

Government & Politics

<http://chronicle.com/free/v53/i18/18a01801.htm>

From the issue dated January 5, 2007

As Democrats Take Over More States, College Leaders Grow Optimistic

But recent history shows that the 2 parties treat higher education equally when it comes to spending money

By KARIN FISCHER

A few weeks after breaking the Republicans' 16-year lock on Massachusetts' highest office, Deval L. Patrick, the governor-elect, traveled to the University of Massachusetts system's flagship campus, in Amherst, and made a vow: He would champion the state's public colleges.

"I heard through the campaign and today that public higher education has never had a champion through a governor," he told the crowd of administrators, faculty members, and students. "You are going to have one now."

But the cheers had barely died down, attendees say, before Mr. Patrick warned higher-education supporters that they must be "realistic," given state budgetary constraints. "Everything we want to do," he said, "can't be done at once."

In November Democrats won gubernatorial races in six states that Republicans had held, and picked up more than 320 seats in state legislatures. When the new lawmakers are all finally sworn in, Democrats will control the governor's office in 28 states, hold legislative majorities in 23 states, and be in charge of the governor's office and both chambers of the legislature in 15 states. Democrats have not dominated state governments by such margins since 1994, says Tim Storey, a senior fellow at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The Democratic victories have raised expectations on college campuses in part because a number of the gubernatorial candidates, including Mr. Patrick, emphasized themes of access and affordability in their campaigns. In Arkansas and Iowa, the incoming governors have called for the expansion of need-based student aid. New York's new governor, Eliot Spitzer, has said he will provide the state's two public-university systems with more money so that they can raise their academic quality and become more affordable.

After a number of lean years, many college officials are hoping that newly elected leaders will open an era of greater interest in and support of higher education.

Not so fast, say veteran political observers. Campaign promises can fall to budget realities and competing priorities. And while Democrats may be less likely to push legislation controlling on-campus activities — like bills to make colleges more tolerant of conservatives — experts say that when it comes to the crucial issue of state tax-dollar support for colleges, there typically is little partisan distinction.

A *Chronicle* analysis of data collected by the Center for the Study of Education Policy at Illinois

State University, shows that over the past 10 years, growth in higher-education spending in states with Republican governors largely mirrored annual percentage increases in those led by Democrats.

"How much difference will the Democrats make?" asks Paul E. Lingenfelter, executive director of the State Higher Education Executive Officers, which represents states' top higher-education officials. "The short answer is, not very much."

It's the Economy

More than any other factor, Mr. Lingenfelter and others say, state financial support for higher education is driven by the economic climate rather than the political stripe of the governor or the legislature. The education-policy center's data bear this out. In the late 1990s, spending on college and student aid rose in states governed by Democrats and Republicans alike. Earlier this decade, as the economy faltered, state leaders, regardless of party, were tight with new dollars or actually cut higher-education budgets, in efforts to keep their states in the black.

State budgets have since rebounded. Sixteen states surveyed in November by the National Conference of State Legislatures reported "optimistic" budget revenue outlooks, and 28 said their budgets were "stable."

In Colorado the decision by voters to temporarily freeze the state's stringent spending cap will give the incoming governor, Bill Ritter, a Democrat, more money to pay for his top priorities, which include raising per-student spending at public colleges; it now ranks second last in the nation.

Whether the Democratic-controlled General Assembly will go along with Mr. Ritter's request is another matter, says Dennis Jones, president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. The nonprofit group, which is based in Denver, recently conducted a study for the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, the state's coordinating board, that found public colleges there would need an infusion of \$832-million to catch up with their out-of-state peers.

But when the executive director of the commission, a Republican appointee, proposed spending an extra \$100-million a year for the next five years, legislators said "No, thanks," Mr. Jones says. "They basically said, 'It's a wonderful sentiment, but we don't have the money to do it.'"

In fact, while the immediate budget outlook in most states might be positive, analysts say the long-term fiscal forecast is considerably gloomier.

In Massachusetts, state-tax revenues over the next five years will not keep pace with existing spending obligations and the cost of new programs proposed by Mr. Patrick and other elected officials, says Michael J. Widmer, president of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, a nonpartisan research organization based in Boston.

The cost of paying for higher education and local property-tax relief could outstrip available revenue by billions of dollars, says Mr. Widmer, who is co-chairman of Mr. Patrick's transition team on budget and finance issues.

Budget constraints could lead to an uncomfortable political reality for other newly elected governors as well, like Martin J. O'Malley, a Democrat in Maryland, whose campaign included a pledge to hold down college-tuition increases. Under a Republican governor, tuition costs at some of Maryland's public colleges shot up by as much as 40 percent over the past four years.

The state faces a deficit of \$400-million in the next fiscal year and a long-term structural deficit of

\$5.7-billion over the next four years, according to recent legislative projections. Mr. O'Malley will have to juggle competing demands, including Medicaid payments and elementary and secondary education, which are largely immune to cuts.

"The governor's promise is good for students, but there's one problem," says Donald F. Norris, director of the Maryland Institute for Policy Analysis and Research, at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County. "He hasn't said where he is going to get the money to do it."

The Person, Not the Party

How public colleges fare, in Maryland and elsewhere, ultimately will depend on the governor's goals for the state and how higher education fits into those goals, says Charles B. Reed, chancellor of the California State University System.

"It's the individual's own vision and the values that they bring to the job that's most important," says Mr. Reed, who previously led Florida's state-university system. Partisan affiliation, he adds, matters little.

For example, Mr. Reed, who served as chief of staff to a governor of Florida, Bob Graham, a Democrat, says he has a good working relationship with California's chief executive, Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican. After initially cutting the budgets for the state's colleges when he took office, in 2003, Mr. Schwarzenegger pressed legislators to increase state aid so they could forgo planned tuition increases. He also worked with Democrats to pass a bond measure that provided \$3.1-billion for higher-education facilities.

Other Republicans have also been seen as friendly to higher education. Gov. Kenny C. Guinn, of Nevada, who is leaving office this month because of a term limit, raised taxes in 2003 to pay for enrollment growth at state colleges and public schools and for other social programs.

In Indiana, Gov. Mitchell E. Daniels Jr., has proposed privatizing the state lottery to bring in money for college scholarships and professorships. Charlie Crist, incoming governor of Florida, has said the state must build one or more new universities in order to handle the state's ballooning college-age population.

Conversely, some Democratic governors have disappointed higher-education leaders in their states. Under Rod R. Blagojevich, of Illinois, and Jennifer M. Granholm, of Michigan, public colleges bore the brunt of their states' severe economic downturn. Bill Richardson reshaped higher-education governance in New Mexico, creating a cabinet-level position for universities and community colleges in 2005, but some observers worry that he has since become disengaged from the issue. And student leaders in Wisconsin complain that higher education was not on Gov. Jim Doyle's radar screen until he ran for re-election last fall.

Douglas A. Kristensen was speaker of Nebraska's legislature before he became chancellor of the University of Nebraska at Kearney, in 2002. Support for higher education among his fellow legislators, he says, was determined more by personal experience than by ideology.

Some lawmakers were supporters of particular campuses because they or members of their families were graduates, while others were skeptical of increasing funds for student aid because "they worked hard to put their kids through school and thought other people should, too," he says.

"I don't think that any one party has the market on being good for higher education," says Mr. Kristensen.

Cease-Fire In the Culture Wars?

Still, if the election of new Democratic leaders is likely to make little difference to colleges' bottom line, their influence may be felt in other ways.

For one thing, governors make appointments to public-university governing boards in all but four states. (In those states, the board members are elected.) Through their choices for those seats, and for statewide coordinating commissions, governors can put their mark on higher-education policy for years to come, says Brian Pusser, an assistant professor of education at the University of Virginia.

New Democratic majorities could be an obstacle in efforts to adopt legislation that would call on colleges to expose students to a greater diversity of opinions in the classroom and would prohibit the grading of students and the hiring or firing of professors on the basis of their political or religious beliefs. Several states have debated such "academic bill of rights" measures, although none have become law.

"I think we'll hear much less of this conversation in Democratic states," says Mr. Jones, of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.

The political turnover could also slow the trend toward privatization of public higher education, says Mr. Pusser. In Ohio, for example, the Republican gubernatorial candidate, Ken Blackwell, had called for contracting out certain college services and for providing a larger share of state funds for higher education directly to undergraduates. Changing how those dollars are allocated, he argued, would force institutions to compete better for students.

But Mr. Blackwell was defeated by Ted Strickland, a Democrat, who has said he wants to take a very different approach to higher-education reform. Under a plan he calls the Ohio Knowledge Bank, Mr. Strickland has proposed adding \$500 in state funds to each college-savings account that a family opens for a child. The state would then deposit \$100 annually into each student's account until high-school graduation; low-income families would receive a larger amount.

Staking Out Positions

In the end, the shift of partisan power in many states could change not whether or how much states spend on higher education, but how they choose to spend that money, says William R. Doyle, an assistant professor of higher education at Vanderbilt University.

While Republicans, on the federal level and in the states, have focused on holding colleges accountable and on making their operations more transparent and efficient, many of the successful gubernatorial candidates took a different tack, he notes. The Democrats talked about improving college access for low- and middle-income students by expanding financial aid or reining in tuition costs.

That could lead to the growth of state need-based aid, or to increased support for programs recently started by flagship universities in a number of states to multiply the number of financially needy students on their campuses.

In years to come, the greater focus on higher education as a campaign plank, and the differing positions taken by Democratic and Republican gubernatorial candidates, suggests that the issue may become more partisan, says Mr. Doyle.

The high-school graduating class of 2009 will be the largest in U.S. history, and, as a

postsecondary degree becomes more critical to obtaining a good job, more of those students will go on to college. Those demographic trends could make higher education — and, in particular, how to pay for it — ever more important to voters, he says.

"We could be at the beginning of a wave of the political salience of higher education," says Mr. Doyle. "As its salience increases, it could be more important to the political parties to stake out more-distinct positions."

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Section: Government & Politics

Volume 53, Issue 18, Page A18

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