

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: Democrats lost the property tax issue and power

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Boy have times changed.

When I was an NBC reporter covering the Wisconsin Legislature in 1993, Assembly Majority Leader David Travis and his fellow Democrats controlled the state Assembly. Democrats knew property tax relief was a big deal in Wisconsin. That's why they passed a bill putting two-thirds of school costs on the state.

The night that happened, then-Republican Senate Majority Leader Mike Ellis of Neenah was skeptical. He said in the parking lot of The Avenue Bar in Madison: "We won't do what they did in Kiddieland today."

But the Senate did do it. Democrats actually worked with Republican Gov. Tommy Thompson to reduce property taxes by as much as 40 percent. A lot of homeowners, though, didn't believe they were saving money.

"I walked into a meeting in Waunakee and asked how many people had a property tax cut," Travis recalled. "Nobody put their hand up, and I had the chart in my hand!"

Democrats controlled the Legislature for two years after President Barack Obama won the White House in 2008. Then came the tea party surge of 2010 when, in one election, Democrats went from an Assembly majority of 52-46 to trailing 60-38!

"Then Republicans changed the district maps to protect their majorities," former Rep. Travis says. "They did it behind closed doors at Michael Best and Friederich."

That is where Reince Priebus, who today is President-elect Donald Trump's incoming White House chief of staff, was a practicing attorney.

"They made the Republicans sign an oath that they wouldn't talk about the maps to anybody," Travis said. "In the past, the process had been more open."

Former state Sen. Joe Wineke, D-Verona, says the Republicans took solidly Democratic districts and made them more Democratic, and they took districts that were leaning Democrat and made them leaning Republican.

But Democrats still should have at least 10 more seats in the Assembly and more in the Senate, the outspoken Wineke believes. Currently, Republicans lead the Senate 21-12 or 20-13, depending on what happens in a recount of the close race for a La Crosse-area seat.

The real reason Democrats have lost at all levels is because they stopped talking to average voters, according to Wineke, who is a past state Democratic Party chairman.

"When is the last time Democrats were on offense with rural voters?" Wineke asks.

In 1992, when Wineke was in the Assembly, he led the charge on a proposed constitutional amendment to give residential property taxpayers major relief. Called the "3 percent solution," the plan would have limited property taxes on the first \$100,000 of income to 3 percent.

"It would have given most seniors a 50 to 60 percent property tax," Wineke said. "That was something voters could understand."

The plan would have changed the state constitution so commercial and industrial property could be taxed at higher percentages than residential property. Out of 815,000 votes cast, Wineke's amendment lost by about 1,000 votes. Wineke said Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, the business lobby that opposed the change, outspent supporters 10-to-1.

Wineke, a populist Democrat, believes Republicans have kept their message more simple to win. He cites Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan. Wineke believes his 1992 "3 percent solution" and a later proposal to expand the homestead credit would have put more money in the pockets of average income voters.

"We've lost the soul of Democrats in western Wisconsin to Donald Trump," Wineke said. "We stopped talking to them in ways that make them think we care about their economic lives."

If Wineke's ideas sound like class warfare, you would be right. "It's time to go on offense to get those voters back," he says.

At the end of the day, Trump never would have won Wisconsin, Michigan or Ohio without winning the votes of people who are or who used to be Democrats. The Clinton campaign was appropriately based in yuppie Brooklyn, New York. Having visited there recently, I can tell you that more spinach salads and white wines are consumed than hot dogs and beer. For the time being at least, millions of shot-and-a-beer drinkers are wearing Donald Trump t-shirts.

Harry Truman must be rolling over in his grave.

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