

TOP STORY ■■■

TUESDAY, JANUARY 30, 2007

Bipartisanship no pipe dream for state pols

By Barbara Rosewicz, Stateline.org Managing Editor

Memo from states to Washington, D.C.:
Divided government needn't be a showstopper.



This column was published simultaneously by [The Politico](#).

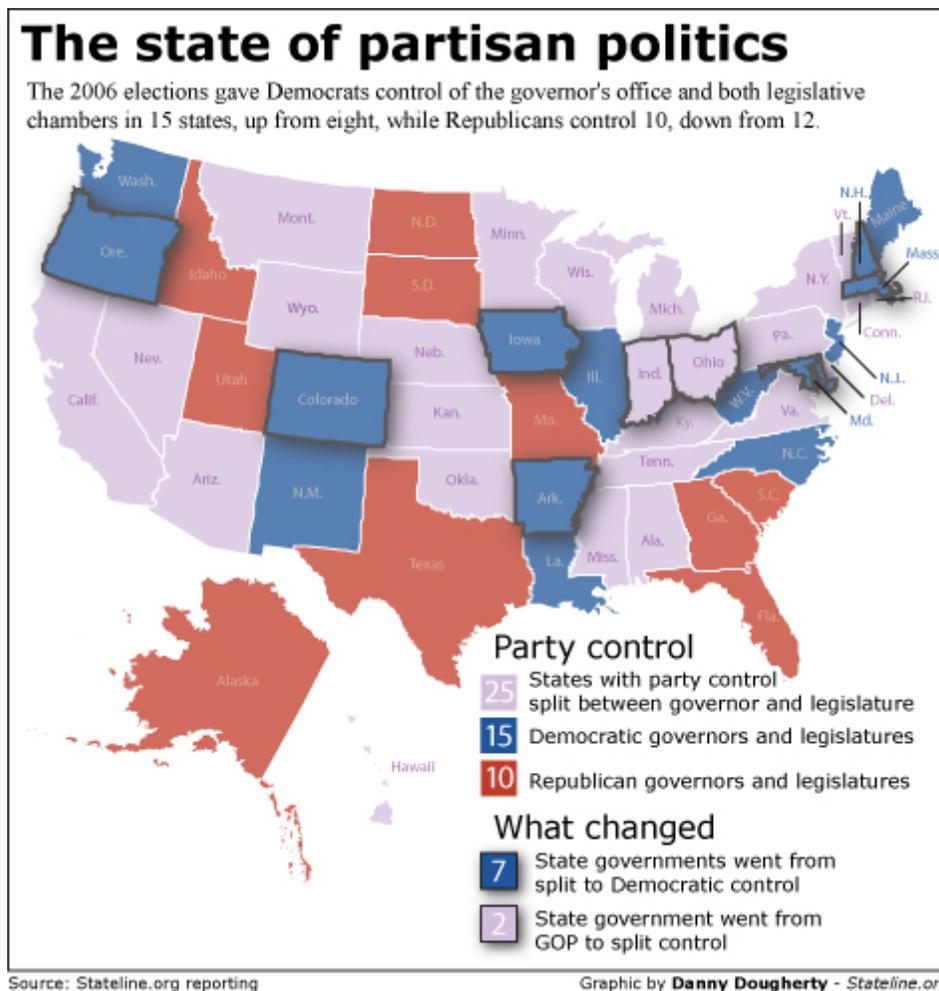
As the nation's capital wonders whether the new split in power between Congress and the White House is a sure bet for gridlock, the lesson from beyond the Beltway is that plenty still can be accomplished when political control is divided between Republicans and Democrats.

Just last year, in six states where one party controls the executive branch and the other has the majority of one or both houses of the legislature, the two sides agreed to hike the minimum wage. In Massachusetts and Vermont, GOP governors worked with Democratic-controlled legislatures to cover the medically uninsured. In California, Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger reversed his governing style to work with Democratic majorities in the legislative branch and take the nation's lead in fighting global warming. Meanwhile, all those issues bogged down in fierce partisan battles at the federal level.

While divided government seems like a stark change on Capitol Hill after a stretch of solid Republican control, states have figured out how to work across the political divide. Frankly, they don't have any choice.

Exactly half the nation's state capitols are divided, with governors from one party and at least one house of the legislature in the hands of the other. (Democrats control both the executive and legislative branch in 15 states, Republicans in 10.) Before the 2006 election, 30 states had divided government.

Partisan colorations mean somewhat less at the state level, where pragmatism and problem-solving



are necessities. For one thing, pressure to compromise is built-in when all states but Vermont are constitutionally required to balance their budgets. For another, state lawmakers are more willing – and because of the smaller scale, have the luxury – to experiment with policy. And in 15 statehouses with term limits, legislators work under deadline pressure to make their mark in six to 12 years.

A need to produce results means Republicans at the state level are more accustomed to

bending occasionally to Democratic ideas and vice versa. Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano (D) wielded her veto pen like a machete last year over the GOP-dominated Legislature, killing 43 bills, including some to restrict abortion and stiffen penalties on illegal aliens. But she compromised on her impulse to invest the state's entire \$1.4 billion surplus in state programs and savings, yielding to Republicans who wanted tax cuts.

On the minimum wage, states proved far faster than Congress at responding to overwhelming public support in polls for raising the \$5.15-an-hour federal rate, last updated in 1996. Federal attempts to raise the wage fell apart before the 2006 elections, though congressional Democrats now are resurrecting the idea. But at the state level, the rush to raise the minimum wage bordered on stampede and even caught up two Republican governors – Schwarzenegger and Arkansas' Mike Huckabee. They broke ranks and signed minimum wage hikes last year, joining nine other states that enacted pay increases by statute and six more that did so by ballot measure. In all, 30 states now mandate higher minimum wages than does Congress.

What states have learned is that cracking the tough problems sometimes requires crossing the political aisle, even if that means breaking party stereotypes. That's precisely what Schwarzenegger and fellow Republican Mitt Romney, as governor of Massachusetts, did when they proposed a government-led solution to the problem of the uninsured.

Sometimes leaders who do that have more credibility precisely because they're going against the partisan grain, much as when anti-communist warrior President Richard Nixon moved to

open relations with Communist China. Or when Democratic President Bill Clinton broke with many in his party to sign a welfare reform bill passed by a Republican Congress.

President Bush himself is no newcomer to divided government. One of his hallmarks as Texas governor was his flair at working with Democrats who controlled the Legislature then. One starting point to stave off D.C. gridlock could be immigration, where the Democratic takeover of Congress makes it easier – rather than harder – to see a deal on Bush’s proposed guest-worker program.

Editor's Note: This column was published simultaneously by [The Politico](http://www.politico.com) (www.politico.com), a new print and Internet-based news publication that covers Capitol Hill and national politics.

Comment on this story in the space below by [registering](#) with Stateline.org, or e-mail your feedback to our [Letters to the editor](#) section at letters@stateline.org. Contact Barbara Rosewicz at browsewicz@stateline.org.

ISSUES AND TOPICS ▄▄▄

Issues: Elections Environment Health Care Politics Taxes and Budget Welfare & Social Policy

COMMENTS ▄▄▄

There are no comments yet, would you like to [add](#) one?