

# **FROM SPRINGTIME TO WINTER: THE '92 AND '94 ELECTIONS AND THE IMPACT ON OKLAHOMA POLITICS**

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The 1992 election was one in which the Democrats were competitive in almost all elections in the state of Oklahoma, yet the 1994 election was one that the Oklahoma Democrats have yet to recover from. This paper analyzes those two elections and the time span in between to determine the cause of the Democratic Party's precipitous decline in Oklahoma. The paper determines that there was a populists' backlash against the Democratic Party during the 1992 to 1994 time span. This form of populism, which is cultural, has remained a primary explanation for the failures of Democrats in Oklahoma. Also the built-in demographic advantages for Republicans put the Democrats in an increasingly minority status that does not appear to be changing.

In the spring of 1993, James Carville, the campaign manager for Bill Clinton's successful presidential bid, addressed the Oklahoma Young Democrats' convention in Stillwater. The large crowd heard one stem-winder after another from the Democratic officials on the podium. To the people in the audience, Oklahoma appeared to be a strong Democratic state. Four of the six U.S. Representatives were Democrats. One of the most influential leaders in the U.S. Senate, David Boren, was the top Democratic voice in the state. The Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and all other statewide officials, with the exception of the State Treasurer, were Democrats. At the state level, the Democrats had large majorities in the both Statehouses. As it was springtime in Stillwater with the air

of re-birth, it also seemed a time of reemergence for the Democrats in Oklahoma. Yet politics, like the weather in Oklahoma, can make some abrupt changes. The Democratic Party went from springtime straight to a deep winter from which it has yet recovered. Within a span of eighteen months, the Democratic Party of Oklahoma would sustain overwhelming losses that would put the party in a weakened status, which it continues to maintain sixteen years after the 1994 election. This paper will review the time period between the 1992 and 1994 elections to determine what events were the culprits for the downturn of the Oklahoma Democratic Party.

### **THE CHANGING POLITICAL WINDS**

The 1994 election is known as one of the most significant mid-term elections for the United States and for good reason. The Republican Party gained fifty-two House seats and defeated thirty-four incumbent Democrats, which elevated its status as the majority in the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years. In the Senate, the Republicans won in all nine open-seat elections that year and also defeated two incumbents to gain the majority for the first time eight years. In Oklahoma, the partisan makeup of the House delegation went from a four-to-two advantage for the Democrats to a five-to-one advantage for the Republicans. In the Senate open-seat election, former Democratic House member Dave McCurdy lost to former Republican House member Jim Inhofe by fifteen-percentage points and carried only twenty-eight of the seventy-seven counties in the state. Of those counties only Comanche county would be considered heavily populated. The governor's race in 1994 also went to the Republican for only the third time in the history of the state. This was also the first time the state elected a Republican for Lieutenant Governor.

In the 1994 U.S. House races, the margin of victory was substantial in two of the three open seats. In District One Steve Largent defeated his Democratic opponent Stuart Price by twenty-six percentage points, and in District Six Frank Lucas won by an astounding forty percentage points. As shown by the breakdown of the congressional elections from 1992 and 1994 in Table 1, the First District race was competitive in 1992, and the Sixth District was one that had a Democratic incumbent.

Table 1 also shows the decrease in support for Democratic

candidates from 1992 to 1994 in each competitive election. In Districts Four and Six, which represented at the time the Southwest and Western areas of the state, there was a percentage decrease of twenty-seven and thirty-eight percent for the Democratic candidates respectively. Only the Democratic stronghold of Northeastern Oklahoma was the percentage decrease under ten percent for the Democratic candidate. In District Five, which is dominated by Oklahoma City, the Democrats could not find a candidate to compete against Republican incumbent Earnest Istook.

Table 1.

Percentage Change in '92-'94 Elections for Democratic Candidate in Oklahoma Congressional Delegation

1992	1994	Percentage Difference
District One R. Inhofe 53% D. Selph 47%	District One R. Largent 63% D. Price 37%	-10%
District Two R. Hill 41% D. Synar 56% I. Vardeman 3%	District Two R. Coburn 52% D. Cooper 48%	-8%
District Three R. Stokes 25% D. Brewster 75%	District Three R. Tallant 36% D. Brewster 64%	-11%
District Four R. Bell 30% D. McCurdy 70%	District Four R. Watts 52% D. Perryman 43% I. Tiffée 5%	-27%
District Five R. Istook 54% D. Williams 47%	District Five R. Istook 78% I. Keith 22%	NA*
District Six R. Anthony 32% D. English 68%	District Six R. Lucas 70% D. Tollett 30%	-38%

\*There was no Democratic candidate.

Source: *Election Results and Statistics 1992 and 1994, Compiled by State Election Board, Lance Ward Secretary, State Capitol, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

If 1994 is the starting point to analyze elections in Oklahoma, then any analysis would conclude that the state is firmly in the Republican camp. Yet one election before 1994 showed a different side to Oklahoma. The congressional races of 1992, as noted in Table one, were not competitive in the four districts with incumbent Democrats. In the two districts won by Republicans, incumbent Jim Inhofe won in Republican stronghold District One by a six-percent margin, and in the open seat of District Five Republican challenger Earnest Istook won by seven percentage points. In these same districts in 1990, Inhofe won by twelve percent, and Republican incumbent Mickey Edwards won by forty percent (*Election results and statistics*, 1990).

The 1992 election was a good year for Democrats in the state. In 1992, Democrats were able to tap into the anxiety many Americans felt about the economy. In fact, according to polls before the 1992 presidential election, the economy was the number one issue followed by healthcare in second place. This worked to the advantage of the winner in the campaign, Bill Clinton, whose unofficial campaign slogan was “It’s the economy stupid.” This slogan signified the Clinton camp’s desire to keep the focus on the economy instead of foreign policy or social issues. The key to the election, according to Clinton, was to “[win] the debate over what the election was about” (Clinton, 2004, 445). The nationwide success of the Governor of Arkansas also had some improvement over past Democratic candidates in the state of Oklahoma. In the 1988 presidential race, Vice President George H.W. Bush defeated the Massachusetts Governor, Michael Dukakis, by a margin of seventeen points in Oklahoma. In 1992, Clinton lost to Bush by nine points. While Dukakis carried thirty-one counties in 1988, Clinton carried forty counties in 1992. Certainly Clinton had advantages that Dukakis did not have: he was from a bordering state, and significant third-party candidate Ross Perot was on the ballot. Perot’s primary issue was the rising debt in the federal government, and his call to reduce spending might have taken away conservative voters from Bush (Clinton, 2004, 412). But Clinton’s form of economic populism might have caused more Democrats to stay with their party, perhaps not to vote for him, but to support other Democrats on the ballot.

## ECONOMIC POPULISM

Clinton campaigned in 1992 with the backing of studies that supported his claim found often among economic populists that the “rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer” (Clinton, 2004, 412). His proposal to change the inequality was to raise taxes on wealthier Americans and corporations, who many voters believed had benefited most from the economic success of the eighties (Clinton, 2004, 412). This was a strategy rooted in economic populism. Populism can be considered a “clash between those who feel themselves on the ‘periphery’ and those perceived to be at the ‘core’ of economic and cultural life” (Hertzke, 1993, 4). Michael Kazin (1995) describes populism as “a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter” (1). From the economic perspective, populism is the struggle between the perceived “haves and have nots.”

Oklahoma’s early days were shaped by populism. At the time of statehood, the leaders of Oklahoma were influenced by the populism found in farm country of states in the South and West. The populism that stressed a greater opportunity for the farmer and the worker was one developed from the excesses of the Gilded Age in the 1890s. Agricultural production in that age increased beyond consumption, which caused prices to go down and then led to foreclosures on farms whose owners could not pay their debts. All this occurred at a time when government supported protective tariffs for manufacturers and land grants for railroads, but it provided no help for the farmer (Miller, 1987, 182). This form of populism was created from the failure of aid to farmers from the political elite (Miller 1987, 182). To the populists of the 1890s, what government most needed to do was to attack the “ultimate consolidation of wealth and power—monopoly” (Miller 1987, 184). The populists’ antipathy for monopoly found a home in Oklahoma’s constitution. The constitution for the Sooner State declared that attempts to form monopolies are illegal. The constitution also created a three-member Corporation Commission that set rates for utility companies (Scales & Goble, 1982, 24).

The heritage of Oklahoma suggests candidates that stand up for

the little guy on the economic food chain can do well. George Wallace, the Alabama Governor who ran on the American Independent ticket for president in 1968, campaigned for a government that aided the common folk. He pledged to create a government that would do more for the workingman (Kazin, 1995, 236). In Oklahoma he received twenty percent of the vote while nationally he received thirteen percent. In 1992, presidential candidate Ross Perot campaigned against the two-party system and the era of greed and trickle-down economics, which branded the 1980s (Kazin, 1995, 280). He received twenty-three percent of the vote in Oklahoma while garnering nineteen percent nationally.

One of Oklahoma's own politicians was at the center of the attempt to bring the Democrats back to the message of economic populism after two devastating losses to Republican Richard Nixon in 1968 and 1972. Oklahoma's former U.S. Senator Fred R. Harris "urged a return to 'bread-and-butter issues' that could separate 'the little guy' from the corporate elites that were the backbone of the GOP" (Kazin, 1995, 275). However, such appeals fell on deaf ears. Too often Harris's remedy would be derided in the Democratic Party as advocating "class warfare." Even Clinton's election in 1992 was, by his own account of the campaign, grounded on a strategy to merge the needs of Main Street with Wall Street (Clinton, 2004, 391). Michael Kazin (1995) writes that the appeal to economic populism by Democrats was a "strategy hatched by candidates and their consultants who sought an honorable and efficacious way to abandon the liberal label" (277). Voters in Oklahoma who had in large part supported the Democratic Party in 1992 soon realized how economic populism was not a primary belief of the Clinton administration with its support for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The North American Free Trade Agreement was put into operation on January 1, 1994. It was an agreement between Canada, the United States, and Mexico to reduce trade barriers between the three countries. Because of its potential to transport working class jobs to Mexico, it was opposed by labor unions. There was a stark difference of opinion among Americans on NAFTA. Americans with incomes higher than the national average supported NAFTA, while Americans with incomes lower than the national average opposed it (Kazin, 1995, 277). President Clinton's own account of the 1994 election indicates the disaster for Democrats was based on the disenchantment among his base after the

passage of NAFTA (Clinton, 2004, 629). Thomas Frank (2004), in his book What's the Matter with Kansas, writes that NAFTA meant that “Democrats no longer speak to the people on the losing end of a free-market system that is becoming more brutal and more arrogant by the day” (245). The support of NAFTA by Democratic president Bill Clinton and by many Democrats in the South and Border states, including all four Democrats in Oklahoma’s congressional delegation, highlighted the divisions within the party. The Democrats could not fully support the economic populist cause without alienating the well-financed segment of the base. Economic populism was marginalized by the Democratic leadership in the 1993-1994 Congress. Republicans, during this same time span, could rally around the other form of populism, which was cultural.

### CULTURAL POPULISM

Kevin Phillips, an advisor for Richard Nixon in his 1968 bid for president and the author of The Emerging Republican Majority, summed up the resentment many felt against another form of elites than the bankers and industrialists. These elites were the so-called cultural leaders of the country, or those who are collectively called, *the liberals*. Phillips would refer to the liberals as the people “who make their money out of plans, ideas, communication, social upheaval, happenings, excitement [and] whose vision of the ‘general good’ could come at the expense of other Americans’ simple desire for stability” (qtd. In Perlstein, 2008, 277). Like economic populism, cultural populism is centered on the opposition between the elites who believe they know what’s good for the masses and those in the ranks of the masses who believe they are on the fringes in society with no voice. There are few groups in America that believe they are being pushed around by the cultural elitists more than Evangelical Christians. Oklahoma is a state with a high percentage of Evangelical Christians in its population. This state ranks seventh as the most Protestant state in the union and the majority of the Protestants in Oklahoma are Evangelicals (Harrison, Harris, & Tochin 2009, 222: Olsen 2008).

Evangelicals split from the mainstream Protestant faiths, such as Methodist and Episcopalian, in two main ways: “the belief that the Bible is the ultimate and only source of religious authority and the belief in a

life-altering event in which the individual accepts Jesus as her or his personal savior” (Brewer & Stonecash, 2007, 154). Mark Brewer and Jeffrey Stonecash (2007), who wrote on the cultural divides in America, describe how the word “tradition” applies in most all events in the daily life of Evangelicals. They note that Evangelicals place a strong emphasis on traditional family life and oppose any possible threat to its foundation. Evangelicals would then approve of Texas Congressman Tom DeLay’s statement in 1993 in his opposition to allowing homosexuals to serve in the military. DeLay believed such an allowance was merely a beginning skirmish in a greater culture war. DeLay stated, “we feel strongly that the homosexual movement is not asking for tolerance; they’re asking for a social endorsement” (qtd. In *Congressional quarterly almanac 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, first session*, 1993, 445). Ultimately the debate over homosexuals openly serving was voted down. In fact, Southern Democrats voted against allowing homosexuals to openly serve, as did the majority in Congress, with the exception of only one member in the Oklahoma delegation, Mike Synar, who supported the legislation. The compromise, known as “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” was approved, which allowed homosexuals to serve in the military, but not openly. Although it was not supported by a majority of Northern Democrats, it was supported by a majority of Southern Democrats and Republicans. However, to cultural populists, the message was clear that this issue signified a behavior among cultural elites that they knew better and the traditional lifestyles of Americans must change.

Gun control became another issue to rally cultural populists against those they identified as the elites. To the cultural populists, it was the elite policymakers in Washington or other big cities that wanted gun control. Legislation that banned the sale of assault weapons was not supported by the majority of Southern Democrats. Congressmen Mike Synar and Dave McCurdy and Senator David Boren from the Oklahoma delegation supported such a ban. The same three were the ones from Oklahoma to support the “Brady Bill,” which required a five-day waiting period before an individual could purchase a handgun.

The 1994 election became a perfect storm of alienation and anger among the two forms of populism. For the economic populists, the ones most likely to support the Democrats, NAFTA reduced their belief the party worked for them instead of elites and made them more likely to stay home. For the cultural populists, the ones most likely to support



Republicans, votes on gays in the military and gun control increased their belief that the Republicans needed to be in control to check the power of elites. The outcome was one of the more significant elections in American history.

## THE IMPACT OF THE 1994 ELECTION ON OKLAHOMA

Perhaps no mid-term election in American history has been as one-sided as the 1994 election. The Republican House candidates received a surge of close to nine million more votes than the party did just four years earlier in 1990 (*Congressional quarterly almanac 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress 2<sup>nd</sup> session*, 1994, 564). No party had ever had that great a turnaround of voter support. In contrast to the increase of support for Republicans, the Democrats had a decrease in voter support. This was especially the case in the Midwest and the South. The crime bill that called for more gun control had a negative impact on Democratic incumbents. Of the thirty-four Democratic House incumbents that were defeated, twenty-nine had supported the crime bill (*Congressional quarterly almanac 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session*, 1994, 563). Close to half of the defeated Democratic incumbents had also voted for NAFTA. Both pieces of legislation, gun control and free trade, left voters with populist leanings a sense that the elites did not embrace their interests, and Democratic incumbents paid accordingly.

However, none of the incumbent Oklahoma Congressmen lost in the 1994 general election. One Democratic incumbent that lost his reelection bid, Mike Synar, was defeated in the primary. His loss in the primary embodied the surge of cultural pluralism in Oklahoma. Synar went against the grain of the typical Oklahoma Democrat in Congress. From a rural district in a state classified as the South in the *Congressional Quarterly*, Synar was one of only four rural, Southern congressmen to vote for striking the ban on homosexuals in the military. He was also only one of ten in that category to vote for the waiting period on handguns. Most glaring was Synar's opposition to the conservative coalition. *Congressional Quarterly* uses this measure called the "conservative coalition" to see how often a member of Congress vote against legislation supported by a coalition of conservative interest groups. In 1994, Synar went against the conservative coalition eighty-six percent of the time, while the average for Southern Democrats was thirty-one percent, and

the rest of the Oklahoma Democratic delegation only seven percent of the time (*Congressional quarterly almanac, 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress 2<sup>nd</sup> session*, 1994, 582). Synar's loss in the primary is not too surprising based on his voting record. His defeat to seventy-one-year old political novice Virgil Cooper did signify the depth of alienation felt by voters in the Second District (Swindle, 1994).

The rest of the Democratic delegation, with the exception of Third District Congressman Bill Brewster, dropped out of their positions before the 1994 election. In 1993, Glen English of the Sixth District in Western Oklahoma had left to become a lobbyist for the Rural Electric Corporation. In May of 1994, Senator David Boren resigned from the Senate to become President of the University of Oklahoma. Also in 1994, David McCurdy of the Fourth District decided to forgo reelection to run for the Senate seat vacated by Boren. The resignations all suggested a strategic decision on the part of the incumbents to avoid either a difficult reelection or an outright defeat at the polls (Jacobson & Kemell, 1981, 50). While defeat of an incumbent is an infrequent occurrence, even in a watershed year like 1994, incumbents such as McCurdy and English may have decided the expense to win reelection and the possibility of serving in the House in the minority made other job opportunities seem more attractive. Table one notes how each district, even the stronghold for conservative Democrats, the so-called "little Dixie" of the then Third District, had decreased support for Democratic Congressman Bill Brewster. Even more telling was the lack of quality candidates the Democrats had to replace the retired incumbents. None of the Democratic candidates in the open-seat elections of the First, Second, Fourth, and Sixth Districts had ever won an election. It then came as little surprise that the Democrats would be left with one Congressman after the 1994 election. In a ten-year period the Democrats in Oklahoma would go from having all but one member of Congress in the state in 1984 to having only one by 1994. However, the bottom still had yet to fall out.

Oklahoma is usually considered by social scientists to be either a Southern state, with Kentucky and the eleven states of the Confederacy as it is classified in the *Congressional Quarterly*, or a Border state with Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and West Virginia, as it is described in *Vital Statistics on Congress* (Ornstein, Mann & Malbin, 2002, 59). States in the South and those that border the South certainly were

favorable to the Republicans as Table 2 describes. While some states had a greater number of seats change from Democrat to Republican, no state had a greater reversal percentage-wise than Oklahoma. Oklahoma's congressional delegation was sixty-seven percent Democratic in 1992 and had dropped down to just seventeen percent after 1994. The question raised from these results is why Democrats in Oklahoma took a greater hit in the 1994 election and the effects of the election have been greater than other states in these regions.

Table 2. Democratic Drop-Off '92-'94 Elections for Border and Southern States

State	1992 Delegation	1994 Delegation	Drop-Off
Alabama	R-3 (43%) D-4 (57%)	R-3 (43%) D-4 (57%)	0
Arkansas	R-2 (50%) D-2 (50%)	R-2 (50%) D-2 (50%)	0
Florida	R-13 (56%) D-10 (44%)	R-15 (65%) D-8 (35%)	-2 (-9%)
Georgia	R-3 (36%) D-7 (64%)	R-8 (73%) D-3 (27%)	-4 (-37%)
Kentucky	R-2 (33%) D-4 (67%)	R-4 (67%) D-2 (33%)	-2 (-34%)
Louisiana	R-3 (43%) D-4 (57%)	R-4 (57%) D-3 (43%)	-1 (-14%)
Maryland	R-4 (50%) D-4 (50%)	R-4 (50%) D-4 (50%)	0
Mississippi	R-0 (0%) D-5 (100%)	R-2 (40%) D-3 (60%)	-2 (-40%)
Missouri	R-3 (33%) D-6 (67%)	R-3 (33%) D-6 (67%)	0
North Carolina	R-4 (33%) D-8 (67%)	R-8 (67%) D-4 (33%)	-4 (34%)
<b>Oklahoma</b>	<b>R-2 (33%) D-4 (67%)</b>	<b>R-5 (83%) D-1 (17%)</b>	<b>-3 (-50%)</b>
South Carolina	R-3 (50%) D-3 (50%)	R-4 (67%) D-2 (33%)	-1 (-17%)
Tennessee	R-3 (33%) D-6 (67%)	R-5 (56%) D-4 (44%)	-2 (-23%)
Texas	R-9 (30%) D-21 (70%)	R-12 (40%) D-18 (60%)	-3 (-10%)
Virginia	R-4 (36%) D-7 (64%)	R-5 (45%) D-6 (55%)	-1 (-9%)
West Virginia	R-0 (0%) D-3 (100%)	R-0 (0%) D-3 (100%)	0

Source: *Congressional Districts in the 1990s*, Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1992, 1994.

## OKLAHOMA DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographics of Oklahoma work in favor for the Republican Party to a degree that may be found only in Western states such as Utah or Idaho. Of the states included for comparison, the Border and South states, Oklahoma is among the Whitest, most Protestant, and with the advent of right-to-work, least union-supported state of the group. While other states such as Mississippi and Alabama may have a greater percentage of Evangelical Protestants, the most supportive group for Republicans, they also have a much larger percentage of African-Americans than Oklahoma. Mississippi's African-American population makes up thirty-seven percent of the total population, while Alabama has an African-American population of twenty-six percent. African-Americans are the most consistent voting bloc for Democrats. With a high percentage of African-Americans found in most Southern states, the Republican advantage found in the South is reduced. However, in Oklahoma, the African-American population is only eight percent of the population. Kentucky has a similar percentage, and only West Virginia among the states listed has a lower percentage with four percent.<sup>1</sup>

With a high percent of Evangelical Protestants, a high percent of Whites, and a low percent of union members, Oklahoma should be a very Republican state. However, the state still has support for Democrats at statewide races and currently has a Democratic Governor and a Democratic Lieutenant Governor. What may be occurring for the Democrats is the lingering effects of dual party loyalty that may help some Democratic officials hold on to their positions (Hadley, 1985, 256). Democrats in the state legislature had benefitted for years from dual loyalty as voters supported Republicans for President and voted locally for Democrats. This dual loyalty has started to wane as Democratic politicians lose their power in the Statehouses. As the incumbents in the legislature vacated their seats to term limits, voters shifted their loyalties in more races to the Republican candidates. In the 2010 election, with no Democratic incumbent running for Attorney General, Treasurer, Auditor, or for Superintendent of Public Instruction, voters will likely shift their support for the Republican candidates in these positions. While the Democrats have elected a governor to the state since the 1994 debacle, it was in large part due to the split within the state Republican

Party in 2002. It was also the only high profile success for the party since the 1994 election. As Table three denotes, Oklahoma Democrats have had the least amount of success in congressional elections of any Southern or Border state since 1994.

Since 1994 in most instances the states of the South and along the South's border are not supportive of Democrats. According to legislative scholar Gary Jacobsen, the 1994 election marks a time when the Democrats became the permanent minority in this region (*Congressional quarterly almanac, 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress 2<sup>nd</sup> session 1994*, 563). Of the ninety congressional delegations produced by the states and congresses listed in Table 3, only twenty had a Democratic majority. Of the four presidential elections since 1994, only nine states out of a potential sixty from the combined elections in that period have been carried by the Democratic candidate. It is also worth noting that Oklahoma was the only state in this heavily Republican area to have a period of time with no Democratic members of Congress.

Table 3.

Party Memberships of Congressional Delegations in South and Border States, 105<sup>th</sup>-110<sup>th</sup> Congresses

State	1997/105 <sup>th</sup>	1999/106 <sup>th</sup>	2001/107 <sup>th</sup>	2003/108 <sup>th</sup>	2005/109 <sup>th</sup>	2007/110 <sup>th</sup>
Alabama	5R/2D	5R/2D	5R/2D	5R/2D	5R/2D	5R/2D
Arkansas	2R/2D	2R/2D	2R/2D	1R/3D	1R/3D	1R/3D
Florida	15R/8D	15R/8D	15R/8D	18R/7D	18R/7D	16R/9D
Georgia	8R/3D	8R/3D	8R/3D	8R/5D	7R/6D	6R/6D
Kentucky	5R/1D	5R/1D	5R/1D	5R/1D	5R/1D	4R/2D
Louisiana	5R/2D	5R/2D	5R/2D	4R/3D	5R/2D	5R/2D
Maryland	4R/4D	4R/4D	4R/4D	2R/6D	2R/6D	2R/6D
Mississippi	3R/2D	2R/3D	2R/3D	2R/2D	2R/2D	2R/2D
Missouri	4R/5D	4R/5D	5R/4D	5R/4D	5R/4D	5R/4D
North Carolina	6R/6D	7R/5D	7R/5D	7R/6D	7R/6D	6R/7D
<b>Oklahoma</b>	<b>6R/0D</b>	<b>6R/0D</b>	<b>5R/1D</b>	<b>4R/1D</b>	<b>4R/1D</b>	<b>4R/1D</b>
South Carolina	4R/2D	4R/2D	4R/2D	4R/2D	4R/2D	4R/2D
Tennessee	5R/4D	5R/4D	5R/4D	4R/5D	4R/5D	4R/5D
Texas	13R/17D	13R/17D	13R/17D	15R/17D	21R/11D	19R/13D
Virginia	5R/6D	5R/6D	6R/4D	8R/3D	8R/3D	8R/3D
West Virginia	0R/3D	0R/3D	1R/2D	1R/2D	1R/2D	1R/2D

Source: *Congressional Districts in the 1990s*, *Congressional Districts in the 2000s*, Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007.

### SINCE 1994

In sixteen years since the 1994 election, there has not been a time that Oklahoma Democrats appear to be thawing themselves out of the deep political winter. As noted earlier, the only real bright spot for Democrats has been the election and reelection of Governor Brad Henry. This election was in large part based on a division within the Republican Party that allowed Henry to win. Henry managed to defeat Congressman Steve Largent by six-thousand votes out of total of nine-hundred thousand votes cast. Largent had to contend with Gary Richardson, a former Republican from Tulsa who took votes from him in heavily Republican Tulsa County (Ervin, 2002). From his tenuous first election and a Republican majority in the legislature, Henry has chosen not to be an innovative leader but to be a defender. This means that the one great political success for Oklahoma Democrats since 1994 has been a Democratic governor's surviving rather than thriving. Historians and political scientists will regard Henry's primary accomplishment as governor to be his use of the veto pen against Republican plans to aggressively alter the gun laws and abortion laws of the state (Krehbiel, 2010).

Other major changes since 1994 in the political landscape of Oklahoma have also favored the Republicans. Term-limits, which first went in to effect in 2002, have created more open seats for Democrats to defend since they were the majority party in the legislature at the time. In those four elections since 2002, Republicans have captured nineteen seats that were previously held by Democrats in open-seat elections, whereas Democrats have captured only four open seats previously held by Republicans in the same span of elections.

In a transition of interest group power, in the fall of 2001 big labor was shown the door in Oklahoma with the passage of right-to-work. In the early days of Oklahoma, the state had more socialists and labor activists per capita of any state. Radicals had their moment in the sun in 1917 with a violent protest against the draft for World War I, which resulted in the arrests of over four-hundred people (Murolo & Chitty, 2001, 163). Since that time, the state's major newspapers have been decidedly anti-labor, and the rural parts of the state have mistrusted labor leaders (Scales & Goble, 1982, 222, 284, 290). Still in 1964 the

state had narrowly defeated a state question that favored the anti-labor practices known as “right-to-work.” The passage of right-to-work would allow workers in unionized workplaces to no longer be required to join the union. In the most expensive special election held in the state, unions spent five million dollars to defeat state question 695, while business interest and the chamber of commerce spent five million as well (“Right to work becomes the newest law,” 2001). Without union backing, Democrats in the state lacked a traditional supporter for their campaigns. A year after the passage of right-to-work, the congressional districts in the state were re-drawn to accommodate the reduction from six congressional districts to five. The plan that was approved eliminated the well-known Third District, “little Dixie” from the southeast part of the state, and moved the Third out to the Western half of the state. The move, according to the *Tulsa World*, “guarantees that Oklahoma will have four Republicans and only one Democrat in Congress for the next ten years” (“Redistricting debate: ruling favors plan by Keating,” 2002).

From the failure to protect traditional strongholds for Democrats in Congress to the inability to keep Democratic interest groups as influential stakeholders to the failure to find competitive candidates to defend open-seats, the last decade and a half have been a string of defeats for the Democratic Party in Oklahoma. Demographically, the Republican Party has an advantage over the Democratic Party that does not look to be changing soon. This advantage is well-known for the strategic politicians in the Democratic ranks and causes them to not take chances (Jacobson & Kernell, 1981, 23). As a result, in the 2010 election, of the three Republican incumbents in Oklahoma’s congressional delegation, only one had a Democratic challenger. In the open-seat election in District Five, the two Democratic challengers in the race had not held elected office. The only Democratic challenger that had success in winning elections, State Senator Jim Wilson, took on the Democratic incumbent, Dan Boren, in District Two. Wilson challenged Boren because he thought the incumbent did not represent the beliefs of the Democratic Party. In fact, Boren did not publically support Barack Obama in 2008 and ran against the national party’s “liberal” agenda (“Dan Boren won’t endorse Obama,” 2008). With the exception of the party in-fighting in the 2<sup>nd</sup> District, the Democratic Party has difficulty getting challengers for congressional races, and when it gets candidates, they are usually not the most qualified of candidates that a party would be seeking. While

the Democrats did get quality candidates for the open-seat gubernatorial race, the current Lieutenant Governor and current Attorney General respectively, the lack of quality candidates for congressional races signifies that the party is resigning itself to minority status. The Republican Party, as observed by its chairman, has won the recruiting battle in Oklahoma (Hoberock, 2010).

### **A CHANGE IN SEASONS?**

For the Democrats, winter is still the season in Oklahoma. The party has not recovered from the election of 1994. The cultural populists turned out against the Democrats in this state in that election, despite the conservative leanings for many Democratic candidates. The economic populists had less reason to vote for Democrats as the party turned to free trade, which alienated a core segment of the party. In the state of Oklahoma, the two largest groups of supporters for Republicans, the cultural populists and business interests, not necessarily congruent on all issues, have stayed united to the benefit of the Republicans. A coalition of anti-government free-marketers and cultural populists who want to shore up America's morality may seem to be an odd marriage, but it stays together because the coalition's goals are ultimately to create virtuous individuals that won't need government (Brewer & Stonecash, 2007, 172). Plus, as long as this coalition stays together, the "condescending and self-serving" liberals will be on the defensive (Perlstein, 2008, 277). As for the Democrats, the coalition of economic populists and social progressives does not stay united because ultimately the party leans towards the interests of the upper-middle class (Frank, 2004, 243). There is not a consistent message of party unity for Democrats in Oklahoma.

Could the Republicans suffer a dramatic turnaround as did the Democrats in 1994? At another time in the Sooner State's history, the Republicans had made gains towards a two-party system only to be "obliterated" by Hoover and the Great Depression of 1929 (Scales & Goble, 1982, 161). However at this time there does not appear to be any election debacle on the horizon for Republicans, especially since it is the Democrats that are dominant at the national level. Another reason for continued Republican success would be demographics. As long as the



state remains as strongly Evangelical Protestant, nonunion, and White, the Republicans will have a base of support to weather poor candidates in the state or disfavor with the party at the national level. Democrats have a long road back just to get to competitiveness. These are a few indications that the Democrats will have started the process of rebuilding. First, there should be quality candidates at the congressional level. Former state legislators or other candidates with election success will run in congressional campaigns. Second, Democratic candidates will run in support of the national platform, not against it. This would signify party unity and mark a clear opposition to the Republican Party. The reality for Democrats is that the remedy for rebuilding is to get their best candidates to campaign in a currently unreceptive atmosphere. Most strategic politicians are going to avoid such circumstances. However, until leaders of the party are willing to take risks that can make them competitive, there will be no change of seasons for the Democrats in Oklahoma.

## NOTES

1. Oklahoma's other significant minority, its American Indian population, could also influence the state's politics. However, since no other Southern or Border state has a comparable American Indian population, it was not be used in the analysis. Also, American Indians do not appear to be a monolithic voting bloc when compared to the other groups used in this research.

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