

Will Idaho voters get an echo or a choice?

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Idaho Democratic Party Chairman Keith Roark recently expressed the right message on behalf of the loyal opposition. He credited part of the state's budget woes to a decade and a half of Republican tax cuts for the well-connected and the well-heeled.

Rising unemployment and a tough economy are the primary culprits. But so are GOP's tax changes. One leading example was reducing income taxes for businesses and wealthy Idahoans in 2001. Another was shifting schools off property tax support and onto the sales tax in 2006, which also helped businesses and wealthy families, to the detriment of lower and middle-income Idahoans.

Both moves left less money for state programs. And in both cases, a recession was looming.

As Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter put the final touches on another round of spending cuts, Roark issued this statement: "It's true that these are difficult times for individuals and government, but based on their tax-shifting track record, Republicans cannot be trusted to do what needs to be done in a fair and family-friendly way."

Pointing that out does little good unless Roark's party produces a candidate for governor.

As things now stand, Idahoans have no alternative to a ruling philosophy that holds most if not all government deserves to be trimmed. The same goes for Idaho schools, which some GOP leaders argue do not suffer so much from being woefully underfunded as by being dominated by a teachers union.

Without a Democratic gubernatorial candidate, no one can challenge the prevailing political view that most taxes are bad, but the best ones regressively squeeze consumers and wage-earners.

A Democratic standard bearer could question the GOP's schizophrenic view of the market place - which smiles upon competition for workers and small businesses, but assures any industry big enough to employ a lobbyist of more tax breaks and subsidies, and all in the name of economic development.

Not all Republicans subscribe to these views. But enough do, especially those who dominate the GOP's primary elections as well as influence its legislative leadership. These also are the folks who label their more moderate colleagues Republicans In Name Only.

Is this where most Idahoans wish to be? Are they traveling this path by default?

Only a robust, gubernatorial campaign will tell. Conventional wisdom says running as a Democrat is a fool's errand because Idaho is so reliably Republican.

Still, what is the purpose of a political party if not to give voters a choice and the opportunity to switch course?

Democrats contend they're progressing toward successfully recruiting a candidate who can wage a credible campaign against Otter. More important than some arbitrary deadline is finding the right individual and then launching his candidacy properly. It's only October on the eve of an election year. There's still time, they say.

But not much. - M.T.