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Platform less frightening than its authors

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Party platforms and resolutions - especially extreme versions such as the one Idaho Republicans produced in Idaho Falls last week - cause grief for candidates who run under them.

But every Idaho Republican candidate - from Gov. C. L. (Butch) Otter to U.S. Sen. Mike Crapo and those seeking legislative office - will find a way to distance himself from at least some of these ideas:

- Stopping the direct election of U.S. senators and placing that authority back in the hands of the state legislatures.
- Nullifying "any and all existing and future unconstitutional federal mandates and laws, funded or unfunded, that infringe on Idaho's 10th Amendment sovereignty."
- Abolishing the Federal Reserve and allowing "free Idahoans [to] pay taxes, and other fees due to the state, county and city in silver and or gold in any form. ..."
- Suggesting the state engage in tax protestation by holding on to the federal taxes Idahoans pay.
- Arguing the state constitutional amendment banning gay marriage wasn't tough enough and restricting marriage to "naturally born" men and women.
- Joining a contingent of investment counselors by urging Idahoans to buy up gold and silver.
- Recommending a state constitutional amendment as a prelude to Idaho assuming control of U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management properties.
- Subjecting everybody who runs as a Republican to sign a loyalty oath to follow the platform.
- Opposing Republican Congressman Mike Simpson's decade-long effort to protect the Boulder-White Cloud range with a wilderness compromise forged at the local level. Idaho's congressional delegation backs the bill.

That sounds more like a fringe group than the party that has been governing Idaho for almost two decades.

Any Republican now on the ballot has the network of supporters and resources to forge ahead independently. That's especially true of Republican incumbents as well as the four dozen legislative candidates who face no challenge in November.

Those who do face opposition will appeal to voters in the center, voters who may reward GOP candidates who walk away from a platform that careens to the right side of goofiness.

The problem is not the platform and resolutions.

The problem is the people in the convention hall who wrote and adopted the platform and resolutions.

Two years ago, they arrived to oust centrist Kirk Sullivan as chairman and to push the GOP toward a closed primary election.

They aren't going anywhere.

Two years from now, they'll be organized to mount primary opposition to moderate Republicans still serving in the Legislature. They'll recruit people from within their ranks to fill what's expected to be a wave of legislative vacancies opening in 2012 and 2014.

The steady drift of Idaho's majority party toward ideological purity will drive moderates out. Nominating people who agree with repealing the 17th Amendment and imposing loyalty oaths should play right into the hands of Idaho Democrats, who will pick up legislative seats in competitive districts. But there are neither enough competitive districts nor enough Democratic candidates to make much of a difference. The GOP will retain control of a smaller but even more conservative legislative majority.

Don't expect the people dominating Idaho's Republican precincts, central committees and state convention to have their way this year. Or even two years from now.

But eventually, they will. - M.T.