

A Difference That Makes A Difference

Out-Party Loyalists: Some of the Worst Jobs in American Politics



A good candidate in the right year can win in nearly any state, regardless of party affiliation. But some states favor either Republicans or Democrats so heavily that members of the other party barely have a chance. That leaves true believers in a lonely place.

The Sole Republican

Sam Slom calls himself the Lone Ranger. He's the one and only Republican serving in the Hawaii Senate. "When that happened after the election of 2010, I got condolence calls and sympathy calls," he says.

Slom is outnumbered 24 to 1, but as the chamber's only Republican, he gets to serve on all 16 of the Senate's standing committees. He and his staff keep an eye out for drafting errors on bills that will create problems that might undermine their sponsors' attentions. "If you look over the 16 years I've served, you'll find very few bills that have my name on them," he said in 2013. "You'll find a lot more that were my bills originally that my colleagues were so enamored of that they put their name on them."

Rebuilding in Baby Steps

For most of Oklahoma's history as a state, Democrats ruled the roost. Like the rest of the South, however, over the past 20 years the state has increasingly given its support to Republicans at all levels of politics. "Oklahoma's the reddest of the red states, a dubious honor," says Wallace Collins, who is chairman of the state Democratic Party.

His party is completely shut out of the state's congressional delegation, as well as all 13 statewide offices. It also holds few seats in the state legislature. That's why Collins's strategy is to rebuild in "baby steps."

"The way we lost control was a little bit here and a little bit there," he says. "We'll get back the same way."

Hoping to Break Factional Ties

Chris Rothfuss was the Democratic leader in the Wyoming state Senate in 2014. There wasn't a lot of

competition for the job. Democrats hold just four seats in the chamber. Republicans have 26.

Wyoming gave a bigger share of its vote to Republican Mitt Romney in 2012 than did any other state, save for neighboring Utah. Democrats might have made some inroads in the southern Rocky Mountain states, but not farther north.

Like a lot of red-state Democrats, Rothfuss represents a university community, in his case Laramie. But he gets a lot of e-mails from Democrats from around Wyoming who are looking to have some kind of voice in the state capitol. "Obviously, even if you're not going to win the vote, it's important to have both sides of the debate presented so you have a better discourse," he says.

Lonely In Rhode Island

Ann Clanton says it can be "quite lonely" being an African American woman who is a Republican. Helping run the party in a state dominated by Democrats makes it worse.

"We're in one of the bluest states in the nation," says Clanton, who is the executive director of the GOP in Rhode Island. "We have an uphill battle getting people to stay engaged with the platform of the Republican Party right now."

As is true throughout New England, Rhode Island Republicans have become nearly an endangered species. Clanton says one of the most difficult aspects of her job is trying to convince candidates that they have a realistic chance of winning if they run under her party's banner. Too often, even those who generally share the party's philosophy find it easier to run as an independent or even a Democrat. And it's hard to make the case to younger voters that the party has anything to say to them. "It's tough going out there and recruiting people," Clanton says. "It's very hard. We have a lot of Democrats who we know are Republican but run as a Democrat—basically so they can win."