

Bulletin: Idaho GOP wins legislative control

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This just in from NBC News: With no votes cast and no ballots counted, the network forecasts Idaho's Republicans have won control of the state Senate.

And the House of Representatives.

Attorney General Lawrence Wasden has won re-election.

So has State Treasurer Ron Crane.

What about a couple of minor events like the May 25 primary election and the general election on Nov. 2?

So often this year, these contests are resembling something like the old Soviet elections. You're free to vote for the one person whose name is on the ballot.

As of Friday's filing deadline, Democrats were contesting the governor's chair, now held by Republican C. L. (Butch) Otter; the secretary of state's office, now occupied by Republican Ben Ysursa; and superintendent of public instruction, currently filled by Republican Tom Luna.

Technically, Democratic candidates have filed for Republican Mike Crapo's U.S. Senate seat and the Second Congressional District slot now held by Republican Mike Simpson.

Democratic incumbent Walt Minnick is defending his First Congressional District office against a field of would-be GOP nominees.

But Democrats are conceding 46 seats in the 105-member Idaho Legislature. Republicans have fielded candidates for all but three of those contests.

In eight of Idaho's 35 legislative districts, there is not a single Democratic candidate.

Some of the most prominent examples of the ideologically-driven conservative House - Republicans Phil Hart of Hayden, Bob Nonini of Coeur d'Alene, Judy Boyle of Midvale, Robert Schaefer of Nampa, Fred Wood of Burley and Janice McGeachin of Idaho Falls - have been re-elected by default.

Democrats have never been able to match the GOP for candidate recruitment, but they've done a lot better - two years ago, they contested all but 38 seats and as recently as 2002, the Democrats conceded only 26 seats - and they've not performed so poorly since 2000 when they allowed 53 legislative Republicans to skate in the fall campaign.

As political historian Randy Stapilus notes, the GOP also did a better job of retaining its incumbents - 77 of 80 members are running again. Among the 25 Democrats, seven are retiring.

What's more, Idaho Democrats have to make their gains in mid-term elections - when the GOP turnout falters - in order to withstand the heavy Republican voting tide every presidential year.

In this, the Republicans are blameless. With the record they've compiled in the last two years, Republicans gave Democrats every incentive to recruit candidates and give voters the opportunity to make a course correction.

Instead, the upcoming Republican primary election will decide the soul of the Legislature. As usual, several Senate Republican moderates face challenges on the right. If enough of them lose, the Senate could begin to mirror the House.

Two years of runaway right-wing dominance has paralyzed any reasonable attempt to come up with more money for Idaho highways, schools, colleges and universities and health care programs. Tax increases are off the table. With resistance, there's been only a modest attempt to go after a small percentage of tax cheats who owe Idaho money. There's been a deliberate effort to lowball state revenue projections, all but guaranteeing budget knives dig deeper.

Next year, the state's reserves and federal stimulus cash will be gone, and unless somebody agrees to eliminate a tax break here or raise another tax there, the bloodletting will continue.

Yet, the most voters now can hope for is that the Legislature doesn't become more irrational. Now, the best Idahoans can count on - is the status quo? - M.T.