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Out of Step and Out of Touch: The Matter with Kansas in the 2014 Midterm Election

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Abstract: In recent years the politics of Kansas, with its strong historic ties to the Republican Party, have taken a hard right turn. This political environment mirrors many other states in which one political party effectively dominates the policymaking process. But while political dominance may aid incumbency it can also contribute to the kinds of political excess that tend to promote electoral backlashes. In this paper, we use a survey of likely Kansas voters during the 2014 midterm elections to examine opinions and voting preferences related to two state-wide races in which incumbent overreach played a prominent role. In particular, we examine the reelection campaigns of Governor Brownback, as his remarkably austere and highly unpopular budget left him ideologically out of step with most voters, and Senator Roberts, as his lack of residence in the state after years of serving in the Senate left him out of touch with a disgruntled electorate. Although both Republicans survived reelection, their actions ensured an unusually competitive midterm in an otherwise deep red state.

Introduction

Two of the most intriguing elections in the 2014 midterm occurred in perhaps the most unlikely of places: deep red Kansas. To be sure, the Democratic Party is far from moribund in the Sunflower State, but throughout its political history dating back to the unrest leading to the Civil War, the Grand Old Party (GOP) has generally dominated elections. In the wake of the so-called “tsunami” election of 2010, the historical dominance of the Republican Party in Kansas was further strengthened while at the same time the state party became more conservative. Kansas is certainly not alone in this respect; after making gains in the 2006 and

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2008 races, the Democratic Party has experienced a historic retreat from power in statehouses and governorships (Bump 2016).

While a party may dominate the policymaking process, within a state the elected officials themselves are still theoretically held accountable through elections. As such, elected officials may worry about becoming too ideologically “out of step” with their constituency (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002), because voters may punish their policy failures on the basis of retrospective judgments (Fiorina 1981). Similarly, a potential scandal or other actions that point to a mishandling of the public’s trust, will affect an incumbent’s survival in office (Basinger 2012). However, questions remain about how such checks may work in a state politically dominated by one party. For example, prior research has suggested that there exists a partisan bias in political perceptions of political events (Bartels 2002) and for an incumbent to be held accountable it may be necessary for the opposition to produce a quality challenger. Given its history, Kansas may provide unique insight into how (and indeed whether) incumbents in seemingly safe states are held accountable.

In 2014, two veteran Kansas Republican incumbents found themselves facing tough reelection fights, but for different reasons. Governor Sam Brownback, first elected in the 2010 tea-party wave election, faced a difficult contest against Kansas State House Minority Leader Paul Davis. Likewise, Senator Pat Roberts endured a spirited challenge from political Independent Greg Orman. In the case of Governor Brownback, his difficult reelection reflected his efforts to push the state in a decidedly rightward direction. After assuming the governorship, Brownback “referred to his tenure as a ‘real live experiment’ in right-wing governance” (Cohen and Barnes 2015, p. 725). He proceeded to honor this self-characterization of his leadership by promoting legislation designed to curtail abortions, refusing federal money tied to the Affordable Care Act, and perhaps most detrimental to his popularity was the passage of an austere 2012 state budget that included “the largest tax cut in Kansas history” (Cohen and Barnes 2015, p. 725). In short, Governor Brownback’s far-right actions placed him out of step with the center-right Kansas electorate.

By comparison, Senator Roberts was not afflicted with the severe right-wing dogma of Governor Brownback and other leading Kansas Republicans (e.g. Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach). Indeed, before he even had the opportunity to defend his seat in the 2014 general election, Roberts faced a near career-ending primary challenge from tea party affiliate Milton Wolf.¹ After narrowly escaping the Republican primary, it became evident that Roberts’ greatest

¹ Kansas holds closed party primaries that are restricted to voters registered under the party label.
obstacle to winning a fourth term was his highly publicized scandal of absentee representation. Although he technically owned a Kansas home, Roberts rented it out and for years stayed with campaign staffers when he returned to the state. Making matters worse, Roberts unleashed a royal gaffe “when he told a local radio station, ‘Every time I get an opponent – I mean, every time I get a chance, I’m home’” (Cohen and Barnes 2015, p. 728). In sum, Roberts was effectively labeled an AWOL Senator. But he vigorously beat back the charge of being out of touch by aggressively campaigning across the state in an ultimately successful effort to convince enough voters he would make amends.

When the Kansas electoral dust had settled, Brownback narrowly defeated the Democrat Davis by less than four points (51.9–48.1 percent of the two-party vote). Roberts fared better, besting the Independent Orman by 55.5–44.5 percent. Nonetheless, neither Republican incumbent had experienced such a competitive race in their long political careers. In his time as a congressman and governor, with the exception of the special Senate contest Brownback won in 1996 with 54 percent of the vote, he had always won with 60 percent or better (63 percent in 2010). Likewise, dating back to Roberts’ first election to the US House in 1980, he had always won with 60 percent or more.

In this paper, we examine the electoral impact of such political missteps when an incumbent’s party effectively dominates a state’s politics. Using a survey of likely Kansas voters just before the 2014 election, we asked respondents for their views on the races for the governorship and the Senate. Ultimately, we show that voters were quite responsive to allegations of extremism and absenteeism and demonstrate exactly why two heretofore popular veteran Kansas politicians were both held to under 60 percent of the vote in a midterm election otherwise favorable to the Grand Old Party.

The Matter with Kansas

In 1854, the same year the Republican Party came into existence (Gould 2003), Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Effectively wiping out the main provisions of the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the legislation allowed for popular sovereignty for territories seeking statehood, which meant in reality that settlers in favor of “free soil” and those advocating slavery would battle it out to see whose position would prevail. Hence, “bleeding Kansas” became a microcosm of the Civil War that would descend upon the US 7 years later. The free-soil Jayhawkers

2 There was a Libertarian candidate running in both contests (Keen Umbehr in the gubernatorial race and Randall Batson in the Senate election) and they each garnered four percent of the vote.
would eventually triumph over their pro-slavery opposition, and Kansas became the 34th state to enter the Union on January 29th, 1861 – months before it would be split apart by a bloody Civil War.

Thus, even in its territorial days the genesis of Kansas and that of the Grand Old Party were intertwined. With the exception of intermittent agrarian unrest and a handful of movements that affected many states (like Prohibition in the 1870s and 1880s, Populism in the late 1800s, and Progressivism in the early twentieth century), from its inception to the present, the GOP has owned Kansas politics (Flentje and Aistrup 2010).\(^3\) The advent of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal regime in 1932 was the last time a Democrat won a Kansas Senate seat and the landslide election of Lyndon Johnson in 1964 was the last time a Democrat took the Sunflower State’s electoral votes (Cohen and Barnes 2015, pp. 722–723). Nonetheless, the character and tenor of Republican dominance has been anything but constant. From the 1960s and into the new millennium, the partisan balance of Kansas politics was maintained by a fairly amiable and workable relationship of moderate Republicans and their Democratic allies.

In the 2000s Kansas conservatives began to challenge the moderate faction of the Republican Party. The hard right turn of the Kansas GOP even led to some notable party switches to the Democratic Party as social moderates found the GOP increasingly hostile to their views (Miller and Schofield 2008). As late as 2006, 2 years after Thomas Frank published his polemic against the cultural conservatism of his native state in *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* (2004), moderate Democrat Kathleen Sebelius had won a second term as governor. When she vacated the governorship to join the Obama administration as Secretary of Health and Human Services in 2009, her Democratic Lieutenant Governor Mark Parkinson (a Republican convert) stepped in but chose not to run in the 2010 midterm (Cohen and Barnes 2015, p. 722).

In hindsight, it is apparent that the 2010 midterm was a turning point in Kansas politics; the moment when the conservative faction of the GOP finally wrested control from the moderates. Whereas the Kansas GOP used to be a big tent party, the ascendence of tea party affiliates and their conservative allies (often one and the same) has rebranded the party label so that it reflects the southern

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\(^3\) Since 1994, Republicans have controlled both chambers of the Kansas legislature (see the partisan composition timelines for state legislatures at the National Conference of State Legislatures website: www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/partisan-composition.aspx) and by various measures of partisan competition, Kansas ranks as one of the least competitive states (see Brown and Bruce 2002). After the 2014 midterm, the Kansas Senate was 80 percent Republican (32 Republicans and 8 Democrats) and the Kansas House was 78 percent Republican (97 Republicans and 28 Democrats; Cohen and Barnes 2015, p. 723). The four-member Kansas US House delegation has been entirely Republican since 2010.
version, by embracing a “full-orb” (Glaser 2005) conservative Republicanism: conservative on all the major issues like values/religion, defense/security, economics/class, and race/civil rights. At least for now, the more moderate “Bob Dole” wing of the Kansas Republican Party has given way to the hyper-polarized conservative faction led by the likes of Secretary of State Kris Kobach4 and Governor Sam Brownback.

Out of Step: Governor Brownback’s Failed Experiment in Topeka

By all accounts Governor Brownback is a bona fide conservative ideologue. Possessed with considerable progressive ambition (Schlesinger 1966), Brownback won a US House seat in the historic 1994 “Republican Revolution,” when the GOP under the leadership of Newt Gingrich returned the House of Representatives to Republican control for the first time in 40 years. Not content to serve in the lower chamber, when Bob Dole vacated the Senate to run for President in 1996, Brownback won his seat in a special election. Brownback briefly ran for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination, but terminated his bid the year before after a disappointing performance in “the Iowa straw poll in August 2007” (Cohen and Barnes 2015, p. 725). After serving 15 years in the Senate, Brownback returned to Kansas in 2010, easily winning the open-seat gubernatorial election.

Not long after assuming the governorship, Brownback became a highly unpopular leader through the implementation of an ideologically motivated agenda. With overwhelming Republican majorities in both chambers of the Kansas legislature, Governor Brownback reduced the state budget to unprecedented proportions in 2012 and 2013. Most of the economic reforms consisted of huge tax cuts that resulted in massive revenue shortfalls as well as credit downgrades (Waldman 2014; Cohen and Barnes 2015). While these reforms were possible given the makeup of the Kansas Legislature, such radical actions ran the risk of placing Governor Brownback and his conservative GOP allies at odds with the median Kansas voter.

Prior research suggests that a state’s economy is a significant factor when voters evaluate their governor for reelection (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Maher 1995). Not surprisingly, the poor economic conditions in the state left Brownback

4 Kris Kobach is a conservative firebrand who made national news for being outspoken in his efforts to curb illegal immigration and tighten election laws. Early in his tenure as Secretary of State, Kobach championed the implementation of a strict photo identification law that passed in 2011, an electoral reform the “Democratic leader of the Kansas state senate” once referred to as “a solution in search of a problem” (Keyssar 2009, p. 284).
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electorally vulnerable in the run up to his 2014 reelection bid. In our survey of likely voters, which was administered in October 2014, we asked respondents their views on the Kansas economy. Only 4 percent rated the Kansas economy very good; 45 percent rated it fairly good; 38 percent rated it fairly bad; and 13 percent rated it very bad.

We also asked our respondents to rate the leading 2014 gubernatorial candidates on a favorability scale ranging from 1 (least favorable) to 10 (most favorable). It was expected that Governor Brownback would be significantly less popular than Paul Davis, his Democratic opponent and Kansas House Minority Leader. Figure 1 displays the favorability ratings for Brownback and Davis. The average rating for Brownback was 4.96 vs. 5.44 for Davis. But what really stands out is the percentage of respondents who rated Brownback a 1–23.8 percent of the sample. Not surprisingly, more respondents were “Not Sure” where to rate the less familiar Davis (16 percent vs. 9 percent for Brownback).

As Theriault (2013) and Theriault and Rohde (2011) have shown, the bulk of the partisan polarization in the US Senate is due to the cohort of Republicans who first served in the House and entered Congress after Newt Gingrich in 1978. Sam Brownback and Pat Roberts were both “Gingrich Senators,” and therefore it is expected that they are viewed as extremely conservative. Indeed, when the

5 An article by Ragusa (2016) probes deeper into the causal mechanisms explaining why the Gingrich Senators are so polarized. One of the primary factors increasing polarized behavior is whether a House member entered Congress “with an extreme partisan cohort” before making it to the Senate. It turns out that this polarizing factor has exhibited an effect throughout congressional history. Incidentally, in the case of Brownback and Roberts, they both entered the House during historic and notably polarizing elections. Roberts came into the House when Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1980, and as mentioned, Brownback was a member of the House freshman class that stormed the gates with Gingrich leading the charge in the 1994 “Republican Revolution.” The 1980 and 1994 elections were two of the most pivotal in shaping the character of the modern Republican Party.
former Gingrich Senator Brownback returned to Kansas, he clearly made a point of infusing state government with his extremist policy views.

In Figure 2 we present the ideological distribution of Brownback, Davis, and the respondents themselves, according to their own assessments on a seven-point scale ranging from extremely liberal (1) to extremely conservative (7). Kansans perceive a stark ideological divide between the liberal Davis and the decidedly conservative Brownback. Whereas the respondents constitute an ideological distribution that is center-right (73 percent are situated from 4 to 7 on the scale), with two peaks – the first at moderate (4) (28 percent) and the second at conservative (6) (23 percent), most place Davis (56 percent) as liberal (2) or somewhat liberal (3). By contrast, a remarkable 71 percent of respondents viewed Brownback as conservative (6) or extremely conservative (7).

Finally, in Figure 3 we have displayed respondents’ ideological distribution of the Democratic leadership and Republican leadership in the Kansas legislature, along with their self-placement as a point of comparison. The distribution is very similar to what we found in Figure 2, notable partisan polarization across the
ideological scale. Most respondents (53 percent) place the Democratic leadership as liberal (2) to somewhat liberal (3). By contrast, the Republican leadership in the state is viewed as markedly less centrist, with 70 percent placing it as conservative (6) or extremely conservative (7). In the minds of likely Kansas voters, their perceptions of the economy, their favorability ratings of the gubernatorial candidates, and ideological placement of the candidates and their respective parties, is strong preliminary evidence that Governor Brownback was out of step with the electorate and hence vulnerable in the 2014 midterm.

**Out of Touch: Senator Roberts is Not in Kansas Anymore**

While Governor Brownback led the charge to the far right, one can make the case that Senator Roberts was nudged in the same direction. To be sure, Roberts is anything but liberal or even moderate for that matter, but he lacks the conservative crusader mentality of a Brownback or Kobach, and this may have contributed to the challenge from tea party favorite Milton Wolf in the 2014 Republican primary. Wolf’s most compelling argument for removing Roberts from office was the oft-repeated anti-incumbent/anti-establishment mantra that has fueled the rise of the insurgent tea party movement (Bullock 2011). There was no defense against the career politician insult, as Roberts first entered Congress as a US House member in 1980 and has served in the US Senate since 1996. But the most damaging feature of the “creature of Washington” claim was that Roberts no longer resided in Kansas. He rented out a house and stayed with staffers when he returned to Kansas. This revelation proved perilous, as Roberts was held to under 50 percent of the vote, winning the Republican primary with 48 percent vs. 41 percent for Wolf in a contest that drew four candidates (Cohen and Barnes 2015, p. 726).

Roberts’ scare in the Republican primary served as a wake-up call but the legitimate accusation of “Senator in absentia,” dogged him throughout the general election. Further complicating his road to reelection, Chad Taylor, the winner of the Democratic Senate primary bowed out of the general contest and had his name removed from the ballot, which allowed for the anti-Roberts crowd to coalesce around his leading opponent, the Independent and wealthy political amateur Greg Orman. As a Gingrich Senator, neither Wolf nor Orman could

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6 Roberts’ DW-NOMINATE score (0.674) in the 113th Congress (2013–2015) placed him as the 15th most conservative member of the US Senate. Likewise, Roberts “was the eighth most conservative member of the Senate in 2013, according to National Journal vote rankings” (Cohen and Barnes 2015, p. 727).
credibly muster an attack on Roberts’ conservative credentials, but the absentee politician claim stuck.

The authors of *The Almanac of American Politics* likened Roberts’ predicament to that of Indiana Senator Richard Lugar who was defeated in the 2012 Republican primary “by a tea party opponent after it was disclosed Lugar was using the address of a house he had sold in 1976 to vote in the state” (Cohen and Barnes 2015, p. 728). Perhaps even more apropos was the 2008 defeat of North Carolina Senator Elizabeth Dole. The North Carolinian and wife of Bob Dole was roundly criticized for hardly ever making the short trip back to the Tar Heel State from her District of Columbia home. Her defeat at the hands of Democratic state senator Kay Hagen was one of the surprise upsets of 2008 (Sides et al. 2012).

Senator Roberts did his best to push back against the claim of being out of touch and launched a vigorous reelection campaign. He brought various high-profile politicians with him on the campaign trail, including Bob Dole, John McCain, Sarah Palin, and even Ted Cruz. The parade of endorsements from establishment and tea party-aligned Republicans was an obvious effort to shore up the electoral support of a Republican-leaning electorate. Roberts also went on the offensive by questioning the political loyalty of his independent opponent who once backed President Obama and refused to say which party he would caucus with in the Senate, if he were victorious (Cohen and Barnes 2015, p. 728).

Table 1 looks specifically at likely voters’ responses to questions about Roberts lack of a Kansas domicile and his campaign endorsements. First, respondents were asked if knowing Roberts does not have a home in Kansas makes them less likely to vote for him. The descriptive results reveal a strong effect as 54 percent of likely voters agreed or somewhat agreed that this fact makes them less likely to support Roberts. Turning to campaign endorsements, their effect on vote choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree/</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree/</th>
<th>Don’t Know/</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree Somewhat</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree Somewhat</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each question the number of cases is 425. Due to rounding, the percentages may not sum to exactly 100%. For ease of presentation, response categories were combined (agree and somewhat agree; disagree and somewhat disagree).
appears modest. Native son Bob Dole had the most influence on respondents voting for Roberts, but his impact and that of John McCain and his 2008 presidential running mate Sarah Palin seems marginal compared to the percentage of likely voters claiming that these endorsements have no discernible effect on their decision.

Table 2 turns to the question of whether the party Orman would affiliate with in the Senate had an effect on voter preferences. Interestingly, the distribution of responses is almost a mirror image in terms of whether Orman were to affiliate with Senate Democrats or Senate Republicans and its impact on voting behavior. A large plurality of respondents disagreed or somewhat disagreed that they would be more likely to vote for Orman if he caucused with Senate Democrats (46 percent) or Senate Republicans (44 percent). One out of five respondents said their voting preferences were not influenced by which party in the Senate Orman were to align with (neither agree nor disagree), and 27 percent agreed or somewhat agreed that the party Orman affiliated with in the Senate made them more inclined to support him.

Figure 4 charts the favorability ratings for Roberts and Orman. Unlike Brownback whose favorability rating was underwater, with a large segment of likely voters rating him a 1 (least favorable), Roberts’ favorability is comparable to Orman’s.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics Regarding Independent Greg Orman.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MORE likely to vote for Orman if you know that in the Senate…</th>
<th>Agree/ Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree/ Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Don’t Know/Not Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He Would Affiliate with Democrats</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He Would Affiliate with Republicans</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each question the number of cases is 425. Due to rounding, the percentages may not sum to exactly 100%. For ease of presentation, response categories were combined (agree and somewhat agree; disagree and somewhat disagree).

Figure 4: Favorability Ratings for Roberts and Orman.
respondents placed Roberts in the least favorable category (15.5 percent) than Orman (11.5 percent), but this four-point disparity is nothing like the 15-point gap between Brownback and Davis. Further, Roberts’ average favorability rating is 5.23 vs. 5.43 for Orman. About the same percentage of respondents were “Not Sure” where to rate Roberts (12 percent) and Orman (13.2 percent) on the favorability scale.

Finally, Figure 5 presents the ideological distribution for Roberts, Orman, and respondents’ self-placement as a point of comparison. Even with his official status as a political independent, Orman’s placement along the seven-point ideological continuum is center-left, contrasting sharply with Roberts. Only 15 percent of respondents placed Orman in the three most conservative categories (5–7). A plurality of respondents (31 percent) placed Orman as a moderate (4) and fully 57 percent considered him to be either a liberal (2) or a moderate (4). Although not quite as conservative as Brownback, an impressive 66 percent of respondents placed Roberts in the conservative (6) or extremely conservative (7) categories. Hence, in the 2014 elections a center-right Kansas electorate perceived its choices to be that of a center-left challenger (Orman) versus a far-right incumbent (Roberts) for Senator, and a left-of-center challenger (Davis) versus a far-right incumbent (Brownback) for governor. At least with respect to ideology, the choices were patently distinguishable.7

Modeling the Vote for Brownback and Roberts

In this section we assess the likelihood of voting for Governor Brownback and Senator Roberts, respectively. We designed an online survey of likely Kansas

7 From most liberal to most conservative, the average scores for all of the ideological placement variables were as follows: Democratic leadership in Kansas legislature = 3.0; Democrat Paul Davis = 3.05; Independent Greg Orman = 3.32; Respondent self-placement = 4.38; Republican Pat Roberts = 5.59; Republican leadership in Kansas legislature = 5.68; and Republican Sam Brownback = 5.74.
voters in the 2014 midterm and arranged for Survey Sampling International (SSI) to administer the questionnaire to a sample of registered Kansas voters. In order to capture likely voters, the start of the survey contained a screening question that narrowed the sample to only those respondents who indicated: (1) “Yes, I plan to vote” or (2) “Yes, I already voted.” The survey employed a Web-based platform and was pre-tested to determine the average length of time to complete (approx. 5–7 min). SSI had the survey in the field from October 10 to October 27, 2014. There were a total of 425 completed surveys, but the sample size is smaller for a multivariate analysis because of the omission of “Don’t Know/Not Sure” responses and the exclusion of respondents who had not yet decided who to vote for in the gubernatorial/senatorial contest.

In the Brownback model, the dependent variable is coded 1 for a Brownback vote and 0 if the respondent backed another candidate. Likewise, in the Roberts model, the dependent variable is coded 1 for a Roberts vote and 0 if the respondent supported someone else. We run probit regressions for both vote choice models. In both models, we include the following demographic controls: Age (in years); Female (1 = female, 0 = male); and White (1 = White, 0 = otherwise). We also included controls for Church Attendance (1 = never, 2 = a few times a year, 3 = a few times a month, 4 = once a week, 5 = more than once a week); Born Again (1 = yes, 0 = otherwise); and Tea Party Supporter (“Do you consider yourself part of the Tea Party movement?” 1 = yes, 0 = otherwise).

With respect to the variables of interest, in both models we include measures of ideology and party identification. Regarding ideology, we include dummy variables for Liberal (1 = extremely liberal, liberal, somewhat liberal, 0 = otherwise) and Moderate (1 = moderate, 0 = otherwise). Conservatives (1 = extremely conservative, conservative, and somewhat conservative, 0 = otherwise) are the omitted reference category. Compared to conservatives, liberal and moderate respondents should be significantly less likely to vote for Brownback and Roberts. And these effects should be more pronounced in the Brownback model for two reasons: (1) Brownback’s Democratic opponent Paul Davis is viewed as more liberal than Roberts’ Independent opponent Greg Orman (greater ideological polarization in

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8 Early voting in Kansas starts 20 days prior to the election and runs until the close of polling on Election Day when all ballots must be received (https://ballotpedia.org/Kansas_elections,_2014).
9 In other words, on the seven-point ideology scale ranging from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative), we collapsed categories 1–3 (originally coded 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, and 3 = somewhat liberal) into the Liberal dummy; the Moderate dummy was originally coded a 4 on the seven-point scale (4 = moderate/middle-of-the-road), and for the omitted Conservative reference dummy we collapsed categories 5–7 (originally coded 5 = somewhat conservative, 6 = conservative, and 7 = extremely conservative).
the gubernatorial contest), and (2) as emphasized in this paper, Governor Brownback aggressively pushed Kansas in a far-right direction (“right-wing,” to quote the governor) and his ideological placement reflects this. Hence, the opposition to Brownback among liberals and moderates should be stronger than what we find in the case of Roberts.

For party identification, we include dummy variables for Democrat (1 = strong Democrat, not so strong Democrat, 0 = otherwise) and Independent (1 = independent leaning Democrat, pure independent, independent leaning Republican, 0 = otherwise). Republicans (1 = strong Republican, not so strong Republican, 0 = otherwise) are the omitted comparison category.\(^\text{10}\) Democrats should be more strongly opposed to Brownback than Roberts, because of the governor’s ideologically-driven actions affecting Kansas politics and policy. By contrast, because of the non-partisan appeal of Independent Greg Orman, Independents should be more likely to vote against Roberts than Brownback. The shared absence of a party affiliation among independent respondents and an independent candidate should make for more resistance to voting for Senator Roberts.

Lastly, we include a set of variables suited for the more immediate context of the gubernatorial and senatorial elections. In the case of the Brownback model, we include a variable for the Kansas Economy (1 = very bad, 2 = fairly bad, 3 = fairly good, 4 = very good). It is expected that respondents with a more favorable view of the Kansas economy are more likely to support Governor Brownback. We include a political knowledge variable Kansas House Majority (“Do you happen to know which party currently has the most members in the Kansas House of Representatives in Topeka?” 1 = yes, Republicans, 0 = otherwise). Knowing that Republicans are the majority in the Kansas House may lead respondents to vote against Brownback since Republican control of state government during his tenure has generated widespread popular discontent.\(^\text{11}\)

Among the factors specific to the Roberts model, not surprisingly, the variable expected to have the greatest impact on vote choice concerns the Senator’s lack of a Kansas domicile. Based on the coding of No Home in Kansas (“Knowing that Pat Roberts does NOT own a home in Kansas makes me LESS likely to vote for

\(^{10}\) In other words, on the seven-point party identification scale ranging from 1 (strong Democrat) to 7 (strong Republican), we collapsed categories 1–2 (originally coded 1 = strong Democrat and 2 = not so strong Democrat) into the Democrat dummy; for the Independent dummy we collapsed categories 3–5 (originally coded 3 = independent leaning Democrat, 4 = pure independent, and 5 = independent leaning Republican), and for the omitted Republican reference dummy we collapsed categories 6–7 (originally 6 = not so strong Republican and 7 = strong Republican).

\(^{11}\) Of course we should have asked a similar question regarding the Republican-controlled Kansas Senate (an oversight on our part).
him” 1 = disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = agree), the variable should be negative and highly significant. We also include a variable for opinions toward Orman based on if a Senate victory would prompt him to affiliate with the Democratic Party: Orman with Democrats (“I would be MORE likely to vote for Greg Orman if he affiliates with the DEMOCRATIC Party in the U.S. Senate” 1 = agree, 2 = somewhat agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat disagree, 5 = disagree). We expect that respondents who are more opposed to voting for Orman if he were to affiliate with Senate Democrats will be more inclined to vote for Roberts.

Finally, we want to see if bringing certain Republican luminaries along the campaign trail actually had an effect on the likelihood of voting for Senator Roberts. Thus, we have included three variables: Dole Endorsement, Palin Endorsement, and McCain Endorsement (“I would be MORE likely to vote for Roberts knowing that [Bob Dole/Sarah Palin/John McCain] campaigned for him” 1 = disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = agree).

Results

Table 3 displays the results of the vote choice models for Brownback and Roberts. Starting with the Brownback model, white respondents are significantly more likely to vote for the governor. Tea party supporters were also more inclined to vote for Brownback. Turning to the variables of interest, as expected, ideology registers a large effect on voter preferences. In keeping with the highly polarizing behavior of Governor Brownback, versus conservatives, liberals are strongly opposed to voting for him. Not quite as strong but also impressive, is moderates’ opposition to Brownback compared to conservatives (the reference category). Also in line with expectations, compared to Republicans, Democrats are the least supportive of Brownback, followed by Independents. Finally, with respect to the more specific campaign variables, respondents who had a more favorable view of the Kansas economy were more likely to vote for Brownback. Although respondents who knew that Republicans controlled the Kansas House of Representatives were not more likely to vote against Brownback, the negative coefficient is signed in the expected direction.

Among the demographic variables in the Roberts model, born again voters were highly supportive of the incumbent. In contrast to the Brownback model, with respect to ideology and party affiliation, the effects are not nearly as polarizing. First, compared to conservatives, liberals and moderates were not less likely to vote for Roberts. Second, there is no statistical difference in the level of support Democrats and Republicans gave to Roberts. But, in keeping with our
Table 3: Voting for Brownback and Roberts in the 2014 Midterm.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Covariates</th>
<th>Vote for Brownback</th>
<th>Covariates</th>
<th>Vote for Roberts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−0.000 (0.006)</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−0.005 (0.007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.050 (0.188)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.128 (0.213)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.714 (0.294)b</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.011 (0.335)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Attendance</td>
<td>0.008 (0.070)</td>
<td>Church Attendance</td>
<td>0.051 (0.077)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born Again</td>
<td>0.221 (0.200)</td>
<td>Born Again</td>
<td>0.669 (0.229)a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tea Party Supporter</td>
<td>0.426 (0.255)c</td>
<td>Tea Party Supporter</td>
<td>−0.299 (0.341)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>−1.733 (0.295)a</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>−0.193 (0.338)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>−0.836 (0.216)a</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>−0.241 (0.303)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>−1.393 (0.310)a</td>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>−0.484 (0.340)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>−0.400 (0.205)c</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>−0.530 (0.240)b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas Economy</td>
<td>0.236 (0.130)c</td>
<td>No Home in Kansas</td>
<td>−0.370 (0.090)a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas House Majority</td>
<td>−0.094 (0.188)</td>
<td>Orman with Democrats</td>
<td>0.344 (0.097)a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−0.613 (0.571)</td>
<td>Dole Endorsement</td>
<td>0.329 (0.099)a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Palin Endorsement</td>
<td>0.363 (0.091)a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>McCain Endorsement</td>
<td>−0.060 (0.100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−1.455 (0.830)c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td>0.410</td>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td>0.579</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cases</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>Cases</td>
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Probit regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variable is coded 1 for Brownback/Roberts and 0 if a respondent reported voting for another candidate. a p < 0.01, b p < 0.05, c p < 0.10 (two-tailed).

expectation, versus Republicans, Independents were strongly opposed to Roberts and conversely more supportive of his Independent challenger. Turning to the more specific campaign variables, only the McCain endorsement failed to attain statistical significance. By contrast, Dole and Palin boosted Roberts’ reelection chances among respondents who agreed that their campaigning in behalf of the embattled incumbent mattered. And, as expected, respondents more inclined to disagree that they would support Orman if he caucused with Senate Democrats, are much more likely to vote for Roberts. Finally, with respect to the most relevant campaign-related factor, respondents strongly opposed Roberts if they agreed that his lack of a Kansas domicile was grounds for voting against him.

Predicted Vote Probabilities for Brownback and Roberts

To provide a more tangible assessment of the likelihood of voting for Governor Brownback, Figure 6 displays predicted probabilities for the statistically significant covariates in Table 3 based on the observed-value approach (see Hanmer...
The probabilities are arrayed from left to right and moving from lower to higher support for Brownback within each variable category. Whites were 17 points more likely to vote for Brownback as compared to nonwhites (0.44 vs. 0.27) and those aligned with the tea party were 10 points more likely to support the governor (0.50 vs. 0.40). Turning to the ideology variables, we see very large differences, with under a 10 percent chance liberals voted for Brownback while moderates registered a 0.28 probability of favoring the governor. Most conservatives supported Brownback, but their 0.57 probability is a notably low value, and it clearly reflects the governor’s general unpopularity with the Kansas electorate (recall Figure 1). Likewise, Republicans had only a 0.51 probability of voting for the Republican governor and Democrats and Independents were substantially less supportive at 0.14 and 0.35, respectively. Finally, Brownback received considerably more support from voters who thought the Kansas economy was very good (0.50) as opposed to very bad (0.34).

Similar to Figure 6, Figure 7 displays the predicted probabilities of voting for Senator Roberts for the covariates that attained statistical significance in the second model in Table 3. At 0.54, born again voters had an 11 percentage point greater probability of voting for Roberts vis-à-vis voters who did not claim such a religious experience (0.43). Independent voters were decidedly less supportive of Roberts, registering a 0.41 probability of voting for the incumbent as compared to a 0.50 likelihood among both Democratic and Republican identifiers. Voters who agreed they were less likely to vote for Roberts because he did not maintain a Kansas domicile had only a 0.37 likelihood of voting for him. By contrast, voters who disagreed that Roberts’ lapsed Kansas residence was an issue had a 0.65 probability of voting for the senator.

Note: Probabilities were derived from the first model in Table 3 based on the observed-value approach (see Hanmer and Kalkan 2013). The Kansas economy variable is scaled from 1 to 4 with a 1 indicating “KS economy very bad” and a 4 indicating “KS economy very good.”
To no surprise, voters who agreed that they were more likely to vote for Greg Orman if he *affiliated* with the Democratic Party in the US Senate, had just a 0.30 probability of supporting Roberts while voters who *opposed* the Independent affiliating with the Democratic Party had a 0.56 likelihood of voting for Roberts. Dole and Palin’s endorsement of Senator Roberts clearly influenced voting behavior among the high and low ends of these five-point scaled variables. Respondents who *disagreed* that Dole and Palin made them more likely to vote for Roberts had a likelihood of voting for the incumbent of 0.35 and 0.36, respectively. But among voters who *agreed* that the Dole and Palin endorsements mattered in their support of Roberts, their probability of voting for the senator was 0.60 and 0.66, respectively. The aforementioned campaign specific variables registered a large effect on voter preferences in the US Senate contest and Roberts’ absentee representation proved the most impactful. Recall that a majority of respondents (54 percent) either agreed or somewhat agreed that Roberts’ lack of a permanent residence in the Sunflower State made them less likely to return him to the US Senate (see Table 1) and in the multivariate analysis this influence on vote choice was substantial.\footnote{By comparison, less than 30 percent of respondents agreed or somewhat agreed that Dole and Palin campaigning for Senator Roberts made them more likely to vote for him (29 percent in the case of Dole and 23 percent in the case of Palin; see Table 1).}
Discussion and Conclusion

Even before attaining statehood, Kansas was engaged in a civil war before the Civil War. In this conflict, Jayhawker Republicanism prevailed and to this day the GOP has dominated Kansas politics. But the current electoral hegemony of Kansas Republicans has triggered another civil war; this time within the GOP, as moderates and conservatives battle for control. As mentioned, for several decades a coalition of moderate Republicans and Democrats maintained the electoral balance in the state and their ideological positioning accurately reflected the sentiments of a center-right Kansas electorate. But this increasingly precarious representational equilibrium was drastically altered by the ascendance of conservative Republicans in the wake of the 2010 elections. This ongoing internal GOP ideological battle is further evidenced by the 2016 Republican primary defeat of US Congressman Tim Huelskamp, a Freedom Caucus member who represented the deep red First District (Schneider 2016). In addition, at the time of this writing there is a special election to replace Congressman Mike Pompeo, who vacated his seat to join President Trump’s administration as CIA Director. Though we expect this special election in the Fourth District of Kansas to remain in Republican hands (Trump won the district over Clinton 60–33 percent in 2016 and it has been in the GOP’s column for over 20 years), the contest furthers the argument we have made with respect to a hegemonic party that persists in trying to govern to the right of its constituents. Indeed, the glimmer of promise for Democrats is not simply that their candidate appears viable, but also because the current short-term conditions are not particularly favorable to Kansas Republicans – Governor Brownback’s approval currently sits at a remarkably low 23 percent and Kansas Democrats netted 23 state legislative seats in the 2016 elections.

In this study, we have analyzed the political milieu surrounding two of the Sunflower State’s most powerful politicians as they sought reelection in the 2014 midterm: Governor Sam Brownback and Senator Pat Roberts. A case study confined to two leading politicians may appear limiting in its explication of a state’s politics. However, upon closer inspection, the behavior of Brownback and Roberts yields tremendous insight, because their actions are palpable symptoms of what can happen when one party dominates a state’s politics. With regard to Brownback, the recent triumph of the conservative faction of the GOP enabled him to push Kansas politics and policy in a rightward direction.

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13 In 2012, Republican Mitt Romney carried the First District of Kansas with 70 percent of the vote (Cohen and Barnes 2015, p. 734).
14 For a recent look at the special congressional election in the Fourth District of Kansas, see the Associated Press article by Hegeman (2017).
much farther than what a typical Kansan (who is a Republican) prefers. In the context of partisan and ideological polarization, Brownback’s right-wing governance speaks to Fiorina and Abrams’ (2009) argument for a “disconnect” between the more centrist positioning of voters and the more extremist stands of their representatives. But this prime example of representational distortion and unresponsiveness would not be possible if the Democratic opposition was more electorally competitive, as was the case before the election of Brownback in 2010.

Regarding Senator Roberts, his representational neglect would also not be possible if the Democratic Party constituted a legitimate electoral threat. As Fenno (1978) observed long ago, every politician cultivates a home style in their relationship with their constituents. But in the case of a veteran incumbent who took reelection for granted, the upkeep of his home style was in disrepair because he stopped coming home. The electorally weakened state of the Kansas Democratic Party has clearly contributed to the political excesses of Brownback and Roberts. In economic parlance, as agents of the Kansas voter, the eviscerated condition of the Democratic opposition has fostered Brownback and Roberts’ considerable agency loss, because these politicians did not fear electoral defeat. The 2014 midterm in Kansas was a notable political story because, even in a one-party dominant state, the principals (voters) made a spirited effort to punish their agents.

The current state of Kansas politics draws some striking parallels to that of the one-party Democratic Solid South. For over half a century, the absence of strong Republican opposition in most southern states meant that political power was bottled up in factional fights occurring within the dominant Democratic Party (Key 1949). In some states a sharp ideological cleavage emerged with a conservative faction battling against a liberal opposition (e.g. Texas). As Key (1949) predicted, and one of his associates articulated (see Heard 1952), it was inevitable that one-party factionalism would give way to the gradual emergence of two-party competition as the perennial losing Democratic faction would find refuge and the opportunity to engage in party-building under the label of the moribund GOP. But the interesting (and often misunderstood) twist in the transformation of southern politics is that the moderate-to-liberal faction of the Democratic Party eventually gained the electoral advantage with the massive re-enfranchisement of African Americans after passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. With African Americans’ virtually monolithic attachment to the Democratic Party (Black and Black 2002), rather than continue to wage a struggle for control of the party, white conservatives instead successfully found a relative advantage in realigning to the GOP (Hood, Kidd, and Morris 2012) and now southern Republicans dominate the region’s politics.
Turning back to Kansas, the internecine warfare between the moderate and conservative factions of the dominant Republican Party also appears unsustainable. As the conservative wing continues to push a far-right policy agenda, one of two political developments appear likely. First, as was true in previous skirmishes, the political pendulum (Stimson 2004) may swing back far enough for Republican moderates to regain the upper hand. But if the conservative Republican faction maintains its hold on political and electoral power, then the only clear alternative for moderate Republicans is to defect to the Democratic Party, a phenomenon already underway (see Miller and Schofield 2008). There are different ways to interpret the happenings in Kansas in the 2014 midterm. In the short-term, Brownback and Roberts got away with their representational malfeasance (Brownback is term-limited and at age 80, Roberts is probably serving his last term). But the vigorous opposition to their reelection bids keeps the door open for what the future might hold for Kansas politics. The Sunflower State is undergoing a contentious intra-party political struggle and that is the crux of what’s the matter with Kansas.

References


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