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COLORADO POLITICS AND POLICY

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THOMAS E. CRONIN AND ROBERT D. LOEVY

Colorado Politics and Policy

GOVERNING A PURPLE STATE

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In loving memory of
Constance Loevy, and to our long,
wonderful friendship with Jerry and Anabel McHugh

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Preface

Colorado has a proud history of being a fiercely independent frontier state. Yet in reality Colorado is largely urbanized. Ninety percent or more of the residents live along the state's two main interstate highways, I-25 and I-70.

Coloradans (it is not Coloradoans) express decidedly negative attitudes toward the U.S. government. The citizen surveys conducted for this book reveal that most Coloradans think the "feds" are too big, too wasteful, and too intrusive. Yet Colorado would be economically devastated if federal installations suddenly left the state and federal contracts and subsidies for a variety of activities and services were ended.

Imagine, for example, a Colorado Springs without the U.S. Army base at Fort Carson, the U.S. Space Command, or the U.S. Air Force Academy. Imagine the Boulder-Golden area without its several national research laboratories. Imagine if Colorado's national forests, parks, and monuments or U.S. Bureau of Land Management lands were privatized.

Coloradans, to be sure, favor a much smaller federal government, but they do not favor the elimination of major U.S. government projects and spending programs in Colorado.

Colorado, in fact, has been uncommonly dependent on the federal government to help manage its mountains and forests, develop its mineral and water resources, build its interstate highways and airports, and provide its human services.

Colorado has a proud history of being fiscally prudent. The state is known for its balanced budgets, low state taxes, and relatively low debt. Most Coloradans are skeptical about government and object to expanding taxing and spending powers. The objections to higher taxes can, however, be overcome when the tax pays for a service that voters like, such as buying open space or furthering historic preservation.

But because of the generally low tax structure, many people believe the state electorate is shirking its responsibility to make critically needed investments for the state's future. Governor John Hickenlooper liked to say that Coloradans have to redefine the role of government to match what the people of the state can afford. In Colorado, this means taxpayer resistance to needed tax increases is a serious brake on state government.

Even incremental policy making in Colorado is a challenge. The state constitution is the third longest in the United States. It deliberately disperses power among different institutions, provides multiple veto opportunities, and sets up various checks and balances. It is much easier in Colorado to defeat new initiatives than to enact them. Divided government has become the new normal. Polarization between and within the two major political parties has grown.

Governmental authority in Colorado is intentionally limited, personal liberty is cherished, private-sector interests are both organized and strong, and political preferences are divided and sometimes shifting. In the surveys for this book, Coloradans said they believe government responds more to "insiders," special interests, and big campaign contributors than to the interests of the average person. Yet on many public policy issues, no single group or political party has a clear or consistent majority.

Over the past generation, Colorado has gradually shifted from being a somewhat "red," meaning Republican, state to becoming a fairly predictable "purple" state in its partisanship leanings. This has been the case both within the state and its electoral patterns, as within the nation. Colorado is often now a battleground or swing state. In statistical terms, Colorado in recent years is right in the middle (ranked 24 or 25) in the nation in its partisanship voting patterns. It does not get more purple than that. We discuss this more in chapter 5.

So who governs Colorado? We are a state without much "old money," with few corporate headquarters, and with less of a defined "establishment" than most states. Can anyone, or any group, lead without political power? Does an increase in governmental authority necessarily mean a diminution of personal liberty?

What will it take to solve the Centennial State's economic problems? What will be required to plan for future growth and to preserve the state's beautiful lands and plentiful resources? What is the proper balance in the financing of economic development, job creation, education, and environmental protection? Can economic development and prudent conservation be done in a harmonious way? How will Colorado handle a doubling of its population over the next fifty to sixty years?

How has a shifting electorate influenced politics in Colorado? And what of the much-debated and now more regularly used citizen-initiative process, where citizens sign petitions to put new laws and state constitutional amendments up for approval by the voters? Has it helped or handicapped public policy making in Colorado? How has this shaped, or reshaped, Colorado's political culture?

Colorado's assets are impressive, yet its challenges are daunting. Inequality is increasing in terms of both social class and geographical location. There is an ever-widening gap between poor counties and rich counties. Colorado's water supplies are overappropriated and understored. The state's highways and road bridges are in rough shape. The state's planning and budget process is unusually complicated and often counterproductive. The list goes on and on.

This book examines how politics and government work in Colorado. It represents an attempt to capture the spirit and distinctive politics that shape parties, elections, and public policy debates.

Our study of Colorado politics was encouraged by the late Professor Daniel Elazar, a respected political scientist at Temple University in Philadelphia. At his invitation, we wrote an earlier book on Colorado politics, published in 1993, which was part of a valuable series on state government in the United States that Elazar edited for the University of Nebraska Press. Each volume in that series examined the specific character of a state's "polity," defined as its political culture, traditions, and practices. Also studied were each state's constitution, governmental institutions, political constituencies, and interest groups.

So much has changed in Colorado politics and government in the past two decades that a new book was needed. For this book, we surveyed and interviewed hundreds of Colorado voters and scores of public officials, political analysts, lobbyists, and state employees. We conducted two statewide public opinion polls that followed up on a survey we did in 1990. In the end, we had to rewrite nearly every part of our earlier work.

We thank those whose writings educated us, and we thank all those who have shared their views about the state and its politics. Please see our acknowledgments and selected bibliography. Views and interpretations in this book are, of course, wholly ours.

Acknowledgments

We thank hundreds of people who have shared their views with us about Colorado politics, public policies, and government. Sometimes these were brief encounters in cafes or general stores in Holly, San Luis, Salida, Creede, Crestone, Crawford, Durango, Aspen, or Meeker. At other times they were at state-wide meetings such as party conventions or the Colorado Water Congress.

But we have also conducted many lengthy interviews with state legislators, lobbyists, judges, the Colorado attorney general, and others. We helped run a several-hour forum with three former Colorado governors. We have gone to state of the state addresses, inaugurations, and sat in on sessions of the Colorado state supreme court and the Colorado Forum.

In addition, we have served on city planning commissions, city charter commissions, county storm-drainage committees, and the 2011 Colorado Reapportionment Commission. We have served as precinct committee members, served on state party executive committees, attended state and national party conventions as elected delegates, and we have managed election campaigns both for candidates and for ballot issues, such as park bonds and building performing arts centers. Both of us have been involved in electoral politics at all levels.

We have traveled extensively around the state, and we have benefited from three statewide public opinion surveys of randomly selected adult Coloradans. These are surveys we designed and raised the funds for.

Among those we especially want to thank are governors Richard Lamm, Roy Romer, Bill Owens, Bill Ritter, and John Hickenlooper; Lieutenant Governor Joe Garcia; Attorney General John Suthers; U.S. senators Floyd Haskell, Gary Hart, Bill Armstrong, Tim Wirth, Ben Nighthorse Campbell, and Michael Bennet; U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Timothy M. Tymkovich; justices Rebecca Love Kourlis, Jean Dubofsky, Luis Rovira, Joseph Quinn,

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All the above have helped make this a better, more-informed book, yet we assume responsibility for what is written.