

## Conservative Republicans cast a longer shadow over moderates in Johnson County

### HIGHLIGHTS

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BY DAVE HELLING  
*The Kansas City Star*

The Johnson County moderate, a fixture of Kansas politics for decades, is an increasingly endangered species.

Republicans and analysts on both sides of the moderate-conservative divide say the Nov. 4 election results confirm that conclusion. The centrist bankers, lawyers and businessmen who once defined the county's politics are giving way to younger, more socially oriented conservatives who now play the major role in determining the county's approach to government.

"The old guard just doesn't have the weight they used to have," said Secretary of State Kris Kobach, a Republican just elected to a second term. "The fact that the elites were against the people at the top of the ballot didn't hurt any of us."

Larry Winn III, a charter member of the county's faction of GOP moderates, said the shift is clear.

"The far right of the party is much more easily excited ... and they get their vote out," he said. "I don't think there's any doubt about it."

The change is most pronounced in state and federal elections, Winn and others said. Most local governments in Johnson County, from city halls to school boards, still include moderates more interested in practical problems than ideology.

But that dynamic may soon change as well. If so, it could replace the county's long emphasis on high-quality public education and infrastructure in favor of a lower-tax, smaller-government approach.

Johnson County is also the most populous county in Kansas, with the most Republicans. Any sea change in its politics will resonate across the state's electoral landscape, changing the way candidates run — and govern.

There are different explanations for the phenomenon:

- Johnson County is growing younger to the south and west, diminishing the influence of aging leaders in more established suburbs. “Check the average age of the so-called moderate R leadership,” one prominent Johnson County Republican said. “It has to be pushing 65.”
- Two-income families and entrepreneurs are replacing the commuter dads and moms of the 1960s and 1970s, bringing a smaller-government, lower-tax approach with them.
- Social conservatives, long engaged in battles over abortion and same-sex marriage, are using their political skills to influence arguments over taxes and the budget.
- Social media and the Internet have made it easier to reach voters outside mainstream media channels, reducing the impact of endorsements and testimonials.
- And fundamentally, the old model — voters quietly deferring to the judgment of business and community elites — appears broken. That’s true in Johnson County and in hundreds of other places across the country.

“We have a new generation of leaders who are just becoming civically engaged and active,” said Brandon Kenig, chairman of Kansas Young Republicans. “Their allegiances are up for grabs.”

Conservative dominance of Johnson County’s Republican politics isn’t universal.

Voters easily elected Ed Eilert, a relative moderate, to another term as county chairman. He defeated Patricia Lightner, widely seen as the more socially and fiscally conservative candidate.



p. And voters continue to endorse tax hikes in communities across

with local government here in Johnson County, whether it’s a school board or county commission or city council, that mindset still dominates. We want practical people that are careful with their tax dollars but demand high quality,” said Greg Musil, a former GOP congressional candidate and self-described centrist.

State and federal elections appear to be a different story. The county’s voters this November narrowly supported tax-cutting Gov. Sam Brownback despite a well-publicized effort by some GOP moderates to elect Democrat Paul Davis.

Davis had promised to freeze future tax cuts until school spending stabilized. School funding is considered critical by many Johnson County business and community leaders who supported the Democrat.

The crossover effort for Davis was organized by former state senator Dick Bond, another longtime figure in Johnson County’s moderate GOP leadership. Bond told The Star this week that he did not regret his work against Brownback.

“His people went to the polls,” he said. “An awful lot of moderates sat on their hands and didn’t go to the polls because they have not yet felt the hurt.

“You’ve got to have 40 students in the classroom and the disabled not being taken care of and more increases in tuition” before moderates react, he said, adding: “It’s coming.”

But county conservatives say voters knew precisely what they wanted, and not only in Brownback’s race. County voters chose GOP Sen. Pat Roberts over independent Greg Orman — who lives in Olathe — and strongly supported Kobach and Derek Schmidt, both conservative incumbents who were seeking statewide office.

There’s more. In August, tea party favorite Milton Wolf edged Roberts among Johnson County GOP primary voters. That’s further evidence, conservatives say, that the county’s political dynamic is shifting to the right.

“The old Republican guard of the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s whose power was fading in the early 2000s definitely sang their swan song in Johnson County during this election cycle,” said Charlotte O’Hara, a frequent conservative candidate in the county.

Benjamin Hodge, often a thorn in the side of GOP moderates in the county, said conservatives are winning because their message is clear.

“Republicans win when we vote like we talk,” he said. “We lose when we try to out-Democrat the Democratic Party and when our voting doesn’t match up with our rhetoric.”

Former state senator Terrie Huntington, a GOP moderate, said some centrist Republicans may have underestimated the popularity of the Brownback tax cuts in the county.

“The tax plan helped some people,” she said. “If you’re (a small business) and you no longer have to pay taxes, that’s a good deal. ... That was important to folks.”

The debate about the wisdom of the Brownback budget will play out next year in Topeka. If the state struggles to meet its obligations — or raises taxes to balance the budget — the pendulum might swing back, some Republicans said.

Others said Republicans should still work to unite both branches of the sometimes quarrelsome party.

“We need moderates and conservatives in our coalition,” Kenig said. “I want that tent to be as wide as possible.”

Indeed, politicians on both sides of the divide say the county’s moderate faction could return in a higher-turnout election like the presidential vote in 2016. At the same time, they expect an escalating tussle over the influence of conservative ideology on local governments like cities and school boards.

Johnson Countians, it turns out, may actually want it both ways: frugal state and federal governments with expensive high-quality services in their neighborhoods.

“I don’t know how much the anti-government, strangle-government movement moves to the local level,” Musil said.

“If it does, we’ll have a different Johnson County.”

To reach Dave Helling, call 816-234-4656 or send email to [dhelling@kcstar.com](mailto:dhelling@kcstar.com).



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**Richard Adams** · The University of Kansas

This article bears little resemblance to reality. For instance, the assertion that entrepreneurs have replaced commuter parents is not actually true. Maybe one out of 10,000 people is an entrepreneur. What we have in Johnson county is a sparse turnout of voters represented by the Brownback/Kobach Tea Party types. Their future is bleak. Dick Bond is right; the normal people, when the outrage over the Kansas social service cuts, plus the crowded classrooms and social migration out of Kansas takes hold. will start to turn out to vote. Kris Kobach's comments about ethnic cleansing in Kansas have doomed him politically. The guy is a overt racist. His requiring of a birth certificate to register to vote directly affected my 92 year old mother who, because she could no longer drive, had to use her walker and me to get a photo ID, whereas she had voted in every single Kansas election since 1942. The guy should be severely punished.

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**Dean Allaudin Ottinger**

So much fun! To hear Mr. Kobach call anybody "Elite" is a knee slapper. He being the lap -dog of 1%'s coast to coast. But in terms of impeccable Orwellian political speech. Home run Mr. Kobach!

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**Bret Hedenkamp** · Owner at Self-Employed

Which is a good thing. Moderates get the likes of Kathleen Sebelius elected... in Kansas? I'll never understand that one!

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**Richard Adams** · The University of Kansas

With the likes of Kris Kobach leading the pack, I sure am glad I don't live there anymore. It is going to continue to be a laughing stock. What are the conservatives going to fight? Gay marriage? They'll have to dig up some other lost cause.

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**Bret Hedenkamp** · Owner at Self-Employed

It's a laughing stock to who... liberals in general and media talking heads (the cool people) in particular? I find that people I know that are the happiest are those that have convictions, stand by them and don't get 'embarrassed' by others opinions.

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