presidential Candidate, 1996-2004

Source: Data collected and generously provided by Robert J. Vanderbei, Ph.D.



Note: a negative percentage indicates a shift in voting trends toward the Democratic Candidate





urbs). Although incumbent Republican Marilyn Musgrave failed to gain a majority of the district's votes—losing significant support to Reform Party candidate Eric Eidsness, who garnered 11 percent of the total vote—she nonetheless earned a 3-point victory over Democrat Angie Paccione. The year's anti-Republican character was perhaps best shown in this district. While Musgrave garnered five percent less of the vote than she did in 2004, Paccione effectively lost votes, ending with two percent less than Democrat Stan Matsunaka achieved against Musgrave in 2004. Thus while many voters in Colorado's 4th were clearly frustrated with the Republican-controlled Congress, they were simply unwilling to vote for a Democrat, instead supporting third-party candidate Eric Eidsness—even though Eidsness had little chance of winning. While Musgrave's win should come as no surprise, the inability of Democrats to make any significant gains in this district in such a Democratic friendly year and with a viable candidate suggests that parts of the Rocky Mountain West may simply be off-limits to Democratic candidates.

#### **In Arizona...**

While Arizona may remain a Republican stronghold for the foreseeable future, the state, and more specifically suburban Phoenix and Tucson, hosted two important victories for Democrats in the past election cycle. In Arizona's 8th district, a seat that only four years ago Democrats lost by almost 60,000 votes, Democratic state senator Gabrielle Giffords defeated Republican Randy Graf by slightly more than 25,000 ballots, a dramatic 85,000 vote swing. To the north, in Arizona's 5th surrounding the Phoenix area, incumbent Republican J.D. Hayworth was defeated by Democrat Harry Mitchell. Hayworth spent almost twice as much as Mitchell but still came up about four percentage points short of victory in a district where just two years prior George W. Bush won by a solid nine percent.

While many analysts saw Hayworth's loss as another example of the nation's unhappiness with the Republican-controlled Congress, Harry Mitchell's victory cannot be attributed exclusively to an anti-Republican environment. Overall, Mitchell gained 12 percent more votes than Democrat Elizabeth Rogers managed in 2004. The success of Democrats Mitchell and Giffords may portend a grow-

ing challenge for Arizona Republicans, signifying that voters in these previously secure GOP districts may be willing to vote for Democrats. This trend may prove perilous for Republican challengers in 2008 since many of the issues that dominated campaigns in 2006 are likely to remain central in voters' minds in 2008.

#### **In Nevada...**

Democrats also showed important gains in Nevada's fast growing 3rd congressional district. This suburban Las Vegas district accounts for much of the state's 66 percent population growth of the 1990s. Last year, incumbent Republican Jon Porter won a costly and close race against Democrat Tessa Hafen. A former press secretary and senior aide to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, Hafen was easily outspent by Porter, but nonetheless came close to defeating the two-term incumbent.

Overall, Hafen's 47 percent of the vote represents a significant gain for Democrats. She lost to Porter by only one percent and, critically, surpassed the dismal 40 percent of the vote achieved by Democrat Tom Gallagher in 2004. Although the district's demographics continue to change, many of the new residents are white-collar families and elderly retirees, both traditionally Republican voting groups. As such, the district may be a bellwether of which political party will come to dominate the suburban Rocky Mountain West.

#### **In New Mexico...**

It is noteworthy that while Democrats made gains in the Rocky Mountain West in 2006, most incumbent Republicans retained their seats even in that anti-Republican year. Perhaps best exemplifying this success was Heather Wilson's extremely close victory (by just 879 votes out of more than 200,000 cast) over challenger New Mexico Attorney General Patricia Madrid in a district that in 2004 tilted slightly to Democrat John Kerry. In the end, Wilson's resume—including extensive military experience—was probably enough to secure her reelection in a heavily military-oriented district. Madrid's strong showing in a historically Republican district coupled with her overall statewide popularity could bode well for her if, as some anticipate, she runs for the open U.S. Senate seat in 2008.

#### **Conclusion**

Overall, the Rocky Mountain West remains a Republican region, with voting trend data over the past two generations—and over the past few presidential election cycles—suggesting Republican gains, not losses. However, variation exists both within and among the Rocky Mountain States. Moderate Democrats can and do win statewide races in many states, though rarely in recent years in Utah, Wyoming, and Idaho. Democratic presidential and electoral prospects are somewhat promising in Nevada, New Mexico, and Colorado yet less promising in Montana and rather improbable in Arizona, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming, unless a national Democratic landslide takes place, such as those that occurred in 1936 and 1964.

Thus, Democratic strategists will most likely target Nevada, New Mexico, and Colorado, focusing in on the Denver metropolitan area, greater Las Vegas (Clark County, Nevada), and the metro region from Santa Fe to Albuquerque in New Mexico. Ski resort communities and university counties also favor Democratic vote gains. Thus, Boulder, Denver, Albuquerque, Las Vegas, Aspen, Taos, Vail, and similar communities are trending Democratic in contrast to most rural areas and places such as Colorado Springs and northern Nevada.

Democrats have won a handful of congressional and Senate seats in the past two election cycles. While there is thus hope for the party, Democrats, even with these several new seats, only control 36 percent of this region's overall delegation (of 44 seats) in Congress.

No one knows whether the 2004 and 2006 Democratic gains represent a trend or are merely a temporary deviation (or even blip) in the partisan make up of this region. And we probably will not know for another two or three more election cycles. Yet what we do know is that the Democrats, if recent national patterns hold, will have to pick up at least two or three states in this region to secure an Electoral College victory.

Republicans are well aware of this and will likely redouble their efforts in the three most competitive states. Plainly, while the Rocky Mountain region comprises just 7 percent of the nation's population, its clout in the Senate (16 percent) and now in the Electoral College give the region prominence.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Before addressing the data, it is important to note a key variable. Republican presidential candidates have performed better nationwide in each election since Bob Dole's 1996 defeat to Bill Clinton in large part due to independent candidate Ross Perot's exit from the ballot after his impressive 1992 and 1996 showings. While Dole managed only 40 percent of the popular vote in 1996, Bush won about 48 percent in 2000 and achieved a slim 51 percent majority in 2004. Since we should expect an increase in the Republican vote, it is important to focus on the regions that have been least resistant to this rightward drift.

<sup>2</sup>The noncompetitive nature of many House races results (with some candidates even running unopposed) skews analyses of election results. For example, without controlling for Democrat Diana DeGette's uncontested reelection in Colorado's 1st congressional district, aggregate data would be contaminated by adding a 100 percent margin win for the Democratic candidate.

<sup>3</sup>Previous examples of so-called nationalized congressional elections include the Watergate-infused campaign of 1974, when Democrats overwhelmed Republicans coast to coast, and the "Contract with America" race in 1994, when Republicans took control of the House of Representatives for the first time in more than four decades.

<sup>4</sup>Aggregate spending by Republican and Democratic candidates in these six races surpassed a stunning \$32 million. The Wilson-Madrid race in New Mexico alone cost a whopping combined \$8.3 million.

<sup>5</sup>It should be noted that in 2001, Colorado Democrats gained majority control of the state Senate for the first time in 40 years and with it the state's congressional redistricting authority.

<sup>6</sup>Six-term incumbent Republican Senator Pete Domenici will be 76 in 2008 and reportedly is considering retiring.

