



## Local Matters.

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## The new politics of changing — and aging — suburbs

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By **Peter Jones**

Published: 08.06.10

*Editor's Note: Since 2008, for the first time, Arapahoe County has boasted more registered Democrats than Republicans. This is the second in a three-part series on the changing politics of the area.*

Deep purple? Maybe not.

Republicans are hoping that red is still the color of Arapahoe County's and Colorado's true love — especially as the midterm elections approach. But love is blue, according to some optimistic Democratic pundits.

In addition to Colorado choosing a Democratic president two years ago for the first time since 1992, the Democratic party now occupies the state's two U.S. Senate seats and five of Colorado's seven chairs in the House of Representatives.

Democratic victories in 2008 came as the party

was already controlling the governor's office and both houses of the Colorado General Assembly — the result of Republican losses in the 2006 midterm election.

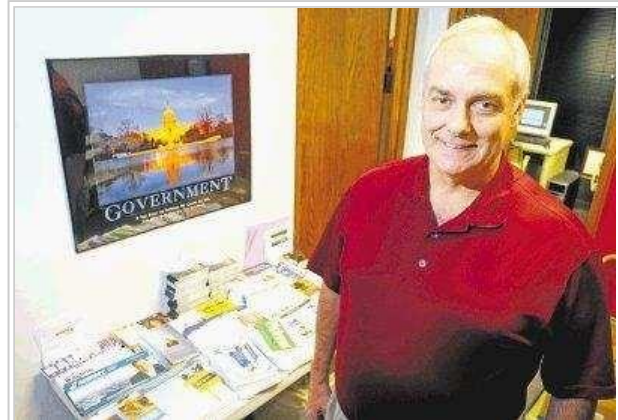
A faltering U.S. economy, the unpopularity of the Iraq War and President George W. Bush's historically low approval ratings were considered the major contributors to 2008's second round of Democratic wins in Colorado and elsewhere.

In recent years, Arapahoe County has been part and parcel to the gradual "bluing" or "purpling" of the Centennial State. According to Pat Waak, chair of the Colorado Democratic Party, the county was an important site in the 2008 statewide voter registration drive that saw declarations from 240,000 new party members.

As in Arapahoe County, the Democrats' statewide registrations have narrowly surpassed Republicans for the first time. According to Denver pollster and political analyst Floyd Ciruli, the county is something of a microcosm of what has happened across the larger political landscape.

"Colorado is a pivotal state in this battle that's going on for the soul of the country in terms of its policy direction," he said. "Arapahoe County has been a slightly lagging indicator on that. I would see it as an essential battleground."

Ciruli likens the political evolution in Arapahoe County to that of neighboring Jefferson. Both counties had been solidly Republican as recently as the 1990s. In recent years, Jefferson, in particular, has moved clearly into the Democratic fold.



Republican David Kerber unsuccessfully challenged Democratic state Rep. Joe Rice in what was once a safe Republican district before before taking the reins of the Arapahoe County Republican Party. He says the tide had turned for Democrats by the time he began walking his district in 2008. As party chair, Kerber anticipates a de-emphasis on social issues as the GOP stakes its ground in coming election cycles. Photo by Courtney Kuhlen | [ckuhlen@ccnewspapers.com](mailto:ckuhlen@ccnewspapers.com)

The pollster says the increasingly competitive Arapahoe County will be a bellwether to watch in November's elections and beyond and could make or break the political futures of state Democrats facing tough challenges.

### **New suburbs, new politics**

Two names are inevitably mentioned in any discussion about the changing political face of Arapahoe County, though neither has ever called the area home — Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush.

"There's no mystery about what happened," said Dick Wadhams, chairman of the Colorado Republican Party. "There was a very unpopular president with horrible numbers and Republicans at all levels were seen through that prism. Obama brought a charisma to the race that people got caught up in."

David Kerber, who chairs Arapahoe County Republicans, agrees. He says the tide had clearly turned by the time he was walking neighborhoods and talking to voters during his own unsuccessful run for the statehouse in 2008.

"There were two people I met who were excited about John McCain out of thousands of houses," Kerber said of his House district, which stretches from Greenwood Village to Littleton.

Most Republican leaders concur that excitement about Obama and indifference about McCain helped fuel Democratic efforts to outmaneuver the GOP's voter registrations in Arapahoe County and elsewhere.

"[Democrats] were very well organized and extremely well funded," said Rep. Spencer Swalm, R-Centennial. "Obama's success also reflected a reaction against George Bush. He's sort of the anti-George Bush. Bush was white and inarticulate and a Texan. Obama is the antithesis — urban, black and articulate."

Many observers also agree that changing demographics have played an important concurrent role in the increased number of Democratic registrations in Arapahoe County. A growing Hispanic population and the party's increased popularity among middle-income voters have been cited as contributing factors.

But according to Ciruli, the most crucial demographic variable of all was so gradual — and inevitable, given the nature of urban sprawl — that neither Republicans nor Democrats had paid much attention to it.

"The suburbs got old," Ciruli said of Arapahoe County, an increasingly urbanized contingency of communities bordering Denver to the immediate south. "They now have the same problems that old cities have."

Aurora, Ciruli says, was in some ways the proverbial canary in the coal mine for the rest of urbanized Arapahoe County. Historically, the second-largest city in the metro area has been far more friendly to Democrats than its neighbors to the west.

For years, Democratic state legislators, ranging from Frank Weddig to Morgan Carroll, have been elected to represent Aurora. Weddig now serves on the county's Board of Commissioners, along with Pat Noonan, another Aurora Democrat. Noonan's election in 2006 signaled the first time two Democrats had served on the board simultaneously.

Many say it is just a matter of time until a Democrat represents other Arapahoe County districts on the board. By Swalm's estimation, Centennial, Littleton, Englewood and other cities are finally catching up with Democrat-leaning Aurora.

"We're not the outer suburbs anymore," the Republican legislator said. "Typically, as neighborhoods get older, for whatever reason, they tend to attract more Democratic voters. It's been years since Republicans have had a legitimate shot at doing much in the city of Denver."

The reason for the change, according to Ciruli, is the increasing importance in the suburbs of such

historically urban issues as land use, mass transit and aging infrastructure — issues that tend to play well for Democrats.

“It’s not just low taxes and the issues that have been the main staples of Republican rhetoric for so long,” the pollster said. “Politicians have had to adapt. If you’re running countywide, you want to be an environmentalist and be very sensitive to open space.”

In 2003, Arapahoe County voters approved a quarter-cent sales and use tax to pay for the preservation of open space in the county. Among the tax’s chief boosters has been the county’s Republican-dominated Board of Commissioners.

According to Ciruli, by associating with such generally appealing issues as parks, open space and overall quality of life, Democrats have been slowly able to improve their party’s image in traditionally conservative areas like Arapahoe County.

“If you’re running with George McGovern, Walter Mondale or John Kerry — candidates that are not very attractive to the Western sentiment, the Democratic brand was very difficult to sell,” he said. “Now, the Democrats have made the brand at least reasonably neutral.”

*Next week: Predicting the future*

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