

Stegner a Democrat? Say it ain't so, Joe

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Lewiston Republican Sen. Joe Stegner really isn't.

A Republican, that is.

So said an unnamed woman at the Idaho state GOP convention in Idaho Falls last month.

"You're a Democrat," she shouted as Stegner was defending proposed constitutional amendments to help local governments finance projects without a vote if no tax dollars pay the debts.

As the Associated Press and Idaho Statesman noted, that's "about the worst insult to throw during the convention."

But this slur must come as a bit of stunner to Nez Perce County Democrats.

If he's a Democrat, why have they been fighting to block Stegner for two decades?

In 1996, they stopped him from ousting Sen. Bruce Sweeney, D-Lewiston. When Sweeney retired two years later, however, Stegner became the first Republican state senator to represent Nez Perce County since H.W. Hulbert in 1968. He's unopposed for a seventh term now, but former state Rep. Mike Naccarato, D-Lewiston, came within 295 votes of unseating Stegner four years ago.

Stegner a Democrat?

No Democrat would have voted, as Stegner did in 2003, to obstruct the Idaho Education Association and other labor unions' ability to draw political contributions through payroll deductions.

No Democrat would have voted, as Stegner did in 2006, to pass then-Gov. Jim Risch's ill-conceived plan to transfer support for local schools from a maintenance and operations property tax levy to an added penny of sales tax. The change cost poor and middle-income families money. Wealthy people and corporations reaped the benefits. Ultimately, schools suffered.

No Democrat would have voted, as Stegner did this year, to cut school funding by 7.5 percent to balance the state's budget. Among the 28 GOP senators, only Moscow's Gary Schroeder voted no - and Republican voters ousted him in the May primary election.

Fact is, Stegner is in the mainstream of his party. He votes like a Republican.

So say two experts, Andrew D. Martin of Washington University in St. Louis and Kyle L. Saunders of Colorado State University. Commissioned by the state to help defend Idaho's open primary against the GOP's drive to close it to registered Republicans, they analyzed legislative votes in 2007-08.

Stegner was slightly to the left of hard-core conservatives such as Jeff Siddoway, R-Terreton, and Shirley McKague, R-Meridian. He was in line with stalwart Republicans such as Lt. Gov. Brad Little, R-Emmett. More to the point, every Democrat then in the Senate voted to the left of Stegner.

What's probably got Stegner's critics so upset is he refused to go along with the 2006 drive to clutter up Idaho's constitution with a homophobic amendment banning gay marriage. Stegner was among one of only three Senate Republicans to vote no. And he insisted upon getting up on the floor and debating against it.

If that's a Republican litmus test, Stegner failed it.

There's a word for the kind of ideological purist some of the GOP convention delegates would expect Stegner to be:

Road kill.

Nez Perce County is a competitive legislative district. In fact, it leans Democratic. If Stegner started aping the eastern Idaho Republicans, he'd become a sacrificial lamb.

It would take his party another 30 years to elect a state senator from Nez Perce County.

Is that what they want?

Poor Joe Stegner.

Not Republican enough for the Republicans.

Not Democratic enough for the Democrats.

He can't win.

And yet, he does. - M.T.