

Meet the Moderates

These politicians and candidates are breaking with today's aggressively partisan times to advocate a more centrist line.

BY: [Louis Jacobson](#) | December 4, 2017

When a Republican and Democrat from Washington state recently [announced](#) a new group called Washington Independents, they did something that in today's aggressively partisan age is positively radical: They seized the political center.

The new group, former Democratic U.S. Rep. Brian Baird said, is "looking for candidates who will listen, have the courage and integrity to solve the tough issues, and who will put principle over party or special interests and people over partisanship."

Baird and Chris Vance, a former head of the state's Republican Party, are far from alone.

According to dozens of political observers across the country, there are a handful of moderates at all levels of government who aren't just quietly pursuing moderate policies but who actually wear the title proudly.

Before we meet these moderates, it's important to note that we're only including politicians holding or seeking office and who are rising stars rather than long-entrenched incumbents. That's because it's too easy to eschew partisanship when you're not facing an imminent party primary, and for this discussion to be valid, it's important to demonstrate that their brand of politics has a future.

Governors

Being a governor offers a better opportunity for pursuing a centrist approach than most elected positions. After all, governors have to run statewide and a hardline partisan approach often won't win over enough urban, suburban or rural voters.

Governors also have to work with the opposite party in the state legislature to pass laws and in cities and counties on economic development. In many cases, this fosters moderate policies.

Unsurprisingly, today's moderate governors can be found in states that generally lean toward the opposite party of their executive leader. In the blue states of Maryland, Massachusetts and Vermont, voters have, respectively, elected Republicans **Larry Hogan**, **Charlie Baker** and **Phil Scott**.

Charlie Baker, for example, signed bills in November that [require insurers](#) to offer free birth control and [ban bump stocks](#), which increase weapons' rate of fire. Hogan, meanwhile, [signed a fracking ban](#) and has pursued sick-leave legislation, though he vetoed a Democratic version he considered too far-reaching.

Red states, meanwhile, have elected several Democratic governors, including **Steve Bullock** in Montana, **Roy Cooper** in North Carolina and **John Bel Edwards** in Louisiana. Cooper's highest-profile accomplishment -- overturning the H.B. 2 "bathroom bill" -- [ended up](#) irritating both the left and the right.

"I happen to believe that Democrats in a large part of the country, but particularly across the South, would do much better if we fielded more candidates who were pro-Second Amendment and pro-life such as myself," Edwards [told Politico](#) in September. "I happen to believe we have a superior message in many regards that will resonate with people across this region, but they won't hear it if you don't check a couple of boxes first. They won't hear the rest of your message."

And almost by definition, the nation's sole independent governor, Alaska's **Bill Walker**, qualifies as a centrist.

It's worth noting, however, that none of these politicians are necessarily a good fit for the term rising star. Few elected positions rank higher than governor, and the ones that do are difficult for moderates to attain.

Winning a U.S. Senate election as a member of the state's minority party is a much heavier lift than winning the governorship. And running as a moderate in a party's primary for president? Fuhgeddaboutit.

Gubernatorial Candidates

If governorships are the ideal place for moderates, then it should come as no surprise that several are running for the office.

Take Kansas. Following a divisive two terms under Republican Gov. Sam Brownback, moderates in the state are flexing their muscles. The widespread unpopularity of Brownback's budget-busting tax cuts has shifted the power in the Republican Party ever so slightly back toward the center, as Democrats and moderate Republicans have sought with some success to stymie Brownback's initiatives.

The GOP has three relatively moderate candidates in their large field for 2018: former legislators **Ed O'Malley** and **Jim Barnett**, and state Rep. **Mark Hutton**. If any of them manages to survive the primary, says Burdett Loomis, a University of Kansas political scientist, they would likely fare well in the general election.

Democrats, for their part, have always had to be more moderate to win in the state. If a conservative wins the GOP primary, the Democrats should be able to make the race competitive with one of their candidates -- House Minority Leader **Jim Ward**, former Wichita Mayor **Carl Brewer**, and former legislator and agriculture secretary **Josh Svaty**.

Another state where moderates may be ascendant in 2018 is Colorado. There, independent voters will have their first chance ever to vote in partisan primaries, potentially pushing both parties toward the center.

Floyd Ciruli, a Denver-based pollster, pointed to several moderate politicians running for governor next year who could benefit, including Democratic Lt. Gov. **Donna Lynne** and Republican Attorney General **Cynthia Coffman**.

Lynne, who has served as president of the Kaiser Foundation Health Plan of Colorado, called herself the most "pragmatic" candidate in the race, "with more experience than any other candidate in managing millions of dollars of budgets, large organizations," *The Denver Post* [reported](#).

Coffman has a moderate record on social issues and has attended an LGBTQ pride event.

Other candidates with moderate profiles who are expected to run for governor next year include Afghanistan War veteran and Democratic state Rep. **James Smith** in South Carolina, former Democratic U.S. Rep. **Gwen Graham** in Florida, Republican surgeon **Knute Buehler** in Oregon and former Tennessee economic development chief **Randy Boyd**.

If a couple of these moderate gubernatorial candidates begin to gain traction during the 2018 election cycle, it may be a sign that centrism is demonstrating a surge in popular appeal.

Statewide Elected Officials

It's increasingly rare for members of one party to win statewide office in states dominated by the opposite party. Nevertheless, there's Mississippi Attorney General **Jim Hood**.

The Democrat withstood a tough Republican challenge in 2015 and may run for governor in 2019. If he does so, he would be the only Democrat with a prayer of winning.

In Missouri -- a state that has turned heavily Republican in a relatively short period of time -- Democrat **Nicole Galloway** was appointed to the position of state auditor and plans to run for the office on her own in 2018. Despite Missouri's political drift, observers say she's taken a relatively nonpartisan approach and has a good shot at winning next year.

The position is a bit of a launching pad: Three recent U.S. senators from Missouri previously held the state auditorship -- Claire McCaskill, John Ashcroft and Christopher Bond.

On the Republican side, Utah Lt. Gov. **Spencer Cox** has [made headlines](#) for criticizing President Trump, reaching out to gays and leading a bipartisan effort to address Utah's homelessness and opioid challenges. He is expected to run for governor in 2020.

State Legislators

Given the hyperpartisan nature of state legislatures these days, it's tough to be a moderate. Still, there are a few in the most unlikely of places.

In Texas, Republican state Rep. **Sarah Davis** is "the most visible and vocal unabashed Republican moderate," says Rice University political scientist Mark P. Jones. She's the only abortion rights Republican in the Texas Legislature, and she's been endorsed by the state's leading LGBTQ advocacy group, Equality Texas.

"Unlike some of her moderate colleagues who are moderates in Austin but present themselves as hard-line conservatives back in their district, Davis both walks the moderate walk in Austin and talks the moderate talk when back home in Houston," Jones says.

In California, Assemblyman **Tom Daly** is a leader among moderate, pro-business Democrats in the legislature. Previously, Daly served as mayor of Anaheim.

"To be effective at any level of government, you have to be able to work with people who are not going to agree with you on every issue," Daly told the *Orange County Register* in 2013.

And in New Mexico, Democrat **George Dodge**, a state representative, is one of a handful of moderates who are gaining influence in the legislature. A Democrat from the conservative eastern portion of New Mexico, Dodge served in the Navy and has been a teacher, principal and business owner. He has risen quickly in the chamber to become vice chairman of the influential House Appropriations Committee.

Mayors and County Officials

Since cities and suburban counties have become increasingly Democratic, mayoral offices and county executive positions offer Republicans some of the best opportunities for pursuing centrist political careers. In other words, they can offer agendas that are pro-business but socially moderate.

In deep red Oklahoma, Oklahoma City Mayor **Mick Cornett** is considered relatively moderate. "By Oklahoma standards, his views on issues like LGBTQ rights [have become] more progressive during his years as mayor," [wrote](#) Arnold Hamilton, editor of the *Oklahoma Observer*.

Cornett is widely considered a strong general election candidate as he runs for governor in 2018, but Hamilton noted that the last Oklahoma City mayor to run statewide didn't survive the 2004 GOP primary.

In New York's Dutchess County, which narrowly supported Hillary Clinton over Donald Trump in 2016, voters have elected Republican **Marcus Molinaro**, a former village mayor and former Assemblyman, as their county executive.

Molinaro is "very steeped in how government works and is committed to good government while pursuing fiscally conservative and socially moderate policies," says Gerald Benjamin, a political scientist at SUNY-New Paltz.

In staunchly Republican Utah, Salt Lake County Mayor **Ben McAdams**, a Democrat, has branded himself as a moderate -- a necessity as he seeks to oust Republican U.S. Rep. Mia Love.

While McAdams had backed a broad expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, he [told](#) *The Salt Lake Tribune* that he collaborated with Republican state House Speaker Greg Hughes on a more politically manageable approach.

Meanwhile, in Alabama, **Walt Maddox** has been elected mayor of Tuscaloosa four times as a Democrat, focusing on economic development and the city's recovery from tornado devastation. He's running for governor in 2018.

One of the surprise hotbeds of moderate Republican and Democratic mayors is Indiana. The highest-profile example is South Bend Mayor [Pete Buttigieg](#), who ran unsuccessfully to lead the Democratic National Committee, billing himself as a fresh, midwestern voice. He's gay and a Navy veteran who served in Afghanistan.

The bench of moderate Indiana mayors is even deeper on the GOP side.

Jim Brainard is the mayor of Carmel, an Indianapolis suburb with a population of 86,000. He's [pushed for](#) green and pedestrian-oriented development. Another Republican mayor is **Scott Fadness** of the neighboring and similarly sized suburb of Fishers; he's considered a pragmatic Republican. Elsewhere in the state, Republican **Lloyd Winnecke** serves as mayor of Evansville and has taken a moderate approach.

**CORRECTION: A previous version of this stated that Mississippi Attorney General Jim Hood withstood a tough Republican challenge in 2017. In fact, it was 2015.*

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