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The Colorado Model
The Democrats' plan for turning red states blue.
by Fred Barnes
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Denver

Last January, a "confidential" memo from a Democratic political consultant outlined an ambitious scheme for spending \$11.7 million in Colorado this year to crush Republicans. The money would come from rich liberal donors in the state and would be spent primarily on defeating Senate candidate Bob Schaffer (\$5.1 million) and Representative Marilyn Musgrave (\$2.6 million), who are loathed by liberals for sponsoring a proposed constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage. The overarching aim: Lock in Democratic control of Colorado for years to come.

Leaked memos have a way of revealing who's on top and who's not in politics and which party has energy and momentum. In Colorado, Democrats are third in registered voters (31.2 percent), behind both Independents (34.19 percent) and Republicans (34.14 percent). But in the last two election cycles--2004 and 2006--they've routed Republicans, capturing the governorship, both houses of the state legislature, a U.S. Senate seat, and two U.S. House seats. Democrats are on a roll, and that's not likely to change this year. Republicans are demoralized, disorganized, and more focused on averting further losses in 2008 than on staging a comeback.

The Democratic surge in Colorado reflects the national trend, but it involves a great deal more. There's something unique going on in Colorado that, if copied in other states, has the potential to produce sweeping Democratic gains nationwide. That something is the "Colorado Model," and it's certain to be a major topic of discussion when Democrats convene in Denver in the last week of August for their national convention.

While the Colorado Model isn't a secret, it hasn't drawn much national attention either. Democrats, for now anyway, seem wary of touting it. One reason for their reticence is that it depends partly on wealthy liberals' spending tons of money not only on "independent expenditures" to attack Republican office-seekers but also to create a vast infrastructure of liberal organizations that produces an anti-Republican, anti-conservative echo chamber in politics and the media.

Colorado is where this model is being tested and refined. And Republicans, even more than Democrats, say that it's working impressively. (For Republicans, it offers an excuse for their tailspin.) Jon Caldara, president of the Independence Institute, a conservative think tank based in Denver, says Republicans around the country should be alarmed by the success of the Colorado Model. "Watch out," he says, "it's coming to a state near you."

It probably is. With enough money, its main elements can no doubt be replicated in other states. But a large measure of political shrewdness and opportunism is also required, political traits that have eluded Republicans in Colorado while becoming the hallmark of their opponents. Democrats are

wisely running candidates, statewide and locally, who campaign as centrists, not as liberals.

In 2004, in their first offensive against Republicans, the rich liberals worked surreptitiously. They'd been brought together by Al Yates, the former president of Colorado State University, and later were dubbed the "Gang of Four" by the press--or, sarcastically, by Republicans, the "Fab Four." Two of the four, Tim Gill and Rutt Bridges, made millions in computer software. Jared Polis, along with his parents, grew rich from building and selling Internet companies. The fourth, Pat Stryker, is heir to a medical products fortune and runs her family's foundation.

They quietly targeted a handful of Republican state legislators (particularly social conservatives opposed to gay rights), polled to find out what issues might work against them, and promoted their Democratic opponents. Dan Haley, the editorial page editor of the *Denver Post*, told me he realized a clever, new tactic was being pursued when he received a glossy mailer late in the campaign backing a firefighter who was the little-known Democratic challenger of a Republican incumbent. The firefighter had obviously not paid for the expensive piece of campaign literature.

The firefighter lost, but other Democratic challengers won. Republicans were flummoxed, having been caught totally by surprise. For the first time in 44 years, Democrats gained control of both the state senate and house. The Gang of Four had spent an estimated \$2 million. In 2006, Gill and Stryker escalated their spending to \$7.5 million, and Democrats won the governor's race. "There's nobody on the Republican side putting in that kind of money," says Republican consultant Walt Klein.

As for the 2008 race, that confidential memo, dated January 23, fell into the hands of a Republican activist and was first reported on January 29 by Lynn Bartels of the *Rocky Mountain News*. It had been drafted by Democratic strategist Dominic DeIPapa and sent to Al Yates, the guru of the rich liberals. They downplayed its significance, though it memorably declared the plan would "define Schaffer/foot on throat." At the very least the memo showed the magnitude of the effort to drive Republicans deeper into the minority in Colorado.

And that effort draws powerful support from a liberal infrastructure that conservatives aren't close to matching. For years, the Independence Institute, founded in 1985 by John Andrews and headed by Tom Tancredo before he was elected to the U.S. House, stood alone as an influential intellectual and political force in Colorado. (Later Andrews was Republican leader of the Colorado senate.) In 1999, Rutt Bridges started the Bighorn Center for Public Policy, and a year later the Bell Policy Center was created specifically to counter the Independence Institute--prompting the institute's Caldara to quip, the Bell center should be called the Dependence Institute.

That was only the beginning of the buildup. Eric O'Keefe, chairman of the conservative Sam Adams Alliance in Chicago, says there are seven "capacities" that are required to drive a successful political strategy and keep it on offense: the capacity to generate intellectual ammunition, to pursue investigations, to mobilize for elections, to fight media bias, to pursue strategic litigation, to train new leaders, and to sustain a presence in the new media. Colorado liberals have now created institutions that possess all seven capacities. By working together, they generate political noise and attract press coverage. Explains Caldara, "Build an echo chamber and the media laps it up."

First, there are the think tanks such as Bighorn and Bell and supposedly nonpartisan political advocacy groups like the Colorado clone of *MoveOn.org* called *ProgressNowAction.org*, founded in 2005. Another clone, this one a local version of Media Matters known as Colorado Media Matters, was created two years ago to harass journalists and editorial writers who don't push the liberal line.

There's a "public interest" law firm, Colorado Ethics Watch, established in 2006, plus an online newspaper, the *Colorado Independent*, with a team of reporters to ferret out wrongdoing by Republicans, also begun in 2006. And there's a school to train new liberal leaders, the Center for Progressive Leadership Colorado, as well as new media outlets with bloggers and online news and gossip, including *ColoradoPols.com* and *SquareState.net*. That covers all seven capacities. Count them.

It's unclear exactly who is funding these outfits, since they don't have to disclose their donors. But the band of rich liberals are assumed to be the biggest contributors. And that's part of the problem for conservatives and Republicans. They don't have a cadre of what Caldara calls "super spenders" to tap for money, and Republicans have lacked the gumption and foresight to build a comparable conservative infrastructure.

To their distress, Republicans have discovered how skillful the liberal collective is at bedeviling them. It works quite simply. The investigative arm uncovers some alleged wrongdoing by a Republican candidate or official or plays up what someone else has claimed. Then Ethics Watch steps in and demands an official investigation, and *ProgressNowAction.org* jumps on the story. This is synergy at work. It spurs political chatter. Finally, the mainstream media are forced to report on it.

Republican secretary of state Mike Coffman was hounded for months by *Colorado Confidential*, now the *Colorado Independent*, for allowing a state employee to run a side business and not reporting a supposed conflict of interest too microscopic to be worth explaining. The mainstream media eventually picked up the story, and Colorado Ethics Watch filed a formal complaint. Later, an official audit found no wrongdoing, but only after Coffman had been publicly pilloried. The episode didn't help his current campaign for a U.S. House seat.

Caldara, too, has been targeted by the liberal groups. He used the phrase "bitch slapped" on his late-night talk radio show. Colorado Media Matters complained, and Caldara says *ProgressNowAction.org* sought to get advertisers to drop his show. "They tried to find a way to Imus me," Caldara says. He's still on the air.

Colorado, for the past half-century anyway, has not been a solidly Republican state. "We're not a very ideological state or a very partisan state," former Republican senator Bill Armstrong says. Colorado voters tilt slightly to the right, though you'd never know it from recent elections. The state was strongly affected by waves of newcomers. Starting in the 1970s, Colorado elected Democrats Gary Hart, Tim Wirth, and Ben Nighthorse Campbell to the Senate, Pat Schroeder to the House, and Democrats to the governor's office for 24 consecutive years. Bill Clinton won the state in the 1992 presidential race. So the notion the current rise of Democrats is a historic, unprecedented breakthrough--that's pure myth.

Republicans rallied in the 1990s when a fresh influx of immigrants from western states arrived. They were more conservative. Highlands Ranch, a town south of Denver, was nicknamed Orange County East because thousands of newcomers from conservative Orange County, California, settled there. After Campbell switched parties in 1995, Republican Wayne Allard won the other Senate seat in 1996, and Republican Bill Owens was elected governor in 1998, giving the GOP all the top statewide offices, four of the six House seats, and the state house and senate.

George W. Bush won Colorado by 9 percentage points in 2000, and Republican control appeared to be firmly entrenched two years later when Owens was reelected over a hapless Democrat opponent, 63 to 34 percent. Championed by *National Review* as America's best governor, Owens was viewed as

a logical Republican presidential nominee in 2008. But by 2004, the Republican heyday had begun to unravel. Owens and his wife had a highly public separation and later divorced. And Republicans made critical mistakes and squabbled among themselves just as Democrats were uniting.

Two policies helped set the stage for the emergence of the Colorado Model. Term limits, enacted in 1990, forced experienced Republicans out of state office, leaving open seats easier for Democrats to win. And a new campaign finance law limited individual contributions to \$400. This allowed independent TV and radio ads and direct mail financed by the Gang of Four to have a disproportionate impact on elections.

On many levels, 2004 was a disastrous year for Republicans in Colorado. Bush's margin of victory was cut in half from 2000. Democrats not only took over the legislature, but a gregarious rancher named John Salazar, a Democrat, won the U.S. House seat west of the Rockies, where Republicans have an overwhelming edge in voter registration. (He was reelected in 2006.) An even bigger blow to Republicans was the U.S. Senate victory by Salazar's younger brother, Ken.

Owens, whose backing was critical, initially endorsed conservative congressman Bob Schaffer for the Senate seat being vacated by Campbell. Schaffer is a likable conservative from northern Colorado who retired from Congress in 2004, honoring his promise to serve only three terms in the House. Then Owens changed his mind and supported beer company chairman Pete Coors, insisting he was the only Republican who could beat Ken Salazar, then state attorney general. Coors defeated Schaffer in the Republican primary, only to run a poor campaign against Salazar.

The bitterness of the Coors-Schaffer race was in contrast with Salazar's undisputed claim on the Democratic nomination. Democratic congressman Mark Udall had announced for the seat the moment Campbell said he would retire. So had Rutt Bridges. But a day later, after a tumultuous 24 hours of negotiations, Udall and Bridges appeared at a press conference to endorse Salazar, who ran as a moderate and an "independent voice" for Colorado. Among Democrats, unity prevailed, and Ken Salazar won.

In 2005, Republicans split over Referendum C, designed to waive the Taxpayer Bill of Rights (known as TABOR) for five years. Passed in 1992, TABOR limited spending hikes to inflation and population growth, required any surplus to be refunded to taxpayers, and mandated a referendum to raise taxes. Conservatives fervently opposed suspending TABOR. But Owens and a handful of Republican leaders joined with Democrats to pass the referendum in order to fund education and transportation initiatives.

Things got worse for Republicans in 2006 as the Colorado Model began to take hold. Another bitter primary, this one for governor, pitted congressman Bob Beauprez against Marc Holtzman, the ex-president of the University of Denver. Beauprez won the nomination, but the "Both Ways Bob" label slapped on him by Holtzman stuck, and Democrat Bill Ritter won the governorship in a landslide. Democrats gained legislative seats as well.

Like Salazar, Ritter had gotten the Democratic nomination without a struggle. This was all the more amazing because he ran as a pro-life, pro-business Democrat. Feminists tried to find a pro-choice Democrat to oppose him but failed. Again, unity behind one candidate prevailed.

In 2008, Republicans are still reeling from the string of setbacks and show few signs of recovery. One bit of progress: Schaffer faces no serious opposition for the Republican nomination to hold the Senate seat of Allard, who kept his promise to retire after two terms. Schaffer is already being trashed

in TV ads by an environmental group, the League of Conservation Voters, as "Big Oil Bob." Schaffer worked for an energy company after he left Congress.

"The bitterness of Coors-Schaffer in '04 still exists," says John Andrews. "The bitterness of Referendum C persists. And the bitterness of Marc Holtzman versus Bob Beauprez in 2006 persists." Moreover, Andrews says, "I'm not sure our party has learned the lessons it needed to learn. Republicans and conservatives missed our moment to be the next wave of the Reagan revolution at the state level. We didn't seize the center, and we didn't seize the imagination of Colorado voters."

That's a remarkable indictment of Republicans by a leading Republican. But it strikes me as a fair assessment. Gill and Stryker, the wealthier half of the Gang of Four, remain determined to drive Marilyn Musgrave out of office after she narrowly won reelection in 2006. Gill, who is gay, is also active in opposing foes of gay rights in other states.

How much they're actually willing to spend against Musgrave and Schaffer is unclear. The leaked memo said a budget of \$11.7 million was "little more than our own thinking about what a successful [independent] operation for the presidential, U.S. Senate and [Musgrave] elections might look like." Republicans often trail during the summer before the election, and Schaffer is no exception, running behind Mark Udall in public polls. Barack Obama is a slight favorite to win Colorado in the presidential election. If he does and also wins New Mexico, Democratic consultant Mike Stratton points out, "Obama doesn't need to win Ohio."

Republicans desperately need Schaffer to hold Allard's seat to avert a filibuster-proof Senate in Washington, a Senate in which Republicans can't block or even modify liberal legislation. Schaffer and his campaign manager, Dick Wadhams, insist Udall is vulnerable as a "Boulder liberal" who can't credibly pose as a moderate as Salazar and Ritter did. Neither of them had a voting record. Salazar was state attorney general, Ritter the Denver district attorney. "Udall doesn't have that advantage," Schaffer says. Udall, by the way, lists his residence as Eldorado Springs, not Boulder. Colorado voters tend to view Boulder as a haven for hippies and out of the Colorado mainstream.

Undeterred, Udall is running to the center, saying he plays a bipartisan role in the House. That will be news to House Republicans. "Udall will get to where he needs to be," says Eric Sonderman, a public relations executive in Denver. The question is whether he can effectively respond to Schaffer's call for exploiting Colorado's vast oil shale reserves. Schaffer's position is increasingly popular, and he intends to dwell on it relentlessly. To propose drilling, Udall might have to defy his wife, Maggie Fox, the state director of the Sierra Club, the ardent environmental group. According to a former aide of Bill Armstrong, she has the distinction of being the only person Armstrong ever ordered to leave his Senate office. (Armstrong doesn't recall the incident.)

Absent the Democratic headwind, Schaffer would have a reasonable chance of winning. But his prospects could be further hampered by an antiabortion referendum on the ballot this November declaring that life begins at conception. If abortion becomes a major issue, Schaffer, who is pro-life, might lose the votes of suburban Republican women. "We don't need this," Wadhams says. In recent years, Republican female voters have tended to stray.

Republican hopes of a renaissance rest largely on winning the governor's race in 2010. That won't be easy. For one thing, they lack a candidate. The Republican bench of attractive candidates with statewide recognition is bare. The most prominent ones--Armstrong, Owens, former senator Hank Brown--have retired. Armstrong is president of Colorado Christian University. Aides of Allard have hinted he could be talked into running, but that's a long shot.

In 18 months as governor, Ritter has managed to anger business, labor, and the *Denver Post*, which had promoted him as a candidate. After promising labor leaders he would sign legislation gutting the Labor Peace Act, he bowed to business pressure and vetoed it. The act makes it difficult for unions to organize new workers.

Labor leaders were apoplectic. At the Gridiron Club dinner in Washington a few weeks later, Ritter was confronted aggressively by Teamsters president James Hoffa Jr., who told him "all of labor is upset." Hoffa warned the Democratic convention might "blow up" if other issues were not resolved in a way favorable to labor.

Then, late on a Friday afternoon last November, Ritter issued an executive order permitting state workers to join a union. Organized labor was pleased, but *Denver Post* publisher William Dean Singleton wasn't. He ordered a front-page editorial that criticized Ritter harshly. "This may be the beginning of the end of Ritter as governor," the editorial said. It certainly was the end of Ritter's warm relationship with the newspaper.

For the fall ballot, Ritter is pushing a referendum to impose a \$300 million increase in the severance tax on the mining industry, further alienating the business community. He personally called leaders of the Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce in the faint hope he could persuade them to back the referendum. The chamber refused.

For all his problems, Ritter will have what Republicans do not have, if he seeks reelection: the full force of the Colorado Model engaged on his behalf. At the same time, his Republican rival is bound to be tormented by the phalanx of liberal groups and targeted by the rich liberals, who are free to spend an unlimited amount of money.

"Colorado is being used as a test bed for a swarm offense by Democrats and liberals to put conservatives and Republicans on defense as much as possible," says Andrews. The initial results of that test are favorable. "The wind's at our back here," says Andrew Romanoff, the Democratic House speaker. The Colorado Model, by nearly all accounts, is working in 2008. And it should continue to be a powerful political force in Colorado (and other states) for many years--that is, until conservatives and Republicans come up with a way to counteract it.

Fred Barnes is executive editor of THE WEEKLY STANDARD. Hannah Sternberg provided research assistance for this article.

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