

Gem State voters join up but drop out

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Gem State voters join up but drop out Marty Trillhaase The Lewiston Tribune |

Call it the fabric of civic involvement.

Volunteering.

Cooperating with your neighbors.

Joining with groups.

Voting.

If you see people who care enough about their communities to volunteer and join hands, chances are they'll vote as well. If not, something's wrong.

So says the Corporation for National and Community Service, an umbrella group that is responsible for everything from AmeriCorps to taking the nation's temperature for community participation.

Washington is ranked ninth in the nation in terms of neighbors working together, 11th for volunteering, fourth for banding together within organizations and sixth for voting, with 52.8 percent of those eligible casting a ballot last year.

Then we have Idaho. It's ranked fifth for neighborliness, 10th for volunteering and 17th for group participation.

Voting?

The Gem State is no better than 25th. Only 47.7 percent of its voting-age population showed up at the polls last year. And why not? You couldn't do more to depress voting in Idaho if you tried.

First, destroy the two-party system. For many Idahoans who casually show up at the polls in November, voting is as potent as one of those old Soviet Union elections.

Frequently, there's no choice. Nearly four dozen of Idaho's 105 legislative seats went unopposed in the general election last year.

Even when two names are on the ballot, it's a formality. Everybody knows the well-funded, organized, business-backed Republican incumbent is going to trounce the impoverished, Democratic neophyte.

However rational their reasons for remaining home, apathetic voters feed a downward spiral. If centrists stay away, the margins for the ideological candidates swell, further discouraging challengers from entering the field, and thereby giving voters fewer voices and less incentive to get engaged in the future.

Next, you resist every notion of making it easier for people to vote. Washington's vote-by-mail system dates back in one form or another 20 years. It embraced local-option vote-by-mail in 2005. This year, the last hold-out, Pierce County, came into the fold.

Sending a ballot to someone's home allows him two to three weeks to research the candidates and issues, make a choice and mail it back. How much that's expanded voter turnout is a matter of conjecture. But it no doubt has helped.

In Idaho, you have to trudge to the polls one day a year, taking time from work, to stand in line - or sign up for an absentee ballot once every election cycle.

Every time Idaho's county election clerks and Secretary of State Ben Ysursa have tried to expand voting opportunities, the conservative Idaho House rebuffed them. A bill that would allow people to apply for a permanent absentee ballot didn't get out of committee. A vote-by-mail system did - until the ethically-challenged House State Affairs Chairman Tom Loertscher, R-Iona, pulled it from the floor on a pledge to conduct another public hearing that never occurred.

Meanwhile, new obstacles have been imposed. Idaho is among a third of the states requiring a photo identification, although the law does allow exceptions. Plus there's ongoing chatter among state legislators to tighten down the opportunities for people to cast absentee ballots.

Finally, you clamp down on the primary election. Since Idaho is a one-party state, the election that counts is the GOP primary. But next year, you'll have to swear allegiance to the Republican Party to vote. The GOP successfully sued to close the primary to all but registered Republicans.

People can change this by getting more involved and employing the initiative process to reform election laws. Don't look to the politicians to do it. They like the way things are. - M.T.