

Two Cheers for "Blue Jeans in High Places"

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GREEN BAY - Mike McCabe, author of [Blue Jeans in High Places](#), asks the readers of his debut book in a sartorial call to action, to grab their boots and blue jeans, roll up their shirtsleeves, and take back our democracy. I can't argue with the ends to which McCabe is striving, but I do have a few critical observations about the path he recommends. The passion he expresses for the cause of reform is admirable, and his knowledge of Wisconsin's recent and more distant political history is impressive, but with a flawed political diagnosis, faulty strategic suggestions for improving our democracy, and hyperbolic condemnations of nearly all public servants, he undercuts the strength of his analysis.

Full disclosure: I'm a politician. Yes, a public servant or public official as we are euphemistically called (see above), but also a politician. I practice politics, and I'm honored to do it. I've been elected twice to the state Assembly. I've knocked on thousands of doors, shaken thousands of hands, and raised (only) thousands of dollars. Maybe this makes me an irredeemably biased participant-observer in our democratic process, but I wholeheartedly agree with McCabe that our system of choosing elected officials is badly flawed. Dark money has flooded into elections at the federal, state, and even local levels. Our legislative and congressional districts have been gerrymandered. And our politics is often lacking the substance that our citizens are worthy of. With these observations, McCabe and I are in total agreement, but how do we improve our lot. There's the rub, and that's where we have some room for debate.



McCabe begins his story in Clark County. Clark is a rural county in central Wisconsin that at one time sent Democrats to Madison and is now reliably red. He bemoans the Republican bent of a county that is the among the poorest in the state and then jumps to the conclusion that the Democratic Party fails to appeal to poor, rural voters. Believe me, I wish the voters of Clark County were still sending a progressive champion like Frank Nikolay (the late great-uncle to my wife) to the state Assembly, but times have changed, demographics have changed, and politics has changed. In Clark County, longtime residents have seen an [influx of Hispanic residents in](#)

[recent years](#)

, which has impacted the economic, cultural, and political landscape. The immigrant population has provided workers for the agriculture industry and diversified main streets across the county in a very positive way, but they also serve as scapegoats for right-wing politicians. As a result, Clark County's electorate now seems

[polarized on ethnic grounds](#)

. If McCabe has a solution to that problem, I'd love to hear it.

Setting that aside, I agree that the Democratic Party is in desperate need of a revamped agenda that speaks to the needs of working people in rural and small-town Wisconsin. Unlike McCabe, however, I'm idealistic enough to believe that a thorough-going reinvigoration of the Democratic Party is possible, and I'm not naive enough to think, as he does, that any inroads can be made into the GOP.

Incidentally, this Pollyannish belief in the ability to rediscover the progressive wing of the Republican Party is the weakest part of McCabe's analysis, in my view. Without citing the precedent, he suggests a strategy that was successfully employed by North Dakota progressives in the early 20th Century under the auspices of the [Nonpartisan League](#). The league implemented the novel approach of running candidates on a shared platform in the primaries of both major parties. The effort was successful, at least for a short time, but I can't imagine a scenario in which a similar strategy would meet with any degree of success in a Republican primary for any state or federal office any time soon. If you've studied the last half-century of American politics, you shouldn't be able to fathom the possibility either. The "Blue Jean" agenda might make sense to the average voter, but the average voter is not the one who votes in Republican primaries, which are dominated by the monied interests that are undermining our democracy, the ones McCabe so rightly criticizes.

Finally, McCabe persists throughout many parts of the book to treat politicians, regardless of party or ideology, with disdain and then goes on to bemoan the sorry state of our civil discourse. I'm not sure how to wrap my head around that contradiction, but his well-worn "pox on both their houses" routine obscures the real and growing gap that exists between the positions expressed by our two major parties and makes it less likely that young, idealistic progressives might enter public life to fight for the values that McCabe and I likely share.

Regardless of these differences, however, I enjoyed the book. McCabe's breezy style and firm handle on the history of Wisconsin politics makes for a quick and stimulating read. We might not agree on everything, but I welcome Mike, with his ideas and his blue jeans, to participate in the Democratic Party of Wisconsin's 2015 state convention. We'll have a big tent, cold beer, and a

casual dress code.

Tags: Untagged