

CHAPTER 22

PRIMARY ELECTION DAY

The weather was sunny and pleasant in Colorado on August 9, 1994. Primary election day was strangely quiet, however, given all of the excitement that appeared to have been generated over the contest for the Republican gubernatorial nomination. One Mike Bird supporter who had the temerity to wave a Mike Bird sign outside a north Colorado Springs polling place was chased by a representative from the local county election office. Other than this lone incident of overzealous campaigning, the registered Republicans of Colorado did their primary voting quickly and quietly in relatively empty polling places.

The Mike Bird faithful gathered in the friendly and familiar confines of the Mike Bird for Governor state headquarters on South Tejon Street in Colorado Springs. The Mike Bird campaign staff had spent most of the afternoon decorating the headquarters with red, white, and blue balloons and setting out a wide variety of after-dinner snacks. Two television sets were placed at each end of the room, but old-timers on the Bird campaign staff knew that the most reliable early information would be reported on the news-oriented all-talk radio stations.

Throughout primary election day afternoon, Chuck Baker on Colorado Springs radio station KVOR-AM conducted what he called his "exit poll." Baker encouraged his listeners who had voted to call in and briefly state for whom they had voted and why. The Mike Bird staff listened to the Chuck Baker "exit poll" as they decorated their headquarters for their election night party. They did not care for what they heard. Many of the Republicans phoning into the KVOR "exit poll" said they had voted for Bruce Benson, and most of them gave "he has the money to beat Romer" as the reason for giving Benson their vote. Surprisingly, Dick Sargent was doing very well in Chuck Baker's exit poll. It suggested that Sargent's very conservative issue stances had connected with the conservative audience that listens to the Chuck Baker show.

The polls closed at 7 P.M., and the Bird for Governor election night

party began at 8 P.M. The large headquarters was quickly filled with a crowd of some 80 to 100 people, all of whom were in a good mood and having a good time. If it had been a cocktail party rather than an election night party, the hosts would have considered it a great success. It was notable that almost all of the people present were not all that interested in finding out the election results, either from the television or the radio.

Michelle Provaznik, the campaign manager, alternated between socializing at the party and getting telephoned reports on how the election was going. Shortly after 9 P.M. she circulated the word to key members of the Bird campaign staff that Bruce Benson was winning the primary election easily, even in Mike Bird's home county of El Paso County. A group decision was made not to ruin a good party by making a formal announcement about how badly the election was going for Mike Bird.

By about 9:30 P.M., however, the election night party was beginning to lose its steam. It was time to bring a formal conclusion to the Bird for Governor campaign. With his wife, Ursula Bird, standing close by, Mike Bird climbed up on a chair in an effort to get the party goers' attention. His loyal supporters immediately greeted him by loudly singing "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow."

Mike Bird proceeded to deliver the bad news that everyone seemed to have known all evening long. Bruce Benson had won the Republican primary, and Mike Bird's quest for the governorship was now at an end. "I said I would run a true grassroots, person-to-person campaign," Bird began, "and we've certainly done that."¹

Early in his remarks Bird stated that he was now supporting Bruce Benson for governor. He also said that he was proud to have obtained his campaign goals even if he did not win the primary election. He had built a campaign organization in every one of Colorado's 63 counties, and he had campaigned personally in every one of those counties. Furthermore, he had worked through the "regular" nominating procedure, bidding for delegates at the precinct caucuses and putting his

name in contention - successfully - at the Republican State Assembly. Bird noted, more proudly than reprovably, that he had met the voters and debated the issues at every opportunity that had presented itself.

There were the customary expressions of thanks to his wife, his campaign staff, and the many volunteers who had worked so many hours during the long months of the campaign. Bird then reminisced about his 20-year career as an elected official in Colorado. He said he much appreciated the efforts of his many supporters, particularly those who were present, over those years.

Mike Bird concluded by quoting a well-known statement by former U.S. President Teddy Roosevelt:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the one who points out how the strong stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the one who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood.... Who, at best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who, at worst, if he fails at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place should never be with the timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."

Mike Bird stepped down from the chair from which he had given his parting remarks. He then did a small number of newspaper, radio, and television interviews. In one of them, Bird commented on why he lost the primary election: "[Bruce Benson] says he has the resources, and I guess he proved that." Bird then mused about why more Republicans had not been upset over Bruce Benson spending so much of his own money to get elected: "Maybe campaign finance is an issue whose time has not come. But I believe it's important, and I'm glad we raised the issue."²

While Mike Bird was doing his last-minute interviews and socializing, the Bird campaign staff began lugging out of the headquarters the television sets, the radios, the leftover food, and all the other paraphernalia of an election night party. Two days later, in a "good-bye to Mike Bird" story in the *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*, Bird summed up his feelings about leaving public life, at

least for a while. "I would always encourage people to take part and not be afraid to run for office," he said. "I've done my public service, and I'm very proud of it. But it's time for others to come along. I'm really very comfortable now just being a private citizen."³

Things were as somber at Dick Sargent's campaign headquarters in Denver as they were at Bird headquarters in Colorado Springs. Sargent acknowledged that Bruce Benson's big-money campaign had carried the day, despite Sargent's stalwart efforts to convince Republican voters that the Colorado governor's office was not "For Sale." As if to highlight the point, on the building housing Sargent headquarters, right next to the Sargent for Governor sign, was another sign saying "Space Available."

The principal prop at Sargent headquarters on primary election night was a pair of stolen and defaced Benson posters. Sargent's grandchildren had decorated the two Benson placards with the slogan "Colorado is not for sale!" and the words "Flip-Flop-Flip-Flop-Flip-Flop."⁴ Lamenting the fact that it now appeared that only millionaires could run for governor of Colorado, Sargent told the news media and his supporters: "I feel sad for you and your children. Who has a million dollars - let alone to spend on a political campaign?"⁵

As was to be expected, the mood at Benson for Governor headquarters on primary election night was upbeat and ebullient. Bruce Benson and his wife, Marcy, and his daughter, Ann, watched the early returns come in on television at a hotel in Englewood, a southern suburb of Denver. Good news was very soon in coming. All over the state, in county after county, Bruce Benson was receiving from 50 to 60 percent of the vote. Mike Bird and Dick Sargent were splitting what little was left over. In some counties, particularly those in the outlying, rural areas of the state, Benson was receiving 70 percent or more of the vote.

When the electoral dust had cleared and the final returns were in, Bruce Benson had garnered 60.1 percent of the statewide vote compared to 22.3 percent for Mike Bird and 17.7 percent for Dick Sargent.⁶ Benson's total vote greatly exceeded that of Bird and Sargent combined.

The news media, prominent Republican politicians, and the lobbyists

all had sensed ahead of time that Benson was going to win the primary and win it big. There was a virtual crush of supporters surrounding Bruce Benson as he stepped to a large podium with a "Benson" sign on it to acknowledge his big victory. "People were saying, 'We can win this race,'" Benson told his cheering supporters. "That's what it means. We can win."⁷

POST-PRIMARY ANALYSIS

The only small dent on Bruce Benson's bright shield of primary election victory was that the turnout of voters had been unusually low, perhaps one of the lowest in Colorado primary election history. The secretary of state's office reported that only 26.4 percent - slightly more than 1 in 4 - of Colorado registered Republicans bothered to go to the polls and vote. This contrasted with 1986, the last time there was a hotly-contested Republican gubernatorial primary, when 33 percent of GOP voters turned out. Bruce Benson had won a solid majority of the primary vote, but he had not inspired large numbers of Republicans to head out to their polling place and show their support.

Colorado Secretary of State Natalie Meyer speculated that holding the primary in August, traditionally a vacation month when political interest is low, may have been the main cause of the weak voter turnout. She noted that, at the time of the 1986 Republican gubernatorial primary, Colorado held its primary election in early September rather than early August.⁸

The election results were no surprise to the Benson for Governor campaign. The Benson forces, which were doing considerably more public opinion polling than most campaigns, conducted three major polls prior to the Republican primary. According to Katy Atkinson, the Benson campaign manager, the polls not only showed Benson winning the primary but also revealed that Bird's and Sargent's criticisms of Benson were not getting through to the voters.

"The voters were not paying attention to Bird and Sargent,"

Atkinson explained. "Our polls showed the primary voters could have cared less about the caucus/assembly process and whether Bruce Benson was going to debates or not. The news media love to write and talk about political processes such as assemblies and debates, but the voters do not share that interest. The voters are only concerned with who the next governor is going to be."

Katy Atkinson also said the Benson polls showed that Bird and Sargent had their timing wrong in trying to win a primary election by using free media. She noted: "Free media - the newspapers and television news - can establish issues in the general election in the fall, but free media cannot establish issues in July and August. In the laid-back summer environment, our heavy paid TV and radio advertising simply overwhelmed Bird's and Sargent's attempts to make their case in the newspapers."⁹

Exactly as Benson's opponents had done during the bitterly-fought primary election campaign, the news media called attention to Benson's great wealth and his willingness to dip into that wealth to get elected governor. Almost every primary election day story mentioned that Bruce Benson was willing to spend \$5 million to get elected governor and had already spent \$2.1 million - \$1.4 million of it his own money - just to win the primary.¹⁰

Fred Brown of the *Denver Post* did an entire newspaper column highlighting the fact that, until Bruce Benson came along, most of the wealthy persons who had tried to spend their way on to the ballot in Colorado had failed. The implication of Brown's column was that Benson not only had barrels of money but knew how to spend it properly to win an election campaign.¹¹

THE ROY ROMER DEBATE CHALLENGE

Roy Romer, the incumbent Democratic governor who would be running against Benson in the November general election, made his bid for publicity on primary election night, even though Romer himself did

not have a primary. As soon as it became clear that Bruce Benson was going to be the Republican nominee, two Romer campaign aides - campaign manager Alan Salazar and consultant Mike Stratton - dropped off a letter at Benson headquarters and circulated copies of the letter to all the news reporters. The letter challenged Benson to 30 debates to be held all over the state of Colorado and to be sponsored by local newspapers, radio, and television stations. "Coloradans deserve more than 30-second television commercials," the Romer letter said, "they deserve 30 debates."¹²

Roy Romer probably proposed "30" debates because that was close to the number of debates with Mike Bird and Dick Sargent that Bruce Benson missed during the primary campaign. Romer wanted newspapers, radio, and television stations to sponsor the debates because he wanted hard-nosed political reporters questioning the inexperienced Benson about the detailed operations and problems of Colorado state government. Romer made no effort to hide the fact that he was facing a much tougher opponent than any he faced in his previous campaigns for the governorship. "It will be a tougher race than I had the first two times," Romer said. "He [Bruce Benson] bought this election. He's going to bring a lot of money to the table. I'm going to bring more energy."¹³

Roy Romer made it clear he was going to attack Benson, not for spending a great deal of money, but for spending so much of his own funds. Romer accused Benson of using his massive fortune to turn the governor's race into a personal "trophy hunt" rather than a contest to determine the most qualified person to be governor. "I think it's wrong to do that," Romer said, drawing attention to the fact that the \$2.3 million he had raised to date came from individuals, corporations, and political action committees, not from his own pocket.¹⁴

The final comment on money and the importance it now held in Colorado primary election campaigns came from the *Rocky Mountain News*. Thaddeus Herrick, a political reporter at the *Rocky*, divided the amount of money Bruce Benson spent on the primary campaign - \$2.1

million - into the total number of votes Benson received - 103,771. Herrick found Benson spent \$20.23 for each vote received. Benson's two opponents, Mike Bird and Dick Sargent, did not even spend \$2 per vote, Herrick reported.

Katy Atkinson, Benson's campaign manager, was quick to explain why Benson spent so lavishly. "We were looking for more than just a primary win," she said. "We were looking to lay some sound groundwork for the fall campaign."¹⁵

THE "SIGN" ONE LAST TIME

The Bird for Governor campaign came to a final end on a strong, but somewhat strange, note. Mike Bird attended a "unity press conference" the day after primary election day with Bruce Benson, officially endorsing Benson for the fall general election. Bird stood, smiling and supportive, in the background as Benson took center stage before the television cameras.

Two days later Bird also attended a "unity dinner" sponsored by the Colorado Young Republicans and held in Denver. Bird received a standing ovation from the state "Y.R.s" when he was formally introduced. Incredibly - but true to form - Bruce Benson did not attend the Young Republican unity dinner. Katy Atkinson, Benson's campaign manager, refused to tell the press the nature of the schedule conflict that kept Benson from being there. When *Rocky Mountain News* political columnist Peter Blake heard that Benson would not be attending the Y.R. unity dinner, he sarcastically suggested that Mike Bird use "that tattered 'Benson' sign you've been hanging on an empty chair" one last time.¹⁶

Notes To Chapter 22:

1. Jennifer Gavin, "Romer challenges Benson to debates," *Denver Post*, 10 August 1994, 8A.

2. Angela Dire, "Benson scores decisive victory," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 10 August 1994, A1.
3. Angela Dire, "With no regrets, Bird exits public life," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 11 August 1994, A3.
4. Jennifer Gavin, "Romer challenges Benson to debates," Denver Post, 10 August 1994, 8A.
5. Angela Dire, "Benson scores decisive victory," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 10 August 1994, A1.
6. For the complete 1994 Republican gubernatorial primary election returns by county, see the chart labeled "Governor," Denver Post, 11 August 1994, 16A.
7. Angela Dire, "Benson scores decisive victory," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 10 August 94, A1.
8. Fred Brown, "Election turnout close to lowest," Denver Post, 11 August 1994, 19A.
9. Author's notes, telephone interview with Katy Atkinson, 19 December 1994.
10. When the final figures were in, about one month after the Republican primary, it turned out Bruce Benson had spent a total of \$2.6 million to win the 1994 Republican nomination for governor of Colorado.
11. Fred Brown, "Tradition puts onus on rich candidates," Denver Post, 10 August 1994, 8A.
12. Jennifer Gavin, "Romer challenges Benson to debates," Denver Post, 10 August 1994, 8A. Actually, Roy Romer had been talking about "30 debates" as early as two weeks before the Republican primary. When told of Romer's proposal, Mike Bird eagerly responded that, if nominated, he would challenge Romer to "50 debates." Mike Bird chose that number because Abraham Lincoln challenged Stephen Douglas to 50 debates in their famous U.S.

Senate race in Illinois in 1858.

13. Angela Dire, "Benson scores decisive victory," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 10 August 1994, A1.

14. Angela Dire, "Benson calling in some favors," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 11 August 1994, A1.

15. Thaddeus Herrick, "Every vote cost Benson \$20.23," Rocky Mountain News, 11 August 1994, 5A.

16. Peter Blake, "Picket line unlikely to trip Tipper Gore," Rocky Mountain News, 8 August 1994, 5A.