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POLITICS

As a dominant politician, Wisconsin may never see another Herb Kohl

Craig Gilbert Special to the Journal Sentinel

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Herb Kohl, [who died Dec. 27](#), will be remembered for a lot of things, including “saving” the Milwaukee Bucks, building a chain of supermarkets, serving in the U.S. Senate for 24 years, giving a lot of money to charity, and being a very private but public-spirited public figure.

He should also be remembered as Wisconsin’s best-performing statewide election candidate ever.

He won four Senate campaigns, three of them by landslides.

“You win some, you lose some. Life tempers you,” Kohl told me in an interview in 1988, when he ran his first campaign at the age of 53.

But when it came to elections, Kohl didn’t lose *any*, unlike Bob La Follette, Bill Proxmire, Gaylord Nelson or Tommy Thompson — all-time Wisconsin politicians who all suffered at least one serious election defeat.

In an increasingly polarized 50/50 state, Kohl won his last campaign in 2006 by 38 points. That stands as the biggest victory margin in a major Wisconsin election (Senate, governor, president) since 1976.

More: [President Biden](#), [Bill Clinton](#), [Gov. Evers](#), [U.S. Sen. Baldwin](#), [Sen. Majority Leader Schumer](#), [NBA commissioner Adam Silver](#) remember Herb Kohl

That same year, Kohl carried the state's biggest Republican county, Waukesha, something no other Democrat has done in the past 40 years.

What explains Kohl's unusual election success? How much of it was due to circumstance, events, the times? How much was the product of his unique political assets?

Are we likely to see anyone else duplicate his track record?

Herb Kohl's winning formula: wealth, biography, persona, politics

First, let's look at some of the things that made Kohl a big winner:

Wealth. Kohl kicked off his first Senate run five months before the 1988 election with a saturation ad blitz unlike anything Wisconsin voters had seen before in a state campaign. This was a time when you could blanket the voting public on broadcast television.

Kohl became an overnight, omnipresent figure. This was not only vital to his first victory, but his capacity to self-fund became a huge barrier to potential challengers in the future. As we've seen over and over, however, money guarantees nothing in campaigns. There have been more rich losers in Wisconsin politics than rich winners. Kohl had other things going for him.

Biography. Being a senator is the biggest thing on the resume of most senators. But Kohl was more closely connected to some Wisconsinites through Kohl's stores and the Milwaukee Bucks than politics. The substance of his life before politics made it possible for him to argue he wasn't just a walking TV ad trying to buy an election.

He had a compelling life story, as the child of immigrants, a son of Milwaukee, a businessman and philanthropist. His challenge in 1988 was not having to manufacture a bio or prove his ties to the community. It was to demonstrate a baseline level of political depth and seriousness as a middle-aged first-time

candidate. Once elected, his transparent lack of national ambition or financial need made his famous campaign slogan, “Nobody’s Senator but Yours,” more resonant.

More: [5 interesting facts about Herb Kohl from his impressive political résumé to his friendship with Bud Selig](#)

Persona. Not many politicians can pull off the first-name trick. Kohl was “Herb” to a lot of people, just like Thompson, the former Republican governor, is “Tommy.” These two men shared a track record of crossover political appeal and utter election dominance. They also illustrate that there’s no stylistic blueprint for winning the public’s affection.

“Tommy” was a classic political natural who relished the public eye, sought adoration and thrived on crowds. “Herb” was allergic to cameras and uncomfortable with attention. In a 1999 story about Kohl’s effort to use procedural ploys to pressure his colleagues over milk-pricing rules important to Wisconsin dairy farmers, a New York Times headline read, “Quiet Peaceable Man Just Wants to Hogtie Senate.”

Kohl had a steelier side than he often showed in public, but his shy, awkward humanity was genuine, and it somehow clicked with voters. Kohl was literally a guy you’d run into, with no entourage, at the coffee shop or drug store.

When I look back over the long conversations I had with him when I covered his (and my) first Wisconsin campaign, I am amazed by the access he granted and the openness and introspection and self-evaluation and disappointments this rather guarded figure shared. He wanted to be defined by his personal qualities and values and deeds, not his money or political views.

Politics. Kohl was not a “giant” of the Senate. His answer to the charge of ineffectiveness? “Who is it that has done something — landmark, major issue (as in) ‘I passed this bill?’” he bristled. “You certainly would never suggest that the person who hotdogs the most is the most effective.”

He tended to focus on parochial, “Wisconsin” work, such as dairy and appropriations and constituent service — in keeping with his retail background. He was more liberal in some respects than people think or remember. He won his first election backing defense cuts and tax hikes on the rich.

But his identity as a businessman and his centrist tone and instincts helped him immensely with voters outside the Democratic base. Kohl was one of 12 Senate Democrats who voted for the 2001 Bush tax cuts. During his first two years in the Senate, he was the chamber’s 39th most liberal senator, according to one rating system used by political scientists. In his last two years, he was the 36th most liberal.

In both cases, this placed him on the conservative side of his own party. This helped Kohl with Republicans back home. He enjoyed the blessing in politics of having virtually no enemies. One GOP activist who decided against challenging Kohl in 2000 told me he’d discovered that “nobody had any passion to beat him on our side.” Republicans ran an ad against Senate Democrat Russ Feingold in 1998 comparing him unfavorably to “our moderate Senator,” Herb Kohl.

Consider Kohl’s performance in Waukesha, the state’s third biggest county and for decades the GOP’s geographic base in Wisconsin. In descending order, here are the top performances in major races by Democrats in Waukesha County over the past 40 years, based on the share of the total vote.

Herb Kohl, 2006 Senate race: 50.9%

Herb Kohl, 2000 Senate race: 46.4%

Herb Kohl, 1988 Senate race: 43.5%

Herb Kohl, 1994 Senate race: 43%

Russ Feingold, 1992 Senate race: 40.9%

Tony Evers, 2022 governor race: 39.4%

Joe Biden, 2020 presidential race: 38.8%

Mike Dukakis, 1988 presidential race: 38.7%

Russ Feingold, 2004 Senate race: 38.1%

Tammy Baldwin, 2018 Senate race: 38.1%

Democrats other than Herb Kohl have lost Waukesha County by an average of 32 points over this span. Kohl lost it by an average of 7 points.

In sports terms, it was Kohl's stellar "road record" (his competitiveness on unfavorable turf) that made him such a dominant statewide candidate.

You can say this was partly a product of the times. Ticket-splitting was much more common in the 1990s and 2000s than it is now. In 1994, Democrat Kohl won his Senate race by 18 points and Republican Thompson won his race for governor by 36 points. About a third of the state's voters split their tickets in these two races. Landslides were more achievable 30 years ago because voters were less entrenched by party.

But Kohl's performance at the polls — like Thompson's — was exceptional even for its era. Voters were beginning to grow more polarized even as their victory margins were growing.

Kohl won his re-election races by 18, 25 and 38 points. Thompson won his by 16, 36 and 21. Wisconsin was highly competitive back then, just as it is today. And while the biggest Kohl and Thompson landslides came against very weak opponents, these two men drew weak opponents *because* of their political strength.

Outside of Kohl and Thompson, only two other Wisconsin candidates for major office have won double digit victories over the past 40 years: Feingold for Senate in 2004, Baldwin for Senate in 2018 (both by 11 points).

Will Wisconsin see another Herb Kohl or Tommy Thompson?

Could another Herb Kohl or Tommy Thompson come along and start winning blow-out elections in Wisconsin?

That is extremely unlikely in today's political culture. Voters are too polarized, making it much harder for them to vote for someone on the other side of the

partisan divide. And fewer moderates are getting nominated.

When I wrote a retrospective on Kohl's election history back in 2011, after he'd announced his retirement, I posed the same question and suggested the 2012 election would provide a pretty good clue. That's because Thompson, the other election juggernaut of his day, was coming out of political retirement to run for Kohl's open Senate seat.

Well, the answer was pretty clear. As a centrist in a party shifting to the right, Thompson struggled to win the GOP primary that year, then went on to lose to Tammy Baldwin in the general election.

[Baldwin may also offer some lessons on this question](#). She's the only major Wisconsin candidate with a double-digit victory in a partisan race since Kohl did it in 2006. Given the changes in our politics, her 11-point win in 2018 is probably the equivalent of a 20-point victory (or more) in the 1990s or 2000s.

Baldwin didn't achieve her lopsided victory by being a centrist; she's one of the most liberal members of the Senate. Instead, she ran an effective campaign against a weak challenger by stressing parochial and bread-and-butter issues (also part of the Kohl playbook) and spending lots of time in areas of Wisconsin outside the Democratic power centers of Milwaukee and Madison.

Baldwin is up for re-election again in 2024. But her 2018 win may define the upper limit of what constitutes a landslide in today's fiercely divided Wisconsin.

In that sense, Kohl's run of election blow-outs was partly a phenomenon of the times.

But much more than that, it was a personal political achievement that you can add to the rich resume of an atypical politician.

Herb Kohl memorial service

Former U.S. Senator and Milwaukee Bucks owner Herb Kohl's life will be celebrated during a public memorial Friday at Fiserv Forum.

The event will begin at noon with the public asked to enter Fiserv Forum through the main atrium located off Herb Kohl Way.

Kohl, who owned the Bucks from 1985 to 2014, played a key role in the creation of Fiserv Forum, contributing \$100 million to the project.

According to an invitation, memorial donations may be made to the LaFollette School of Public Affairs, Milwaukee Jewish Federation and Wisconsin Teachers' Classroom Projects.