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The Nation

Democrats Score in the Rockies

by JOHN NICHOLS

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Imagine a parallel universe where, instead of crying in their beer as the election results rolled in on November 2, Democrats were raising microbrews in toasts to their unprecedented success. Now, stop imagining and focus on the Rocky Mountain West, a region that trended so Republican in the 1990s that a popular joke suggested gays and lesbians were afraid to come out of the closet for fear of being thought to be Democrats. This year the Democrats got the last laugh. While those so-simplistic-as-to-be-useless maps of partisan breakdowns in the presidential race paint the region as hopelessly Republican--feeding the sense that wide expanses of America are lost forever to the Democratic Party--Dan Petegorsky of the Western States Center invites a closer look, which reveals that "the 'red' label on the presidential map contrasts sharply with the state-level results."

On the same day that George W. Bush was winning nationally and Republicans were increasing their majorities in Congress, Democrats in the eight states of the Rocky Mountain West were winning state and local contests at a rate not seen in decades and offering valuable lessons for the national Democratic Party, organized labor and progressive activist groups that are sorely in need of new models for campaigning. "Before the pundits write this off as the year when nothing seemed to work right for the Democrats," says Montana Democratic Party executive director Brad Martin, "there is a Western story that needs to be told."

Actually, there are several stories. Shifting demographics, local issues and the extent to which the presidential contest was fought out on the ground had varying influences on state results. But there were some constants: Western Democrats tended to abandon the national party's template and focus on local issues, they relied far more heavily on volunteers than paid staff and they worked much, much harder--and with considerable success--to attract rural voters.

The one other constant was good news. Here's just a little of what happened in the Rocky Mountain West on November 2:

§ Montana elected its first Democratic governor in twenty years. The new governor, rancher Brian Schweitzer, joins Democratic chief executives in Arizona, New Mexico and Wyoming. Montana Democrats also took back the offices of state attorney general, auditor and superintendent of public instruction. A victory in a key state Public Service Commission race gave Democrats control of Montana's chief regulatory body. They shifted control of the State Senate from 29-21 Republican to 27-23 Democrat. And they came within one vote of taking control of the Montana House. The Democratic delegation includes eight Native Americans, several of whom were set to assume leadership positions in their respective legislative chambers.

§ Colorado Democrats won both a US Senate seat and a US House seat that had been held by Republicans. They also reversed Republican majorities in the state House and Senate to take control of both chambers for the first time in forty-four years, and installed the state's first female

State Senate president, a female majority leader in the state House and an African-American Senate president pro tem. The newly empowered Democrats immediately signaled to conservative Republican Governor Bill Owens that he had better select a moderate to replace outgoing Attorney General Ken Salazar--the Democrat who won the state's US Senate seat. The new Democratic Senate majority leader, Ken Gordon, said that to win legislative approval for his nominee, Owens would have to appoint someone with "mainstream values." Asked to define that term, Gordon said, "Not John Ashcroft."

§ Even in the states with the heaviest patterns of Republican voting in the region--and, as it happens, the nation--Democrats scored both symbolic victories and sweet successes. In Wyoming, US House candidate Ted Ladd, whose name never appeared on lists of targeted Democratic challengers, took 42 percent of the vote, the best percentage for a Democratic Congressional candidate in fourteen years. Idaho elected its first openly lesbian legislator, Nicole LeFavour, an environmental activist who easily claimed a Boise seat in the State House. And the *Salt Lake Tribune* declared on the day after the election, "While the nation and most of Utah tilt further to the right, Salt Lake County is solidifying as a bastion for the left." The new county mayor and the three at-large county council members are all Democrats. The local government wins are part of a trend throughout the region, where Democrats in recent years have taken charge of mayoral posts in Billings, Boise, Denver, Phoenix, Las Vegas, Salt Lake City and Santa Fe.

§ Voters in Western states cast their ballots on the green side of a number of environmental referendums, with Montanans refusing by a 58-42 margin to reverse a six-year-old ban on dangerous cyanide leach mining, and Coloradans passing a Renewable Energy Amendment, which requires major public utilities to get 10 percent of their electricity from renewable sources by 2015. Nevada voters approved a state minimum-wage hike, Montana voters backed medical marijuana and Colorado voters endorsed a tobacco tax that proponents hope will free substantial new money for healthcare and children's programs.

§ Though John Kerry was dismissed as a "Massachusetts liberal," a phrase that ought to be the kiss of political death in a region where the word "Eastern" can be taken as an insult, the Democrat came close to winning two states that went easily for George Bush in 2000--Colorado and Nevada--and improved the Democratic percentage of the presidential vote in seven of the region's eight states. Even in states where Kerry took a drubbing, the Democratic campaign showed strength--moving up five points in Montana, a state where he never campaigned. In Wyoming one county backed the Democratic presidential ticket. And it turned out to be Teton County, the home of Vice President Dick Cheney, whose neighbors picked the Democratic ticket by a healthy 53-45 margin.

Surveying the results from his office in Missoula, former US Representative Pat Williams said, "When you look at what happened in the West on November 2, it's wildly encouraging. It's a Democratic sweep in Montana, big advances in Colorado, pick-ups everywhere--Democrats winning in places where they haven't won in decades." Williams, a Democrat who left the House eight years ago, has a new catchphrase, "Montana? A Red State? Take Another Look." He's not alone. Democrats in a number of Western states are trying, with somewhat limited success, to

call attention to the fact that their region is not nearly as red as the red/blue maps and the pundits would suggest.

There is no one explanation for the improvement of Democratic fortunes in this region. Like any set of election results, those coming out of states like Montana and Colorado are complicated by factors ranging from population shifts to local issues to the relative appeal of particular candidates. But there are signals that can be taken away from the region's results. For Democrats, they may be some of the most instructive lessons to come out of the November 2 voting.

For instance, while many pundits saw in the national election results a signal that Democrats were out of touch with "moral values"--the hot code phrase for opposition to gay marriage and abortion rights--Western Democrats found that one of their big advantages was a growing sense among voters that Republicans had gotten a little too in touch--or, to be more precise, obsessed--with that theme. "The Republican far right has overplayed its hand in the West for more than a decade," says Williams. "I heard a lot of people say that the Republican Party seemed to be more concerned about legislating mores than creating jobs. In Western states, where wages are low, that doesn't make sense." Across the West, Democrats explained their advances at least in part by suggesting that voters had gotten sick and tired of moralizing Republicans. "The Republicans' obsession with narrow cultural issues while the state's looming fiscal crisis was ignored drove a deep wedge between fiscally conservative live-and-let-live Republicans and the neo-conservative extremists with an agenda," explains *Denver Post* columnist Diane Carman.

Before the election, Susan Good, who in the 1990s served as chair of the Montana Republican Party, told radio listeners in that state to vote for Democratic legislative candidates because the Republican Party had been hijacked by ideologues, who had made it "stagnant." Another Montana Republican, State Senator John Bohlinger, declaring that "somehow we lost our way," jumped party lines to run for lieutenant governor on the Democratic ticket. Charles Johnson, a Statehouse reporter for the *Montana Standard* newspaper, said, "By most accounts, Montanans loved the bipartisan approach in the ad run by the Democratic team running for governor and lieutenant governor. 'I'm John Bohlinger, I'm a Republican businessman from Billings. And I'm Brian Schweitzer, a Democratic farmer from Whitefish.'" Johnson said it was the most effective ad of the campaign.

The embrace of bipartisanship by Democrats running in a number of Western states played well with voters. But it did not involve an abandonment of principles. Rather, Democrats found old-school Republicans like Bohlinger, whom one Montana newspaper described as "a popular state senator known for his moderate--some would say liberal--views on education and health care," and offered them an opportunity to join in a broad fight against the extreme right-wing forces that have taken charge of most Western Republican parties. There is a huge lesson here for national Democrats and their allies, who failed in the 2004 campaign to make effective use of the many prominent Republicans--and traditionally Republican-leaning newspapers--who said they could not back Bush.

Another huge lesson for the 527 groups that assisted the Kerry campaign and national Democrats has to do with the identification of issues. Democrats in Western states, most of which were not targeted by national campaigns, developed their own sets of issues. In a number of states they

emphasized the need for openness in government, which had become a concern during years of wall-to-wall Republican rule that often saw important decisions made in closed caucuses.

Western Democrats also focused a great deal of attention on the threat to water quality posed by environmentally insensitive practices such as coal-bed methane extraction [see Eyal Press, "Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch," October 11]. And they spent a lot of time explaining their positions, developing detailed accounts of why such practices--which were backed by energy-industry lobbyists and their Republican allies--pose a threat to the livelihoods of farmers and ranchers in states like Montana. In Colorado, Democrats pushed renewable energy and water rights initiatives. In states across the region, they embraced the concerns of Native Americans, who have emerged as a powerful and, in many states, reliably Democratic voting bloc.

Along with their own issues, they developed their own kinds of campaigns. A new group, Democrats for the West, served as something of a clearinghouse for ideas and cooperative initiatives--for instance, the Democratic governors of Wyoming and Arizona traveled to Montana to aid Schweitzer's gubernatorial campaign. Campaign techniques varied from state to state but they usually placed a huge emphasis on using volunteers rather than the paid staffers favored by some party and 527 groups that worked the national campaign for the Democrats. In Montana, with a field staff of twenty-one, the state Democratic Party fielded close to 3,000 volunteers for get-out-the-vote efforts. "We reached out early to the pro-choice community, the hunting and fishing community and folks from the labor movement, and we said, 'Look, you've got to be a part of this,'" explained Brad Martin of the Montana Democrats, who came to the party from the public interest research group (PIRG) movement. "We have a strong history of the party being an activist organization, and we really emphasized that in this campaign."

To be sure, there were some home-grown 527 groups, like Forward Colorado, which was formed by four millionaire environmentalists in that state. But Forward Colorado, which is credited with playing a major role in shifting the balance in that state's legislative races, remained close to the ground. The group didn't impose cookie-cutter approaches developed in Washington; rather, it worked closely with local activists to develop messages and mailings targeted for individual districts.

So it was that, on November 2, while national Democrats were wringing their hands after getting wiped out in rural regions of states like Ohio, Democrats in the West were pointing to successes in remote counties. On Colorado's Western Slope, Democrat John Salazar's campaign slogan was "Send a Farmer to Congress." In a district that had elected Republicans in the past, voters followed Salazar's advice. They also backed his brother, Ken Salazar, for the state's US Senate seat. Ken Salazar, who campaigned in his pickup truck and delivered a stump speech that focused on the need to defend the interests of "the forgotten parts of Colorado," ran more than ten points ahead of the national ticket in rural areas. He did so while backing abortion rights and civil unions for gays and lesbians. As Brad Woodhouse, a Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee spokesman, noted after the election, Salazar "pays homage and respect to the beliefs of rural voters, while also staying true to the core Democratic principles." If there is a single lesson that Democrats and their activist allies need to learn after what was for the most part a 2004 electoral debacle, it is that rural America is still winnable. And they can start by looking west.

