

The Big Sweep—What it means to Medicine

Colorado has entered the pantheon of color shifting states, moving from purple to deep blue. For the first time since 1958, the Democrats now occupy the legislative and executive branches of government. In the statehouse, Democrats expanded their majority by four in the House making it 39 out of 65, and by two in the Senate for a 20 out of 35 head count. COMPAC's elevated and accelerated grassroots role in these races was unprecedented, as was the level of collaboration and coordination with county and specialty medical societies, students, and the Alliance.

From candidate screenings that made our issues locally and powerfully relevant, to our steadfast, bottom up support through “physicians-for-pick-your-candidate” campaigning, block walks, fund raising, robo calls and independent efforts, medicine was on the front line. CMS also maximized its Small Donor Committee funds to stand behind incumbents who were there for us on our managed care reform legislation - SB 198. We were loyal, consistent, persistent, and decidedly bipartisan. We stood by the Democrats and the Republicans who have stood by us.

At least five other states changed from Republican to Democratic Governorships, tipping the balance to over half the Governors' mansions, which will have substantial and thus far unanalyzed implications for the 2008 presidential sweepstakes, and place Colorado at the epicenter of those contests. More on this seismic spike and ensuing waves of influence in the near future.

While the pundits continue to pore over results, conduct their post mortems and sift through all the political implications of a majority of Democratic Governorships and congressional majorities, here is our initial take on what this will likely mean for Colorado medicine in the short run up to the 2007 legislative session:

1. Health care has come of political age. Access to care is no longer a victim of benign neglect, the noisy kid kept strapped into the back seat. We just got hold of the wheel. Not only did candidates on both sides of the aisle campaign on health care issues, Governor-elect Ritter put health care front and center in his campaign, and reemphasized that commitment in his acceptance speech. Our now seemingly prescient ramp-up of our Physicians' Congress and steadfast support for the creation of a Blue Ribbon Commission not only has wheels, it has sprouted wings, and can fly.
2. Colorado Medical Society has come of political age as well. Physicians, students and Alliance members were embedded in pivotal races, on both sides of the partisan divide. Medicine provided a steady stream of draft speeches, talking points, white papers, and practical advice to the incumbents and candidates. We were FOR candidates, and campaigned on the positive side of health care advocacy. In a world that was increasingly nasty and mean spirited, we kept our lab coats on and spoke as one voice for our patients and our profession. Governor-elect Ritter had strong support from his many physician friends, who regularly advised him and will be close by during this transition into a Ritter administration.

3. There will not only be a new sheriff in town that values us, there will be a whole passel of new deputies to get to know, starting with the Commissioner of Insurance, and his/her peers in the Departments of Regulatory Affairs, and Health Care Policy Finance.
4. Our worthy adversaries in the managed care world placed most of their bets on one horse. There are manifold opportunities for setting a national standard on managed care reforms. Medicine should be very careful what we ask for in what will likely be an accommodating legislature.
5. Colorado stepped to the national stage, and our efforts in the health care arena will have national audiences. The National Democratic Convention by all accounts will land here. Get ready for boatloads of clichés like “national spotlight” and an invasion of oddly dressed partisans wearing funny hats and buttons and decidedly non-western accents. (We will prepare a guide of how to understand these furriners at a later date)
6. Congress will jump to light speed on health care issues—more hearings, more aggressive engagement on entitlement issues, and more show trials that will call into question every aspect of corporatized health care— managed care organizations, the phrmas, the medical device manufacturers, the non-profit systems. Transparency just got redefined. The White House will be engaged in almost weekly games of chicken as Democrats push issues onto the President’s desk and say, “make my day.” Congressional Republicans talk of a Rove memo circulating that urges their own competing national health care platform and campaign-centered message. But as this will seem breathtaking in scope, don’t hold your breath. Congress hasn’t outgrown its penchant for partisan bickering, payback, gridlock, and it’s uncertain how the Ds will wield their hard-fought influence in what are still very tight balances.