

A funny thing happened on the way to the extreme right: The middle started to fall away. In his 2004 book, "What's the matter with Kansas? How conservatives won the heart of America." Thomas Frank used Kansas as a metaphor to examine why so many working and middle-class Americans are willing to consistently vote against their own self-interest. I never fully accepted his thesis, since I think he made a fatal flaw by defining self interest in narrow, economic terms. Using his standards, one must also wonder why liberal icons (the Vanity Fair set, if you like) such as the Kennedys and Roosevelts vote for politicians who raise taxes just as you would wonder about Kansans who vote for social conservatives who cut them. Now, however, we are starting to see the unraveling of the Grand Old Party in the Sunflower State. In the past few weeks more and more stalwarts of the party have jumped ship to the Democratic side, including the former party chairman, Mark Parkinson, now running for Lieutenant Governor alongside popular Democratic Governor Kathleen Sebelius. Many moderates and business/fiscal conservatives are feeling unwelcome in today's Republican Party, dominated as it is by the cultural conservative set. Vindictive reprisals against moderate positions have become so common and so strong that many seem to see no other way out. You can read all about this latest trend in Nicholas Riccardi's wonderful article in the LA Times:

<http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/front/la-na-kansas13jun13,1,6259569.story?coll=la-headlines-frontpage&ctrack=1&cset=true>

Here are a few quotes from the article:

"A lot of people in Kansas are feeling lost right now," said Parkinson, 48, who was invited onto the ticket by popular Democratic incumbent Gov. Kathleen Sebelius. "I decided I'd rather spend time building great universities than wondering if Charles Darwin was right." (in reference to the Kansas State Board of Education decision to redefine science)

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Ron Freeman, executive director of the state GOP, says the recent defections are due to the personal ambitions of the politicians, not because of any ideological shift.

"To say it's gone way to the right, that's not a fair analysis," Freeman said, noting that two of the party's four statewide officeholders back abortion rights.

One of those officials, Insurance Commissioner Sandy Praeger, is opposed in the GOP primary by a candidate opposed to abortion rights. Another moderate, Secretary of State Ron Thornburg, is facing a primary challenge from a female GOP state senator who was reported in 2001 as saying family values began to erode when women got the right to vote.

Some Kansas voters say they feel shut out. "I'm absolutely fed up with the conservative Republicans," said Richard Meidinger, a retired physician in Topeka. "All the abortion stuff, gay marriage stuff doesn't belong in the legislative debate."

Martin Hawver has a name for lifelong members of the GOP like Meidinger: "failed Republicans." The editor of a respected Kansas political newsletter, Hawver's Capitol Report, Hawver counts himself among their number, occasionally doing the unthinkable and voting Democratic.

"It used to be you could never go wrong with voting for who the Republicans nominated," Hawver said. "But that's changing now. People are a little uneasy."

Cindy Neighbor is one of them. A veteran member of her local school board and a moderate, Neighbor, 57, unsuccessfully ran against a conservative for an open seat in the statehouse in 2000. She narrowly lost, but won in 2002.

Neighbor wasn't long for Kansas Republican politics, however. She backed an education bill that could have raised taxes, and party conservatives told her there would be retaliation. She lost the next primary to the same representative she'd ousted two years earlier. Another moderate Republican who'd co-sponsored her bill "Bill Kassebaum, the son of former Kansas U.S. Sen. Nancy Kassebaum Baker" was ousted at the same time.

Now Neighbor's running for her old seat "as a Democrat."

"It was, 'If you don't like this "goodbye," " she said of her struggles to stay in the Republican Party. As a Democrat, Neighbor added, "you can still have your ideas and you're accepted."

Let's hope that this trend starts to be replicated across the country, and within the national parties. I have always thought that the marriage of business/fiscal conservatives with cultural conservatives was one more of convenience than of natural shared interests. It started over a quarter century ago - when the more libertarian Goldwater Republicans were banished from the party leadership, and Reagan melded Nixon's "Southern Strategy" with the recently emboldened "Moral Majority" to forge a new alliance.

Now that the fiscal conservatives have gotten their tax cuts, even if they haven't also gotten their spending restraint, they are more complacent. On the flip side, the cultural conservatives feel that they haven't gotten enough - just a couple of Supreme Court justices - and they want more. Hence the Gay Marriage/Flag Burning nonsense in the Senate. The immigration debate may finally be the thing which forces a wedge between these two camps, only time will tell.