

Blue Jean Nation "Ghosts in the graveyard"

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There are not modern counterparts for the rural Democrats or middle-of-the-road Republicans of yesteryear. The disappearance of these species is a warning signal that we ignore at our peril.

ALTOONA, WI - American politics has changed immensely in the last generation or two. It used to be more of a hobby, something done on the side by people with lives outside of politics. Now it's been taken over by professionals and most who are serious about it consider it a career.

There has always been lobbying in the halls of government, but the primary currency of lobbyists used to be information. That was before lobbying was married to election fundraising. Petitioning government and supplying campaign cash have now become inseparable.

When I got my first taste of the inner workings of Wisconsin's State Capitol back in the early 1980s, being a lawmaker was a part-time job. Now it's full-time. Not because there are so many more laws that need making, but rather largely owing to the fact that soliciting political donations has become a daily chore.

Abortion was a touchy subject back in the 80s and it remains a touchy subject today, but back then there were Democrats and Republicans on both sides of the issue. Republicans who favor legal abortion are no longer welcome in the party's ranks, and Democrats who have qualms about abortion aren't tolerated by their party either.

Two species of politicians have gone extinct in the last couple of generations. There used to be rural Democrats. Not anymore. The legislature used to be filled with small-town Democrats like

Tom Harnisch of Neillsville, Harvey Stower of Amery, Dale Bolle of New Holstein, Gervase Hephner of Chilton, Bill Rogers of Kaukauna and Bob Dueholm of Luck, who followed in the footsteps of his father Harvey. In more recent years, there were still a few rural Democrats like Phil Garthwaite of Platteville, but they were few and far between. Now they're long gone. The Democratic Party [used to appeal to rural voters](#) , but [no longer does](#) . It has become an urban party.

The Republican Party has become the political equivalent of a donut. No middle. There was an abundance of centrist Republicans in Wisconsin's legislature in the early 1980s, many of them women like Barb Lorman, Sheehan Donoghue, Peggy Rosenzweig, Mary Panzer, Sue Engeleiter, Pat Goodrich, June Jaronitzky and Betty Jo Nelsen. Men too, like Dave Paulson, Bob Larson, Francis "Brownie" Byers, Brian Rude, Mike Ellis and Dale Schultz. Slowly but surely some like Panzer, Lorman and Rosenzweig were driven out by far more conservative Republicans who challenged them in party primary elections, while others like Schultz were replaced by right-wingers once they saw the handwriting on the wall and decided to leave the legislature. Republican moderates became a vanishing breed. The elements Republican leaders invited into their party to replace the moderates have given rise to extremism that [invite s comparisons to fascism](#) .

The fact that there are not modern counterparts for the rural Democrats or middle-of-the-road Republicans of yesteryear is a symptom of illness in our political system. The disappearance of these species is a warning signal that we ignore at our peril.

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