



The Changing Colors of Oklahoma Politics

The surprising “blue majority” in the reddest of red states

BY GLEN ROBERSON IMAGES COURTESY OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Tom Kielhorn is a respected man. He has been a university professor, a marketing analyst, a political consultant, and an advisor to governors, senators, and congressmen. Today he sits with a friend in an Oklahoma City restaurant awaiting his food and talking politics. Normally, this is one of his favorite pastimes. Politics is in his DNA.

He finds no joy in the subject today. Tom stares out the window, his chin in his right palm. “I can remember a time when state Democrats would pay a Republican’s filing fee just to run against them. Now . . .” His voice trails off. Rapping the tip of his index finger on the table, he says, “I refuse to believe we [Oklahomans] have changed that much!”

The source of Dr. Kielhorn’s angst is the ascendancy of the Republican Party in Oklahoma during the past half decade. From statehood in 1907 until 2004, Democrats won 81 percent of all elections, whether statewide or local. Now, the Grand Old Party (GOP) controls the State House of Representatives, the State Senate, the Governorship, and every other statewide elective office. It has graded inroads into local government as well, electing county commissioners, prosecutors, and city judges. Jim Inhofe is serving his third term in the U.S. Senate. Is this just a passing storm of party majority, or are these developments a harbinger of long-term climate change?

RED STATE, BLUE STATE

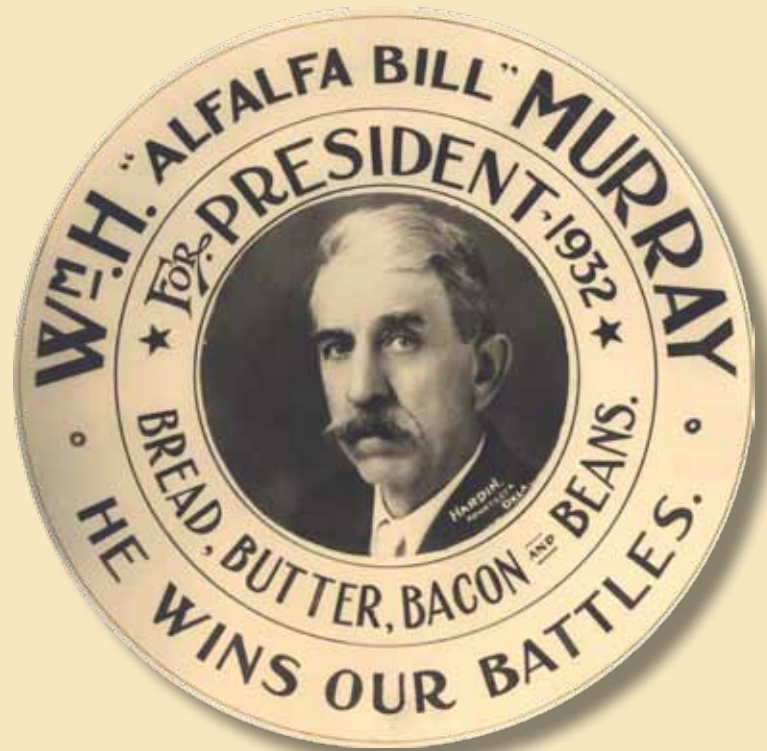
Oklahoma Republicans have held power before; they were the party of statehood. Republican President Benjamin Harrison opened Oklahoma Territory to settlement by authorizing the land run of 1889. Republicans controlled the territorial legislature and filled the growing townships with loyal postmasters and prosecutors willing to promote the party cause.

But statehood ended GOP dominance. Democrats of adjacent Indian Territory outmaneuvered Republicans and sent 99 of the total 112 delegates to the State Constitutional Convention in Guthrie. Republicans found themselves in the ridiculous political position of being “for” statehood, but “against” a constitution written by Democrats. Their dilemma cost them political power for an entire century.

The Democrats at the State Constitutional Convention were not a monolithic group. Some were lawyers like Charles Haskell (who later became the state’s first governor); others were successful businessmen like banker Lee Cruce (the state’s second governor); a few were labor leaders. They all shared a deep faith in the agrarian way of life and a deeper mistrust of the onrushing industrialism: factories; Wall Street financiers (Haskell called them parasites); huge business “trusts” like Standard Oil and Carnegie Steel; and expanding cities where criminals sneered at civic values and political machines turned governing into graft. They despised most of all how industrialism massed people into factories and cities and threatened the frontier ethos of unrestrained libertarianism (which lauded individual liberty and minimal government) personified by independent farmers and risk-taking small-town businessmen. Thomas Jefferson christened them the backbone of the republic and the protectors of democracy. They believed it with absolute conviction. Yet, they watched their children leave the family farm, lured by the promise of the city; they heard slurs entering the common lexicon, phrases like “country bumpkin” and “hayseed.” Frank Baum’s scarecrow, the symbol for the farmer in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), wanted a brain.

Oklahoma Democrats have often divided their loyalties between the national and the state parties. At the state and local level, Democrats have offered candidates from a wide spectrum of political ideology. In the past, a voter could find a conservative middle-of-the-road candidate as well as liberal candidates running against each other in the state Democratic primary. Such divisions have made it difficult for them to offer a consistent platform as a unified party. During the Great Depression, liberal Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal were widely popular with the Democratic rank and file. Oklahomans gave Roosevelt large majorities in his four elections. Yet, that same party elected governors William “Alfalfa Bill” Murray (1931-1935), who opposed Roosevelt’s “socialist programs” and disliked him personally, and conservative Leon Phillips (1939-1943), who found the New Deal “repugnant” and filed lawsuits in federal court to stop construction of the Denison Dam and Pensacola Dam, both funded by FDR’s Works Progress Administration. Only Governor E.W. Marland (1935-1939), founder of Marland Oil (Conoco), admired Roosevelt’s efforts. Marland even dreamed of his own “Little New Deal.” The Democratically-controlled legislature killed his programs.

Today, Oklahoma Democrats can no longer disassociate themselves from the national party. Polls indicate most Oklahomans view the national Democratic Party as too liberal for their taste. The “ticket splitting” of the past is no longer an acceptable strategy for much of the state electorate.



Top, clockwise from left: Campaign poster for Olney Flynn, 1946. Campaign poster for J. Howard Edmondson, 1958. Political ad for J. Howard Edmondson, 1958. Middle: Alfalfa Bill Murray runs for President with the 1932 “Bread, Butter, Bacon & Beans” campaign. Photo by Joe Hardin Studio. Bottom: Oklahoma Constitutional Convention in session, City Hall, Guthrie, O.T., Feb. 1907. Photo by Fred S. Barde

VARIATIONS ON “THE DREAM”

From the very beginning, Oklahoma’s political culture sat in a conservative milieu that continues today. Our political legacy is shaped by that not-so-distant frontier society, personified by ambitious, independent farmers and ranchers, storekeepers, and indigenous industries like oil and gas. There has never been a wide gap in the Oklahoma mind between homesteader and wildcatter. Dr. Keith Gaddie of the University of Oklahoma stresses that Republican and Democratic leaders drink from the same reservoir of “pro-business” attitudes. Whether the Governor is a Democrat like Lee Cruce and Robert S. Kerr, or a Republican like Dewey Bartlett and Mary Fallin, all promote business investment and growth in the state.

Even the “outlying” political movements of our past, whether from the Left or the Right, idealized the agrarian ethos. Prior to World War I, Oklahoma had more Socialists per capita than any other state. Oklahoma Socialism demanded government ownership of railroads, a graduated income tax, and a general redistribution of wealth. It championed struggling tenant farmers, for whom the agrarian dream had become a nightmare.

The “new” Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s came from the “better sort”: merchants, professionals, and educators who saw themselves as the protectors of traditional civic morality. Like the “old” Klan of post-Civil War days, they believed people of western European ancestry to be superior to all others and stridently supported segregation of the races. But they publically beat bootleggers in Tulsa and drove prostitutes from the streets in Oklahoma City. Wife beaters, gamblers, and the like felt their wrath. Klan members believed they were doing God’s will by disinfecting a fallen society.

But then, our politics has always had a religious bent. Oklahoma is the only state to come into the Union “dry.” It is easy now to paint prohibitionists as religious busybodies who wanted to dictate their own moral values to others. But there was a real social issue underlying that religious motivation; for huge numbers of people, alcohol was the drug issue of their time, and alcoholism was the addiction that destroyed families and threatened the social fabric of the community.

Socialist gatherings resembled church revival meetings more than political rallies. Their tents billowed with shouts of “Amen” and the refrains of “The Old Rugged Cross.” These impoverished, landless farmers, who paid loan rates as high as 14%, cheered the story of Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers and proclaiming, “Blessed are the poor.” Their Jesus was more than a personal redeemer; He was a social revolutionary.

THE SILENT MAJORITY

Now the Republican Party is back in power, using the modern technologies of television, computers, and social networking to create a united platform espousing lower taxes and smaller government. For the last 10 presidential elections, the Republican Party’s candidate has swept Oklahoma. Democrats had to content themselves with electing candidates to state and local offices. In 2008, Republican presidential nominee Senator John McCain carried every county in the state over Democratic Senator Barack Obama, prompting *Tulsa World* writers Michael Overall and Tom Lindley to proclaim Oklahoma “the reddest of red states” (Nov. 6, 2008). It marked a historic victory for Republicans in local races, too.

The current irony is that more Oklahomans are registered as Democrats than as Republicans. The January 2011 Report of the Oklahoma State Election Board shows 999,943 Democrats registered in 52 counties. Republican strength totaled 849,332 voters in 25 counties. While Democrats might lead in total numbers, party registration is a poor way to gauge partisan strength and Democrats can take no comfort in it. Party loyalty is declining in Oklahoma, as it is throughout the country, and voters cross party lines in elections all the time. Samuel Kirkpatrick, David Morgan, and Thomas Kielhorn wrote in *The Oklahoma Voter* in 1977 that only 19 percent of eligible voters in the state possessed a strong political philosophy. There is no reason to believe that figure has moved far. The Election Board reports that 26 counties show 11.5 percent of voters registered as Independent, and the trend is growing.

Also of note is that, historically, rural areas in our state have exercised more political power than urban areas. Of the 44 Speakers of the Oklahoma House of Representatives, 26 come from towns under 10,000 in population. Democrats have long depended on these small communities of eastern and southern Oklahoma to send them to office. But census figures show these rural communities are losing people at the annual rate of 3.6 percent. As the rural population declines, so does the Democratic base.

Republicans have offset rural erosion with growing strength in urban Cleveland, Oklahoma, and Tulsa counties. In Cleveland and Wagoner counties, the two fastest growing in the state, Republican registration outnumbers Democrats 52.1 percent to 47.9 percent. Though it is difficult to get comprehensive data, people moving into the state have tended to settle in our metropolitan areas. Nationally, political consultants maintain as an operating principle that people occupying urban centers, where incomes are rising, tend to vote Republican.

OKLAHOMA VALUES

There is sufficient evidence to conclude that Oklahomans are altering their political allegiances. Demographic trends indicate that the Republican Party has a strong chance to continue its recent successes. The GOP also offers a united image to the public (though the Tea Party movement may challenge that picture), which may give the party an advantage. But no one is sounding the death knell for Democrats: Brad Henry was a popular two-term Democratic governor. Another strong showing by Republicans will add proof of longer-term partisan change. A Democratic resurgence would be evidence of a political season where the two parties demonstrate equal strength. Either way, the old political environment of Democrats dominating politics like they have over the past century is gone.

What remains are the commonly held old libertarian values of self-determination and individual liberty, rooted in the frontier experience of the state. These Oklahoma values transcend “Red” or “Blue”—and in that very fundamental way, we have not changed at all. ☛

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