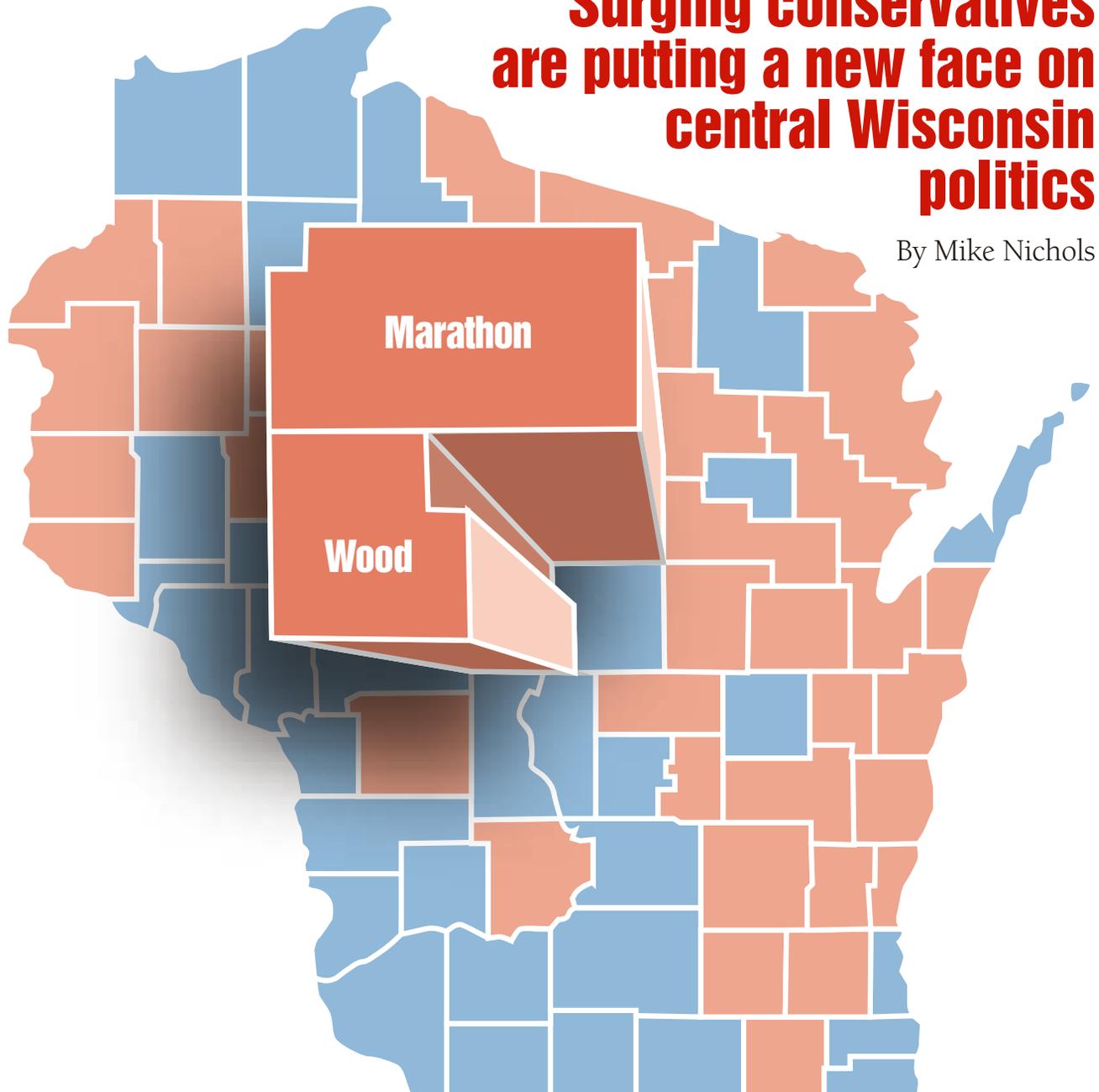


True portrait

**Surging conservatives
are putting a new face on
central Wisconsin
politics**

By Mike Nichols



The official caricaturist at the Central Wisconsin State Fair in Marshfield was located nowhere near the local Democratic Party's booth. But no matter.

If you were a conservative stopping for a little literature and conversation after the cricket-spitting contest, you could quickly get lampooned just as effectively — and for free.

Among the literature available at the booth over the Labor Day weekend: a piece advising Republicans who “hate taxes” to refrain from using Social Security, public restrooms, sidewalks, federally regulated airplanes, the Internet, and water from public drinking fountains. Liberals, went the logic, are free to drink deep.

A Democratic volunteer, after observing that the Marshfield area is largely conservative, remarked that “this is really a white, rural area, and a lot of people have not had a lot of education after high school.” She then launched into a diatribe about a lack of tolerance for minorities and allegations that some people still use the “N-word.”

All of which begs the question: Why have so many Wisconsinites in the heartland of the state suddenly become close-minded, government-hating, racist simpletons?

Across the way, over at the Wood County Republican Party booth, Marilyn Knoll and Frank Deppe, congenial volunteers from Wisconsin Rapids and the Town of Rudolph, respectively, had the answer:

Local conservatives are not what liberals say they are. In fact, independent-minded central Wisconsin conservatives are not what many folks on the right might assume, either.

“I bet you did not think you’d come to a booth and find us,” said the 65-year-old Deppe, sitting near

Knoll and a second woman who preferred to remain unnamed.

“A retired Teamster and,” Deppe said, gesturing to himself and his anonymous friend, “a retired teacher.”

Conservatism, it seems, is showing up with new vigor in all sorts of surprising places — and people.

There has been a tectonic move to the right in central Wisconsin.

“There’s no denying things have shifted,” says Mandy Wright, the only remaining Democrat among eight state representatives and senators in Marathon County.

Wright — an articulate political newcomer who eked out a victory with less than 50 percent of the vote in a three-way general election last November and who sometimes sounds fairly conservative herself — represents what she calls a “historic” Assembly seat

once held by both former Congressman Dave Obey and former Gov. Tony Earl.

They’re not the only Democratic stalwarts who are merely memories. Onetime liberal mainstays like Russ Decker and Roger Breske are fading into the past as well. Decker, a former Senate majority leader from Schofield who represented the 29th Senate District for almost 20 years, was ousted in 2010 by Republican Pam Galloway. She was a doctor who later resigned and was succeeded by Republican Jerry Petrowski.

The adjacent 12th District Senate seat, which extends from Marathon County all way up to the state’s border in the northeast, was long the province of Breske but is now being filled by Republican Tom Tiffany.

It is true that Wood County — where Marshfield and the fair are located — is the home of onetime Obey aide state Rep. Amy Sue Vruwink, at least

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for now. (She beat Republican newcomer Nancy VanderMeer in the 2012 race by a mere 144 votes out of almost 27,000 cast.) But if you lift your gaze a little on the map to the rest of central and northern Wisconsin, it is almost as solidly red as Wisconsin's cranberry bogs.

The real political juice in the heart of the state is redder than ever, and it doesn't have anything to do with redistricting. Even before districts were redrawn in 2012, counties like Marathon and Wood that were once reliable liberal bellwethers had moved decidedly right. The presidential vote proved the metamorphosis was real.

Both went for Bill Clinton over Bob Dole in 1996 before opting twice for George Bush. They then fervently embraced Barack Obama just five years ago. Marathon went for Obama by no less than 9 percentage points over John McCain in 2008, while Wood County favored the Democratic candidate and eventual winner by no less than 14.

Then came 2012.

While Obama prevailed by 4 percentage points nationally and 7 percentage points in Wisconsin, both Wood and Marathon went for Romney — the latter county by a convincing 6 percentage points. Sean Duffy's 7th Congressional District, which stretches across a vast swath of central and northern Wisconsin, went narrowly for Romney as well.

One school of thought says central and northern Wisconsinites are just revealing their true nature, their respect for a buck and a job, their disdain for overspending and government dependence, their belief in local decision-making over a big, centralized, monolithic federal government.

"I think these small rural communities are, at heart, conservative," says Tiffany. "Now, I don't think they have always voted conservative."

Then why now?

One key reason: Dave Obey. The liberal titan, who served 21 terms in Congress, became much less a creature of Wausau than Washington, where he now works for former House Majority Leader Dick Gephardt's government affairs shop. But his influence on voters up and down the ticket in central Wisconsin was almost as effective and unbridled as his acerbic tongue.

"You cannot overestimate the change from Dave Obey to Sean Duffy," says Tiffany, an increasingly high-

profile Republican from tiny Hazelhurst who took the lead on pro-mining legislation. Obey was constantly going around saying, "The evil Republicans are going to take away your Social Security and Medicare," says Tiffany. The

former chair of the House Appropriations Committee made a living at it, and people believed him, he explains. They also believed Obey was on the side of the common man.

"I think there is a real populist streak here," says Tiffany. "If you can harness that, it really helps a political candidate. People like Dave Obey and Russ Decker got into office partly by emphasizing that populist streak."

Obey secured support with federal money. He brought gobs of it back to his district, and bragged about it. And he dished lots out elsewhere as well. He didn't just play a key role in passing the \$787 billion stimulus package, he said it should have been bigger. He didn't just preside over the vote that pushed Obamacare over the top in the House, he said he wished it included a more aggressive "public option."

Obey stepped aside in 2010 without having to face voters after all the largesse. But to the fundamentally frugal back in his home state, what once seemed like populism was likely looking more and more like profligacy.

'There's no denying things have shifted,' says state Rep. Mandy Wright, the last remaining Democrat representing Marathon County.

Marathon County is still largely agricultural, and farmers and other small business owners tend to be fiscally conservative.

“They don’t like a lot of spending. They want to keep money in their pockets. They’re concerned about taxes,” says John Spiros, a first-term state representative who represents the area around the fair in Wood County and much of Marathon County to the north.

As proof of that fundamental frugality, Tiffany points to support for Scott Walker among central Wisconsinites after he pushed through the limits on collective bargaining.

“Look at the recall map,” said Tiffany. “They got it. They said, ‘You have to live within your means.’”

Portage County, south of Marathon and east of Wood, was one of the few places outside the big cities that went for Barrett in the recall race. But the rest of central and almost all of northern Wisconsin — dozens and dozens of counties — went for Walker, and in many places by enormous margins. Barrett ran up big numbers in Milwaukee and Madison, but almost nowhere else.

Times are tight, and most central Wisconsinites did not think more spending and more government and more dependence were the answer. Deppe, sitting behind the Republican table at the fair, articulates just why.

He was a Teamster, a member of Local 662 who drove a truck for a living for 27 years. He voted for Duffy and he voted for Walker, and he says he never regretted it.

“The longer [Walker] is in there, and his policies are coming into effect, the better people realize it is,” he said.

He’s not an acolyte for any politician. In fact, he’s downright disdainful of politicians of all stripes in Washington. Despite where he was sitting, he said he’s not even really a Republican.

“We’re conservatives,” he said. “Independent conservatives. If there were a Conservative Party, that’s where we’d be sitting.”

“We have no other voice. This is the only voice we have,” added Knoll.

Her husband, who worked with Deppe, passed away not long ago. She said she was told she could receive a larger Social Security death benefit if she stopped working herself. Maybe even get food stamps.

She shook her head.

“I’m not willing to stay home and be dependent on the government,” she said.

“I don’t want to do that. I want to be independent. I like people. I like socializing.

I like money to buy things. ... If I had to sit at home and do nothing and just collect Social Security, I’d be depressed.”

“So many people are getting something for nothing,” said Deppe. “Why would you go out and look for a job when you get unemployment [compensation] for 99 weeks,” a length of time some Wisconsinites were eligible at one point.

Over at the local Tea Party booth at the fair, there was a similar sentiment on display. On a placard right out front was a chart labeled “Food Stamp Presidency” showing that over 47 million Americans now use food stamps — an accurate number that is up from 26 million at the end of the Bush administration.

“If I had to make a guess” at why the area has become more conservative, said George Kantz, 68, a retired Marshfield resident who was a manager at Weyerhaeuser and also served in the Coast Guard Reserve, “it’s a reaction to overreach by the federal

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government.”

Back at the Wood County Republican Party booth, the teacher who sat silently between Knoll and Deppe finally spoke up. Her conservatism stems, in part, from the fact that she is pro-life, a position that finds little support on the left. But asked about Act 10, Walker’s legislation that severely curtailed collective bargaining and caused a firestorm among the old guard in the teachers’ unions, she comes down on the conservative side as well.

“I guess I know there is a limited amount of money,” she said.

Social issues are important, to be sure. So are Second Amendment rights, which resonate deeply here. When voters considered a constitutional amendment to keep and bear arms in 1998, it passed overwhelmingly statewide with 74 percent of the vote. In Marathon County, it topped 82 percent.

But “at this point,” says Tiffany, “it’s all about economic opportunity and job creation. . . . That’s where the battle lines are drawn.” And, he adds, “less

Wood County in brief

County seat: Wisconsin Rapids

Population: 74,424

White: 95.6%

BA or higher degree: 18.3%

Median household income (2007-'11): \$47,182

Persons below poverty level (2007-'11): 10%

Median home value (2007-'11): \$117,900

Homeownership rate: 74.6%

Higher ed facilities: UW-Marshfield/Wood County, Mid-State Technical College

Major employers: Marshfield Clinic, Ministry St. Joseph’s Hospital, Roehl Transport, NewPage Wisconsin Systems

SOURCES: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

government, especially at the federal level, is the best way to accomplish that.”

“I think people are ripe for the explanation that we have tried the big government route. We have big government in every facet of our lives, and how is that

‘Democrats have done a wonderful job of painting us as the evil boogiemán,’ says local GOP leader Jim Miller. ‘We have to attract these younger voters, or we will be an extinct party.’

working out for us?”

Troubled times, increasing debt and reliance on government, a basic acknowledgement that human beings are happier and more prosperous through work — all play into the conservative philosophy. But Tiffany also believes conservatives in the area just have better, more visible messengers than they used to.

On the flip-side, liberals face a different reality. When Obey was around, it was easy to ride his machine and his coattails. Local liberals didn’t develop a grassroots organization of their own. Some conservatives think they actually forgot how to campaign. The Obey coattails have now disappeared and left the left grasping for something that is no longer there.

Spiros, a one-time Texas cop who moved to Wisconsin in 2002, puts it succinctly.

“I heard the Obey name,” he said, “but I never saw Dave Obey. I see Sean Duffy all the time.”

Political momentum, of course, can quickly change direction. And pendulum swings are just as common in central Wisconsin as anywhere else. Democrat Obey was preceded in Congress by Republican giant Mel Laird, who served 16 years before becoming President Richard Nixon’s secretary of defense in 1969. Old-timers remember that Clifford “Tiny” Krueger, the former circus fat boy from Marathon

County, served 34 years in the Legislature before stepping down in 1983. He was one of the last Progressive Republicans, a now-extinct branch, and sang the praises of Fightin’ Bob LaFollette.

Gone, too, are guys like Breske, a Democrat who was willing to buck his party on the statewide smoking ban and concealed weapons legislation. He saw himself as a spokesman for small business and, as a *Wausau Daily Herald* story put it when he died in 2012, “seldom let politics stand in his way.”

Indeed, as politicians on both sides become less independent and more likely to march in lockstep with their parties, the folks in the middle are, perhaps, less likely to feel much kinship with either. But, given a fundamental conservatism, they’re more likely to vote Republican.

Still, it would behoove Republicans not to take too much comfort in their success of late. Populism, common sense and independence have a history of trumping strict ideology and party in central Wisconsin.

Some observers raise the possibility that the current

shift rightward, in fact, has been purely a product of the moment rather than a reflection of a deeper philosophic shift. Wright, the first-term Democrat who now holds Obey’s old Assembly seat, suggests that conservatives are riding high simply because the new campaign finance laws have given them a tactical advantage in elections. For that matter, even on the right there is blunt acknowledgement that conservatives have to reach out to new constituencies and younger voters to keep winning.

“I think the Democrats have done a wonderful job of painting us as the evil boogiemer,” says Jim Miller, the Republican Party chairman of the 7th Congressional District. “We have to attract these younger voters, or we will be an extinct party.”

What conservatives need to do, he says, is to get out into places they’ve traditionally ceded to liberals, including college campuses, and tell their story.

This message — rebutting negative stereotypes, finding good storytellers willing to bring the conservative gospel to seemingly unreceptive spots — is a message for conservatism in general. In central and northern Wisconsin, the movement has seemingly found the right people at the right time to step forward.

“People up north have always been pretty independent-minded,” says Miller. “We feel we’ve had a disconnect with southern Wisconsin and have had to go it on our own.”

The ongoing challenge is to get folks walking in the middle of the exposition center to wander over and listen. And the longest lines, in truth, were not at any of the booths manned by the Republicans or Democrats or Tea Party members. They were at the “mini masseuse booth” where folks could sit down and have a kink worked out of their neck.

Those booths always have a healthy business, just like the quick-sketching caricaturists. ■

Marathon County in brief

County Seat: Wausau

Population: 134,735

White: 89.8%

BA or higher degree: 21.2%

Median household income (2007-'11): \$54,316

Persons below poverty line (2007-'11): 9.4%

Median home value (2007-'11): \$141,700

Homeownership rate: 74.5%

Higher ed facilities: UW-Marathon County, Northcentral Technical College

Major employers: Aspirus Wausau Hospital, Greenheck Fan Corp., Wausau School District, Kolbe & Kolbe Millwork

SOURCES: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU,
WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

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