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EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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2009 LEGISLATIVE SESSION: PRAGMATIC APPROACH IS GOOD POLITICS

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The 2009 legislative session that begins this month will be different from recent sessions in one big way. For the first time since 1994 Democrats, and not Republicans, will control the State Assembly. But in other significant ways, the session will be very similar to the 2007 one. And that similarity means that, in all likelihood, major policy changes will reflect a moderate, pragmatic tone.

The Democrats will enjoy a 52-46 majority in the 99-member Assembly (there is one Independent). This margin is nearly identical to the 52-47 edge the Republicans had the last two years. This means that Democrats, like the Republicans in 2007-08, can afford to lose only two of their members and still hold onto the 50 votes they need to pass legislation. Any proposal that is unacceptable to even a small number of Democrats, whether it strikes them as “too liberal” or “not liberal enough,” won’t have the votes to become law.

In such a scenario moderate Democrats, or Democrats from Republican-leaning districts, will have a lot to say about the party’s agenda over the next two years, just as centrist Republicans had influence on the GOP majority in the 2007-08 legislature.

The State Senate is in a similar situation. The 18-15 Democratic edge in that chamber provides the majority with a similar two-vote cushion. Here too, Democratic Senators who are more moderate in their philosophy or whose districts lean Republican will have considerable leverage in determining what bills win the votes needed for passage.

This reality is underscored by the state’s dismal fiscal outlook. No matter how one looks at it, the 2009 budget bill will be a difficult one to pass. Painful budget cuts are unavoidable. Increases in fees and taxes are a distinct possibility. Finding 50 votes for the budget in the Assembly will prove as difficult for the new Democratic leadership as it was for outgoing Republican leaders. If GOP votes for the budget are to be found, they will be won by centrist politics that “split the difference.” The same will be true for any major legislation enacted outside the budget process.

As one Democratic legislator who defeated a GOP incumbent put it, “I didn’t win because the conservatives in my district became liberals overnight. I won because they want me to get things done.”

Democratic leaders recognize that constituents everywhere have a similar concern. In the weeks since the election they have emphasized the goal of reaching out to Republicans. They have also signaled a preference for pragmatic, workable solutions to every day problems. They have said little or nothing about controversial issues that might undercut any appeal to moderates in the middle of the political spectrum.

St. Thomas Aquinas often noted, "Virtue stands in the middle." Politicians rarely quote saints in floor debates. But the hard reality of the 2009 legislative session is that the middle of the political spectrum will be a good place to be for those interested in getting things done.