



The Democratic cult of personality

by John Krull

Will Rogers once said:

"I'm not a member of any organized party. I'm a Democrat."

At the end of last week and through the weekend, Indiana Democrats did their best to demonstrate that Rogers was right.

The comedy began last week when Indiana Democratic Party Chair [Dan Parker](#) announced he was resigning. The requisite tributes flowed in, including a perfunctory raspberry from Indiana Republican Party Chair Eric Holcomb.

Quickly, candidates began jockeying for position to succeed Parker. Likely Democratic gubernatorial candidate [John Gregg](#) and likely Democratic U.S. Senate candidate [Joe Donnelly](#) wanted Tim Jeffers to be the state party chair. Others wanted Joel Miller.

That's when the comedy turned to farce.

Some fine reporting by The Evansville Courier & Press's Eric Bradner revealed that Gregg and Donnelly discovered that their candidate — Jeffers — didn't have the votes to win and they decided that they weren't comfortable with Miller.

So they went back to Parker and asked him to stay.

After a contentious three-hour meeting on Saturday, the Democrats narrowly voted to have Parker remain as their chair.

What does this prove — other than that Will Rogers wasn't just making a funny?

Well, a couple of things.

The first is that the model that has served the Democratic Party in Indiana for the past 25 years is broken.

Ever since 1986, when [Evan Bayh](#) eked out a close victory for Indiana secretary of state, the party has been built in Bayh's image — centrist, risk-averse and determinedly non-ideological. The model worked to elect Bayh governor and then senator and then to put Frank O'Bannon in the governor's seat after him.

But it has come crashing down within the past four years.

In 2008, Bayh and his team couldn't get his candidate — Jim Schellinger — the Democratic nomination for governor. On the same night, after throwing all their muscle at delivering

Indiana to Hillary Clinton over [Barack Obama](#), Obama came within a whisper of winning the Hoosier state and Clinton's presidential hopes were doomed.

Two years later, Bayh opted not to run for re-election to the U.S. Senate. That started a chain reaction as Democrats lost the Senate seat, the seat in the U.S. House of Representatives that Bayh's hand-picked replacement candidate, Brad Ellsworth, had filled and the seat in the [Indiana House of Representatives](#) that Ellsworth's replacement candidate had filled. Worse, without Bayh at the top of the ticket, Democrats took their worst drubbing in two generations, as Republicans took control of the Indiana House, 60-40, and Democrats in the Indiana Senate fell to the point that they couldn't even deny a quorum by walking out.

Worse still, Bayh made it clear that he wasn't ever coming back. No Democrat who intends to face the voters of his own party again takes a job with Fox News — which is what Bayh did.

The second thing is that it's a dangerous thing to build a political party around a person, rather than a set of principles.

With Evan Bayh, the message was the man.

The man was good-looking, likable and, as far as anyone could tell, devoid of passion for any political position or idea other than sitting in the biggest chair available to him.

When Bayh left, he left the Democratic Party no foundation upon which to build. Because the state party had organized itself around a man rather than a set of shared goals or common ideals, it had nothing left to hold it together when the man took off.

As a result, the party's presumptive gubernatorial and U.S. Senate candidates — both of whom present themselves as sort of like Republicans, only less so — couldn't install their own state party chair. Because Democrats couldn't agree on where they wanted to go in the future, they compromised by going back to the past and getting Parker to stay a little longer.

They tried to present it as a victory of sorts, a triumph of hard debate.

That's a little bit like wandering into a place where a skunk has sprayed and saying that you love the smell of the wildflowers.

That Will Rogers was a funny guy.

A smart one, too.

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