

# Profile: Colorado's Sixth Congressional District



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Colorado's Sixth Congressional District is our quintessential Western battleground district. Comprised almost entirely of the cities and suburbs to the south and east of Denver, the Sixth is a purple district in a purple state. In this case study, we examine the district's demographics and how they compare to red and blue districts within the state. We then look at the politics of the district and past election results, where this ticket-splitting swing district has repeatedly elected a Republican Congressman in recent years while simultaneously supporting President Obama. We then turn to look at how discussions about national issues play out in the local media. In general, we found a theme that while the national dialogue tends to be abstract, residents of the Sixth District see the issues as tangible. Based upon what is particularly relevant to the district, we highlight the issues of energy, health care, and marijuana, but the general lesson that can be learned—a national, one-size-fits-all approach won't work for swing districts—is applicable to the other purple places in the country which decide major elections.

## District Overview

Colorado's Sixth District was not always as urban and suburban as it is now—covering much of the area surrounding Denver to the south and east. Prior to the last round of redistricting which followed the 2010 census, the Sixth looked markedly different. Population growth in the Denver metro area caused the district boundaries to shift inwards from the rural, Republican-dominated counties to the south and west of Denver, towards the more moderate suburbs and Aurora.<sup>1</sup> The district currently starts to the south of Denver, in the suburb Littleton (population 42,000), the seat of Arapahoe County. From Littleton, the district bulges slightly south into Douglas County, namely Highland Ranch but mainly moves west, into the city of Centennial (population 100,000) and less densely populated parts of Arapahoe County, before shifting north to encompass a chunk of Aurora, Colorado's third-largest municipality (population 353,000). From there the district snakes further north into Adams County before swinging back east to capture most of Brighton (population 36,000) and the northern part of Thornton (population 130,000).<sup>2</sup>

The Denver metro area is doing well economically, with an unemployment rate of 3.1%, and the counties that make up the Sixth District reflect that trend, with unemployment rates of 3.0% in Adams County, 3.0% in Arapahoe County, and 2.5% in Douglas County.<sup>3</sup> In 2014, the metro area saw median household income rise by 5%—about \$3,000—and poverty fall by one-tenth.<sup>4</sup> The largest sources of jobs in the Sixth District are the education and health care industries.<sup>5</sup> In fact, some of the largest employers in Aurora are the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, which has 8,140 employees, the University of Colorado Health, with 5,860 employees, and Children's Hospital Colorado, with 5,740 employees.<sup>6</sup> The single largest employer in the area by far is Buckley Air Force Base, which employs 11,000 workers in the region.<sup>7</sup>

## **Demographic Snapshot**

To show why the Sixth is competitive, it is helpful to compare the demographics of the district with a safe Democratic district, such as Colorado’s First Congressional District, and a safe Republican District, such as Colorado’s Fifth. The First District contains mostly the city of Denver while the Fifth is in the central part of the state, covering Colorado Springs and its suburbs. <sup>8</sup> Compared to the blue First District, the purple Sixth is 35 points more suburban and nearly seven points whiter, while compared to the red Fifth it is 38 points more suburban and nearly five points more Hispanic. The purple Sixth is wealthier than either the red or blue districts, with a median income \$12,617 higher than the blue First and \$10,692 higher than the red Fifth. Sixth District residents are between five and eight points more likely to earn six-figure incomes than residents of the other two districts, and the poverty rate is five points lower than in the blue First District. <sup>9</sup>



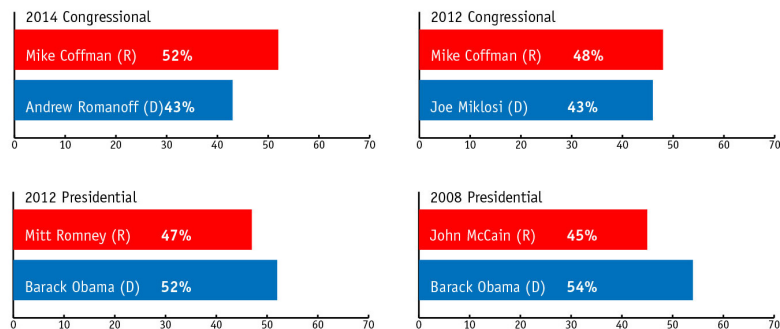
## Politics and Elections

In recent years, the district has repeatedly supported Democratic candidates for president, but Republicans have managed to hold on to the congressional seat despite the redistricting which reduced its Republican tilt. <sup>10</sup> The change is illustrated well by the 2008 election: President Obama lost the old Sixth District by 6 points, but in the newly drawn Sixth District, his vote share in that election grew by 8 points to 54%. The Sixth is currently represented by Congressman

Mike Coffman, who originally was elected to the prior much more conservative and rural district after the incumbent, Tom Tancredo, resigned to run a quixotic race for President. After redistricting made the Sixth much more competitive, Coffman moderated himself enough to remain in office in this district, which now boasts a partisan rating of D+1. <sup>11</sup> In the last year with a Presidential election, he eked out a two-point win, but neither candidate broke the 50% threshold.

As has been true for several cycles, the Sixth is a top Congressional target for Democrats in the 2016, and the party united behind the candidacy of State Senator Morgan Carroll. A third-generation Coloradan who represented Aurora in the state legislature, she has been endorsed by EMILY's List and is a top priority for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's Red to Blue list (turning districts from Republican-held to Democratic-held). <sup>12</sup> In a presidential year, the district is expected to be extremely competitive, and the race is currently considered a toss-up by the Cook Political Report. <sup>13</sup>

### Election Results under Current District Lines <sup>14</sup>



## Local Issues

In seeking to better understand competitive districts like Colorado's Sixth District, it is important to examine and understand how the issues play out on the ground. To highlight the differences between the national and local conversations, Third Way has undertaken an analysis of the local media of the district.

In January of this year we began tracking ten topics in five local newspapers prevalent in the local media market, generating 240 results for analysis. The topics were K-12 education, energy, gun policy, health care, immigration, marijuana, military spending, racial issues (including issues pertaining to members of the African American and Hmong communities), telecommunications, and the Veteran's Administration hospital. Every week, we archived relevant articles, editorials, op-eds, and letters-to-the-editor from the Aurora Sentinel, Denver Post, Douglas County News-Press, The Villager, and La Voz. The goal was to focus on local salience, and national wire stories were excluded. This analysis highlights issues surrounding energy, health care, and marijuana, three topics that received a lot of attention.

We found intriguing differences that diverge from national talking points. We selected three issues areas that are particularly relevant to the Sixth District—energy, health care, and marijuana legalization—but believe that our findings illustrate that there is a larger lesson to be learned about how competitive districts are different from a typical Democratic or Republican district.

While national debates on issues such as energy and climate change, health care, and marijuana focus on where people stand on abstract issues that often act as litmus tests for ideology, Colorado's Sixth District demonstrates that the conversations on the ground are nuanced and are focused on dealing with the practical aspects of how the issues play out in everyday life. The national debate about energy policy may focus on renewables versus fossil fuels or whether climate change exists, but in the district it's about how to provide an energy mix, meet state renewable guidelines, create local jobs, and support communities that have both dying industries and skilled labor. The health care discussion on the ground in the Sixth isn't driven by an argument about repealing the Affordable Care Act, it's focused on how the marketplace functions, businesses shifting costs to Medicaid, and whether insurers are willing to offer an affordable range of diverse plans. Finally, the local debate about recreational

marijuana is focused less on the morality of using the drug than on community needs and concerns on the ground that have arisen from the day to day realities of taxing and regulating a new, booming, and controversial industry.

## **Energy**

The energy industry is a major player in Colorado, which is home to oil, gas, coal, and renewable energy—one could call it an “all of the above” energy state.<sup>15</sup> Although the Sixth District is suburban in character and doesn’t have coal mines or oil fields, the energy sector does have a presence. And when issues surrounding the energy industry are discussed by district residents, they do not parrot the national energy narratives of either political party.

Much of the national political energy debate is about whether climate change exists and which type of sources, renewable or extractive, U.S. energy policy should encourage. By contrast, our analysis of local media demonstrates the extent to which citizens are already wrestling with and responding to transformations in our energy sector. For example, Colorado’s largest producing coal mine, West Elk, cut 80 workers in June of this year, citing declining demand for coal.<sup>16</sup> This is part of a larger trend in Colorado, whereby the coal industry is collapsing and many communities, particularly rural ones, are struggling to adapt, and several times this issue was raised.

While some local industry players and area residents argue this is due to coal being pushed out of the energy mix by over-regulation and an emphasis on cleaner sources, most tend to say that the low costs of oil and natural gas are the main culprits. District residents, in letters-to-the-editor, observed that coal miners are “a dedicated group of highly skilled workers” and the country should ensure their contributions and potential don’t go to waste.<sup>17</sup> They offered both thanks and praise to coal miners, though they were not accompanied by a call for citizens to deny climate change or ignore the complexities of moving from fossil-fuel driven to clean and renewable energy. As put by a resident of

Centennial, who “deeply appreciate[s]” what miners did for the economy,

*“We, as a state, need to help [miners] transition to work that supports our fragile environment [but we] need not deny the seriousness of climate change.”<sup>18</sup>*

The Sixth District also has a direct connection to the renewable energy industry. Aurora is home to the Solar Technology Acceleration Center, a solar energy test and demonstration facility that benefits from the area’s 300 annual days of sun (which is why the city’s namesake is the Roman goddess of dawn).<sup>19</sup> As such, renewables are a big topic of discussion in the region, driven in part by the fact that Colorado also has a renewable energy standard requiring 30% of energy to be produced by renewables by 2020.<sup>20</sup>

However, instead of abstract arguments about fossil fuels and climate change, the main concerns in the Sixth are practicality, jobs and business, and simply dealing with the current reality, which were mentioned several times in the local media. With wind, for example, the focus in local media has been not just on the environmental impact, but also how wind energy is cost efficient, supports domestic manufacturing for turbines (made in Colorado), and creates jobs.<sup>21</sup> Coverage of bio-fuel focuses on business challenges, illustrated by a story about a Douglas-county company that is “‘one of very few companies still standing’ in the next-generation biofuels industry” but “needs a [financial] shot in the arm to realize its commercial potential.”<sup>22</sup>

All told, our analysis of the local media shows that conversations about energy policy in the Sixth District are different from the national debates over fossil fuels and climate change. Instead, this swing district is struggling with the nuanced issues of moving to a clean energy future while supporting the local economy and the workers in it.

## Health Care

The health care industry is a major source of jobs in the Sixth District, and given that dynamic, its citizens have strong feelings on the issue.<sup>23</sup> The national debate about health care has been dominated by Republican efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA). But on the ground in the Sixth, we see a vibrant discussion about repealing, fixing, or expanding the ACA.

Local criticism of the ACA and discussion of future reforms is based on direct experiences working with the new rules. For example, some residents openly worried that so-called low-cost plans on the exchange aren't really affordable and that the mandate was poorly conceived. As one area woman noted, “

*“Regardless of good intentions, did anyone actually think the insurance companies would lower their rates if they have to insure everyone, regardless of pre-existing conditions?”<sup>24</sup>*

Statewide, Coloradans are also considering universal health care, for which a referendum will be held this November. The ColoradoCare plan would displace both Medicaid and private insurance by offering an alternative with coverage in eleven categories. Funding would come from payroll taxes, with one-third paid by the employee and two-thirds employers. An independent analysis found that if enacted, ColoradoCare would control \$38 billion in revenues, larger than companies such as Nike and McDonald's.<sup>25</sup> In op-eds and letters to the editor, critics expressed concern that the costs of the plan would outweigh the benefits, and specifically that it would tax senior citizens, who would see few benefits since they are covered by Medicare.<sup>26</sup> As one Highlands Ranch resident wrote, about himself and his wife's situation:



*“Our Medicare medical costs are deducted from our Social Security checks. If Amendment 69 passes, we will have to move to another state. . . . The cost of ColoradoCare would be too much to handle.”<sup>27</sup>*

This is not fire-breathing rhetoric about government overreach. It is concern about the practicality and cost of health care plans and how existing systems will interact with new rules. And the concerns raised are primarily driven by whether to repeal, fix or expand the ACA and the nuances of implementation.

## **Marijuana**

Colorado is one of the few states that has legalized recreational marijuana, but local jurisdictions largely have control over how legalization is implemented.<sup>28</sup> The counties, cities, and towns of the Sixth District fall into different points on the legalization spectrum. Currently, Douglas County bans recreational dispensaries while Arapahoe County permits them, but the latter is not allowing any additional dispensaries to open.<sup>29</sup> Adams County doesn't permit medical dispensaries, but it will soon start allowing recreational dispensaries.<sup>30</sup> As to be expected, there are a range of opinions on marijuana in the Sixth District. Our media analysis shows that while the conversation in the Sixth District contains a microcosm of the national debate, it is also largely focused on dealing with the practical aspects of the new reality of state marijuana laws that conflict with those at the federal level.

Like many people across the country, some in the Sixth are still suspicious of recreational marijuana, seeing it as a harmful narcotic. The City Council of Littleton recently voted against a measure that would've allowed recreational marijuana to be sold in the city, even though a majority of voters there cast a ballot to legalize recreational marijuana in 2012 statewide referendum.<sup>31</sup> Opponents of the Littleton

measure voiced concerns about damage to Littleton's family-friendly reputation. As one young woman put it, "I don't want to have to move out of the place I love because of the influx of use and abuse . . . I don't want to raise kids where buying a drug is easy." <sup>32</sup> While they may have supported legalization in the abstract, a "not-in-my-backyard" feeling still persists among residents in the district.

The most active conversation around marijuana focuses on issues of implementation, regulation, and taxation and varies in different places throughout the district. For instance, one news story covered an Aurora City Council meeting on rules clarifying a prohibition on home-growing in attached garages or outdoor spaces. <sup>33</sup> In Aurora, marijuana has become so generally accepted that the city is even starting to relax some regulations. As an Aurora spokeswoman stated, when discussing removing a surety bond requirement for marijuana businesses, "Aurora's bond requirements were originally intended to ensure that marijuana businesses would pay the taxes that they owed, but the city of Aurora has not found tax payment to be a problem within the industry." <sup>34</sup>

Taxes proved a popular topic for discussion around marijuana, which reflects the fact that the industry is expected to generate over a billion dollars in sales and \$135-million in tax revenue in the state as a whole. <sup>35</sup> There was some disagreement over the spending priorities for marijuana tax revenue, such as how much should be spent on programs like services for the homeless and how much should be related to marijuana education efforts. <sup>36</sup> In fact, tax revenue is such an important part of the marijuana zeitgeist that it sparked a lawsuit between the City of Aurora and Adams County, which was mentioned several times in local press coverage. <sup>37</sup>

Like the national conversation about marijuana legalization, it is likely that views on this issue will continue to shift in the district. But we expect that as the legalization of marijuana expands into new states, the national debate will start to sound more like the conversation in the Sixth District,

focused on the practical aspects of implementing recreational marijuana rather than a more abstract debate about morality or ideology. In this district, the question is no longer “whether” legalization should move forward, but “how.”

## Conclusion

This district provides us with a fuller picture of the world that voters inhabit in swing districts. National, one-size-fits-all approaches to marijuana, health care, and energy policy and politics won’t work for swing districts, since there are important differences between voters in competitive districts and those who live in seats that are safely won by one or the other political party. As our analysis of local media indicates, messages about important issues won’t resonate with voters if they are keyed to the national debate instead of the reality as local voters experience it.

## Appendix

### Demographics of Select Colorado Congressional Districts <sup>38</sup>

Category	CO-01 (Democratic)	CO-06 (Purple)	CO-05 (Republican)
<b>Cook PVI</b>	D+18	D+1	R+13
<b>Population</b>			
Total	772,255	765,338	749,815
Urban	86.6%	50.3%	76.1%
Suburban	13.4%	48.6%	10.2%
Rural	0.0%	1.1%	13.7%
<b>Race &amp; Ethnicity</b>			
White	56.7%	63.6%	72.6%
Black	8.3%	8.7%	5.5%
Latino	29.0%	19.6%	14.8%
Asian	3.4%	4.9%	3.5%

Multi-Racial	1.9%	2.6%	3.5%
<b>Age</b>			
Under 18	21.0%	26.8%	24.1%
18 to 34	29.4%	22.3%	25.4%
35 to 64	38.6%	40.6%	38.3%
Over 64	11.0%	10.4%	12.2%
<b>Economics</b>			
Median Household Income	\$53,271	\$65,987	\$55,295
Under \$50k	46.6%	37.5%	44.4%
\$50k-\$99k	28.3%	32.2%	32.9%
\$100k-\$199k	18.8%	24.1%	18.9%
Over \$199k	6.3%	6.3%	3.8%
Poverty Rate	16.9%	11.7%	11.2%
<b>Education</b>			
H.S. Degree or Less	31.1%	29.0%	28.1%
Some College	24.9%	30.7%	38.1%
Four Year College Degree	27.25	25.7%	20.7%
Post-Grad Study	16.7%	14.5%	13.1%
<b>Work</b>			
White Collar	44.0%	40.2%	40.3%
Blue Collar	41.0%	43.1%	42.6%
Sales/Service	15.1%	16.7%	17.1%
Gov't (subset)	11.1%	12.2%	18.1%

TOPICS

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