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Some predictions from pollster Ciruli

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People are always curious about the future. But in times of uncertainty, as now, the question “what’s next?” carries more weight.

As we begin the new decade, strong indicators point to where we may be headed as a state and nation, shaped by both recent and ongoing changes.

- **The economy.** The economic recovery will continue to be the top issue nationally and internationally. In the next decade, the U.S. political and economic models will face much competition. It’s not clear whether the democratic free-market system will remain dominant. Developing countries previously considered only as markets now are high-level competitors (India and China graduate many more engineers than the United States).

- **Terrorism.** Recent terrorism threats have reminded Americans of the uncertainty of their safety and add to insecurity about the economy. Traditionally, this uncertainty aids the Republicans, who historically were perceived as more competent on security issues. However, Republicans’ reputations still are recovering from the voter memory of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

The ongoing fight on terror may force Democrats to move to the right on issues of national security.

- **National politics.** The public is very unhappy with incumbent politicians and Washington, D.C. Democrats are receiving the most criticism and lowest ratings since their high-profile 2008 election sweep. But in general, voters are distrustful of both parties and deeply cynical. The Senate election of a political unknown in Massachusetts highlights voters’ search for political outsiders.

- **Colorado politics.** After moving to the left and electing nearly a full slate of Democrats in 2008, Colorado’s political posture is shifting to the center. Democrats are in trouble due to the economy, the general displeasure with incumbents and concerns about their national agenda. The 2010 midterm elections will be competitive, with both parties battling for the swing voters.

The Republicans will have the edge if they can find candidates that can appeal to the center. However, they have yet to win public trust and confidence. Much of the political leadership in this state and nationally remains very ideological and polarized. The public still values bipartisanship and consensus, but they seem increasingly out of reach.

In the last decade, Colorado politics were the focus of an extraordinary amount of national attention, going from a presidential backwater to a major battleground. The state’s political contests are competitive and tend to be a harbinger of what is happening in the country. In 10 years, the state shifted from deep red to purple to deep blue.

Now, as it enters the 2010 election season, the newly won Democratic dominance is at risk and several major offices — governor, Senate and at least one member of Congress — are either tight or leaning Republican.

Gov. Bill Ritter’s re-election no-go highlights the party’s challenge in 2010. His replacement, Mayor John Hickenlooper, as a newer face with a less partisan image, is a stronger candidate.

- **Governmental reform.** Calls for reform and efficiency in government will intensify. In particular, the bad economy is affecting government finances, hit by lagging revenues and rising demands in expenditures. While Colorado has withstood the recession better than most states due to its natural resources, beauty and steady tourism, the state’s finances are constitutionally gridlocked, and there is no legislative or civic consensus on what to do about it.

The California financial and gov-erning crisis has heightened fear among local elected and civic leaders that, without reforms, it could happen here.

- **Growth.** Colorado’s population has continued to grow throughout the decade, although at a somewhat slower rate during the last few years. The population surpassed 5 million — up more than 700,000, or 17 percent, in the last 10 years. Colorado was in the top five growth states during the entire decade, and despite slower growth the last two years, still was among the four fastest-growing, exceeded only by Wyoming, Utah and Texas. This has helped keep Colorado at the lower end of recession statistics, but the implications are that demand for public services and infrastructure will increase.

- **Values.** Public values are shifting from displays of material wealth to valuing financial security and a more modest quality of life. Alongside this reining in of excesses is a shift from things to experiences. People are reducing risk, becoming more practical and avoiding the big and flashy.

The baby boomers, in particular, have had a shock since they're closer to retirement and will have to exercise more caution in their financial planning. Possibly, these values harken back to Colorado's rugged individualism and caution in the face of the extreme landscape and weather.

Voters and consumers want to be perceived as sensitive to social, civic-minded and environmental values. They have, to some extent, begun to favor supporting local or socially conscious businesses. They're moving toward saving rather than spending, and conserving rather than consuming.

• **Communication and technology.** The near-universal penetration and use of the Internet, cell phones and cable channels have accelerated and dramatically changed the spread of news and information worldwide. These new systems and how people use them will dominate public policy, government and consumer communication throughout the next decade.

The public is glad to begin a new decade, and to say goodbye to the old one. There's a sense that the '10s will be better than the '00s. Whatever lies ahead, trends have clearly accelerated and are more volatile. And, as with the perpetually yellow terror alert, our anxiety is very high.

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