

Republicans face uphill battle in Democrat-dominated Bloomington

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Brad Wisler could be described in many ways. Business owner. Dad. Former city council member.

But there's one description he hopes doesn't stick — the last Bloomington Republican office holder.

Wisler was the last GOP candidate to win in a city election, securing the District 2 city council seat in 2007. But when he decided not to run for re-election in 2011, no GOP candidate stepped forward to take his spot or several others, and the city went entirely Democratic.

The 2011 election seemed to be a low point in Bloomington politics, exemplifying a trend in city and Monroe County government that has seen the number of Republican voices decline, losing two offices in last Tuesday's election.

"There are great Republican candidates in this town," Wisler said. "The big problem is they feel it's futile."

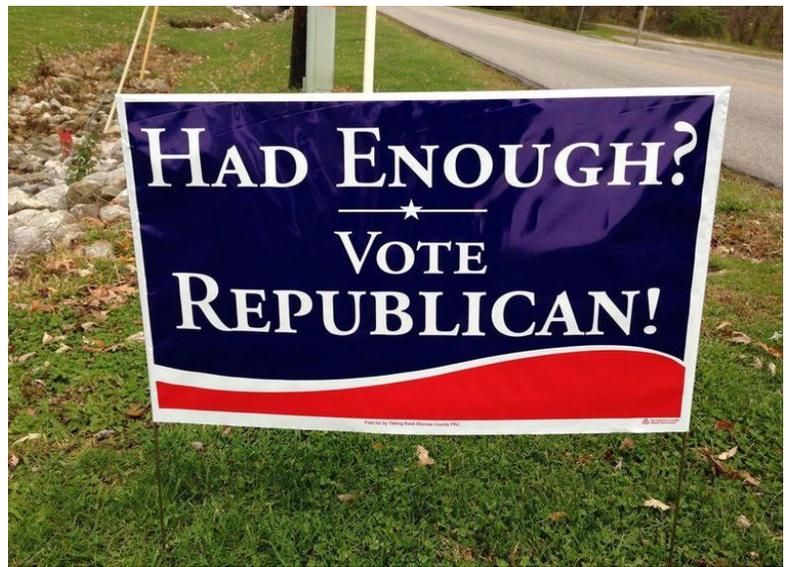
It's a far cry from where the county was 50 years ago.

In 1966, the GOP won all seats on the Monroe County Council. The next year, the party managed seven of nine Bloomington City Council seats, the mayor's office and the clerk's office.

But in the half century since, Monroe County has been turning blue, becoming decidedly so in the past decade.

There's the 2011 election — no Republican managed to win in the city, and only three GOP candidates ran in the election at all. The following year, Republicans managed to win two seats at the local level — judgeships, one of which was uncontested. Both of the winners were incumbents.

Although the local GOP managed to fill its 2014 ticket to the highest level it's been in years, nearly all local offices were won by



A "Had Enough? Vote Republican" sign, paid for by the Taking Back Monroe County PAC, is seen last week on the edge of a resident's yard just south of Bloomington on Gordon Pike.

Democrats.

"If you're a Republican and you want to start a career in politics, your best bet would be to live somewhere else," Wisler said.

Where the party stands

There's no easy answer to why local Republicans continue to lose badly.

Misfiling of election paperwork. No ticket leader. A shift in demographics.

It might be a downturn, part of a cycle that has ebbed and flowed with time, though keeping Republicans in the minority.

Since 1971, the Republican Party has been in the minority in city government, dropping down to one GOP voice twice, in 1991 and 2007.

But Monroe County is a different story. Republicans have a stronger presence countywide and in township offices, though it hasn't been a stronghold.

The election of 1974 was a shock of sorts, with longtime Judge Nat U. Hill winning the only Republican seat.

Still, the party managed to fight back, and by the end of the 1980s, Republicans were the majority on both the county council and board of commissioners, and controlled seven of the eight elected departmental offices in the county.

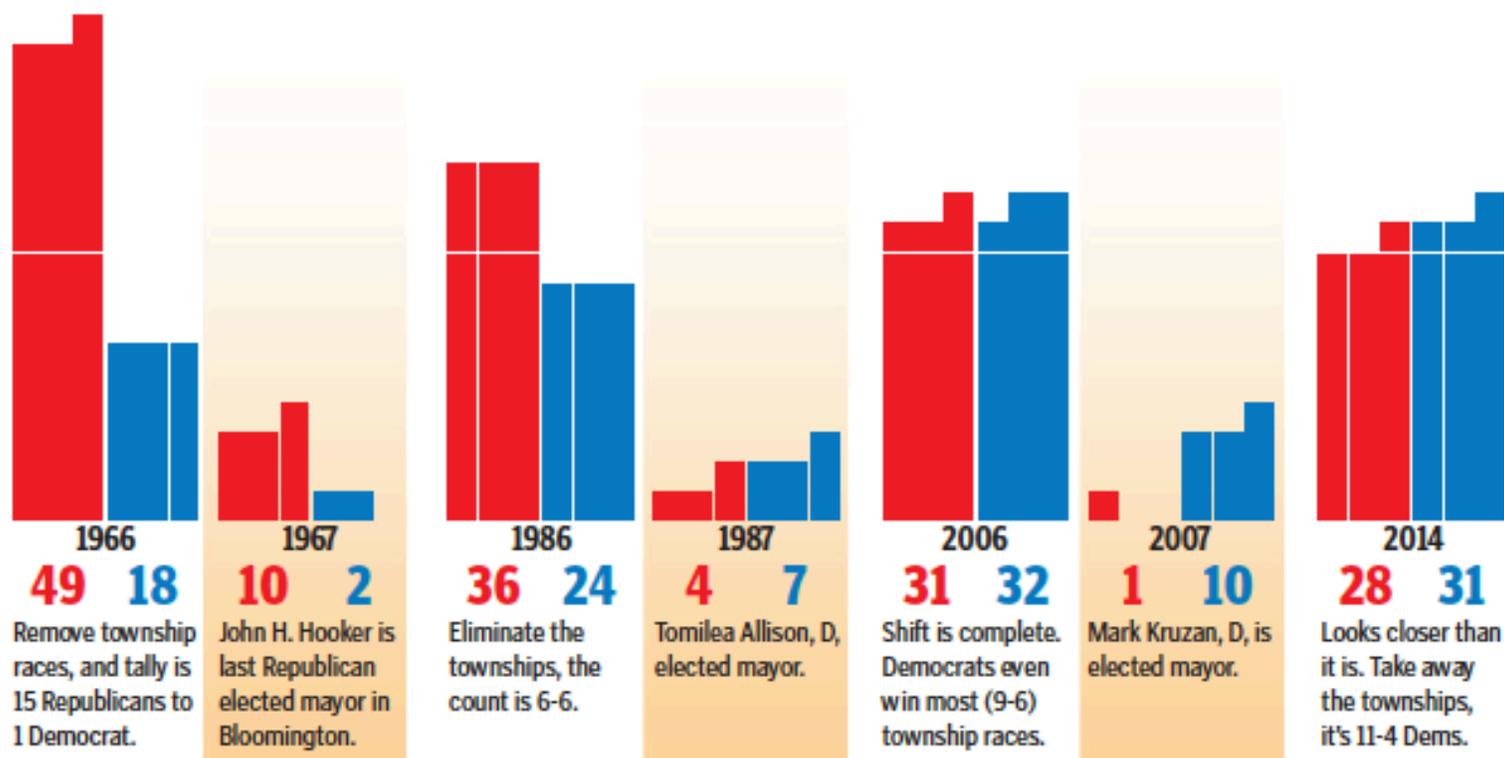
Control continued to flip flop during the 1990s and 2000s, with Democrats taking and maintaining control of the county council since 2004 and the board of commissioners since 2006. The current council makeup is 5-2, with Democrats in the majority, although in January, that ratio will shift to 6-1. The commissioners are all Democrats.

In the past four elections, the number of local offices Republicans have won — excluding

How and when Democrats took over Monroe County

Vote by vote, office by office, a dependably red county in a solidly red state turned a deep, dark blue. These key elections show how it happened.

□ County and Ellettsville elections □ Bloomington elections ■ Republicans ■ Democrats



SOURCE: ELECTION RESULTS

HT STAFF GRAPHIC

townships and Ellettsville — has been three, zero, two and two.

The party is trying to rebuild from those elections, but it's not easy, even in the best of circumstances, to find candidates willing to run and commit to public life.

"I have a horrible time with the general public: finding people to run for office, write letters to the editor, serve on boards," said Steve Hogan, chairman of the Monroe County Republican Party. "It's really hard to keep the best voices you have involved. There's a push off because there's a one-party government. Republicans who make their living with government are reluctant to step forward."

And the stings of former elections can carry over, even four years later.

Former Republican city council member and county commissioner Kirk White recalled his first election as a nail-biter. He squeaked past incumbent Pat Murphy to win in District 2, becoming one of four Republicans in city government in 1988.

White attributed his win to a strong mayoral campaign by Tim Ellis, who lost to incumbent Mayor Tomi Allison by about 300 votes.

Four years later, White found himself the lone Republican voice on the council, a fact he associated with a weak mayoral candidate and general feeling of apathy among voters.

"People were disheartened when Tim lost," White said. "People felt like if Tim couldn't win, what's the point in trying?"

Hogan said the 2011 strategy, which predates his current chairmanship of the party, was to focus on what party leaders thought were winnable races only.

"That's where I think Republicans probably dropped the ball," Hogan said.

In 2013, no elections were held, and the party focused on recruiting candidates. Along with a series of caucuses, the party has filled every local seat except one — which the party would have filled except for a paperwork error.

Between townships, state, federal and the local races, there were 60 Republicans on the ballot in November. They won in 36 races, most of which were at the state or township level.

Filling a ballot spot is different from winning an election, and whether the party can fill the spots with candidates who can win in Bloomington and Monroe County has yet to be seen. But at least, this year, there was a choice.

The view to a party outsider

Once a Republican declares himself or herself, some assumptions are made, said Marjorie Hershey, Indiana University professor of political science: White. Wealthy. Older.

In some political pages, there might be even

more assumptions made: Close-minded. Out of touch. Unwilling to compromise.

When people would say, “He’s the party of Newt Gingrich,” former Republican city council member Jason Banach had an answer:

“He hasn’t called me lately.”

The problem is the loudest voices are not the moderate ones, and they may easily mobilize the like-minded. As in the 2012 Republican primary, when ultraconservative Richard Mourdock challenged moderate and respected U.S. Sen. Richard Lugar, and managed to win, White said.

“A lot of people looked around and said ‘What the hell is the Republican Party doing to itself?’” he said. “When you have those kinds of things going on in a party, people look at that and say ‘That’s not my party.’ That’s difficult to overcome.”

Though both parties are fractured to some extent, the cracks in GOP politics have played out on a national level more noticeably than party leadership would probably like.

On the one side, there are the ultra-conservatives — members of the tea party movement who tend to include more hard-line party people. On the other side are the moderates, who might refer to themselves as “social liberals” or subscribe to a non-party view.

Though people point to IU and its students as the source of Bloomington’s liberalism, university students are not as liberal as one may think, said Riley Parr, chairman of the College Republicans at IU.

“I think people look at students and think they’re Democrats,” Parr said. “But the makeup of the state, most students, they probably come from a conservative family.”

Parr said most of his peers were probably more moderate or trying to figure out where they fell politically.

Since Banach’s first election in 1995, Democrats have done a better job mobilizing those votes.

Even locally, the cracks have been obvious, which have led to some divisiveness.

Since at least the 1980s, there have been interparty battles between the conservatives and the moderates. Hogan, who leans more moderate, withstood several challenges during his first tenure as GOP chair, and last year, he was re-elected for another term, holding off the more conservative Bob Hall.

While some fracturing is unavoidable, for local Republicans, it may be costly.

“To win an election, you’ve got to be emotionally attached and convicted to win,” White said. “More conservative Republicans have that level of commitment.” Thus, they win

in primaries and struggle in general elections locally.

How to win an election

The easiest way to win an election in Monroe County as a Republican is to play up the issues, not the party, successful candidates say.

White said the biggest mistake local Republicans make is running a campaign of “change” in Bloomington and Monroe County.

“Sure it’s got its quirks, sure there are things we don’t agree with,” White said. “Short of major corruption or dereliction of duty, most Republicans like it.”

The “Had Enough? Vote Republican” signs that intermingled with candidate signs this election season are the wrong tactic, Wisler said.

“Most people are going to say ‘No, I haven’t’ — things are pretty good in Bloomington,” he said. Wisler focused on the community and issues that he thought he could help provide a solution for, such as trash pickup.

Nationally, Democrats tried to distance themselves from President Barack Obama, who saw approval ratings drop in recent months. Locally, the most successful Republicans have cut some ties with the national party, too.

Political parties have lost the strong influence they once held over elections, though not all influence, said Les Lenkowsky, a professor of public affairs and philanthropic studies at IU and a former member of George W. Bush’s administration.

“You probably can’t ignore the party,” Lenkowsky said. “You need to keep in mind the amount of help they give you.”

Once you’re in office, partisanship doesn’t necessarily end. There’s no GOP way to build a road — but there may be a GOP way to fund it.

“Partisan politics does matter on the local level,” Hershey said.

Republicans are usually more budget focused and less likely to want to spend for services or projects they don’t feel are essential, Hershey said. And 90 percent of Americans identify with a party, despite assertions to the contrary.

“At the local level, it wouldn’t matter once you were in office,” Banach said of party affiliation. “The problem is you have to get there first.”

Can Republicans win Monroe County?

Getting into office is a difficult task, even with a full ballot of candidates.

Republicans won two county offices this year, with longtime public servants Marty Hawk and Ken Todd keeping their county council and judge seats, respectively. Both Ellettsville Town Council offices also were won by Republicans.

The GOP lost two offices it previously held, county council District 2, where Ryan Langley is the office holder through the end of the year, and recorder, where Jeff Ellington held the seat following the death of Jim Fielder in May. Ellington lost by 755 votes, making it the closest of all the countywide races.

Hogan was disappointed with the outcome, but said there was a victory in narrowing the margins in the races.

Republican candidates reduced the margin of defeat in five county races, in some cases by more than 10 percentage points compared with 2010. And five races were not comparable because there were no Republican candidates in the races four years ago.

"I think there's a lot to be proud of," Hogan said.

The last big party wins were in 2002, and since then, not only have wins declined for the GOP, but also candidates interested in even running, which may be the biggest problem for Republicans to overcome.

Part of the difficulty comes from the lack of Republican incumbents. Incumbents often control appointments to boards and commissions, which can be a breeding ground for potential candidates.

"It builds up the defenses and makes it harder for the opponent to fill in," Wisler said. But right now, the GOP doesn't have the "farm team," he added.

Even people on those boards are difficult to recruit.

Banach left the city council in 2005, but still serves on boards and commissions. He doesn't regret the decision to leave the council, although the 2011 election gave him some pause.

"When I saw no one was going to put their name on the ballot, I thought about it for a second," Banach said. Still, neither Banach nor any other Republican stepped forward.

Hogan's hopeful the narrower margins of victory in 2014 are a symbol of change. It was a slate of good candidates, and good candidates tend to breed more good candidates, he said. But a return to early 2000s numbers isn't going to happen overnight.

"We do have a lot of work to do, good golly, yes," Hogan said. "We're already working on candidates; we're already working on strategy. 2015 is the next one, and we've already begun."

Lenkowsky was a little less optimistic. Though the party could rebuild itself in Bloomington and Monroe County over the coming years, it's going to take a lot of time, he said.

"There's always hope," Lenkowsky said. "In a city like Bloomington, it's a long shot."