

Republican moderate — a rare breed worth remembering



Dario Anselmo talks about good schools and quality parks and trails, and promises that a woman's reproductive choices are her own. He once owned the Fine Line, the downtown rock club, where the Pixies made their famous 2004 return. This is the same Anselmo running for state representative ... as a Republican.

Like land lines, Tab and Pac-Man, moderate Republicans are becoming harder to find, or at least harder to find among the cohort of activists and elected officials who run the party.

It wasn't always that way.

Go to a Republican event, and there's a decent chance at least someone on the dais will invoke Ronald Reagan. It may be three decades since his 49-state re-election victory — Minnesota: always the contrarian — but Republicans still bask in the Great Communicator's clearly defined agenda of tax-cutting at home and toughness abroad.

Reagan was a conservative standard-bearer who challenged President Gerald Ford from the right in the 1976 GOP primary. But often forgotten is that he was willing to work with the party's moderates. Vice President George H.W. Bush and Chief of Staff James A. Baker were distrusted by movement conservatives, but Reagan stuck with them.

Closer to home, a few years later, former Minnesota Sen. David Durenberger would become cosponsor of a Republican health care reform bill with a striking resemblance to Obamacare.

Moderates have all but disappeared here and nationally. In a national survey, the percentage of Republicans calling themselves "moderate" declined from 12 to 8 percent since 2002, just as the percentage of Americans calling themselves Republican also has declined, according to the Pew Research Center.

Conservatives have taken over state parties and defeated elected officials just for sounding moderate even when they have a conservative voting record.

Consider Sen. Richard Lugar, the Indiana Republican who was crushed in a 20-point primary defeat in 2012 by Tea Party Republican Richard Mourdock.

According to University of Maryland political scientist David Karol, Lugar was the 16th most conservative Republican in the Senate during his first term of 1977-78. When he left office in 2007 his positions had not changed appreciably — high marks from business, low marks from environmentalists, 100 percent rating from the Right to Life Committee.

But in that time he had become the seventh most liberal Republican in the Senate.

The seat Anselmo is vying for locally is another example. His opponent is DFL Rep. Ron Erhardt. But Erhardt wasn't always a Democrat. He served 18 years as a fiscally conservative Republican before being denied his party's endorsement in 2008. By 2012, Erhardt re-emerged as a Democrat and won.

Republicans surely worry — if only privately — that as they have weeded out party moderates, they also have lost five of the past six presidential popular vote totals.

The future looks even more problematic because millennial voters — 80 million Americans between age 18 and 33 — are more racially diverse and tend to be more educated and more socially liberal than generations prior.

What many Republican leaders find alarming — see the party's post-2012 “autopsy” document — is that President Obama won 60 percent of those millennials, a smaller margin than his 66 percent total in 2008, but still a drubbing.

With their new-wave sound and skinny ties, the kids seem to like the '80s. Anselmo and his fellow Republican moderates can only hope the nostalgia extends to '80s politics, when moderates were still in.

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