

GOP wounded Idaho by closing primary

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Even when Idaho's voting turnout was good, it wasn't all that great.

In the past three decades, it's declined even more.

Now the Idaho Republican Party has made things even worse.

Analysts categorize voters into two groups:

- Eligible - these are citizens 18 years or older who have the opportunity to vote.
- Registered - these are the people who have taken the time to sign up and have actually voted at some point.

When politicians use the registered voter number, they paint a brighter picture and obscure the real problem.

In 1980, 30.94 percent of Idaho's eligible voters joined in the primary. That proportion has fallen steadily over the years and now sits in the mid-teens.

Thirty-two years ago, 41.34 percent of Idaho's registered voters cast a ballot in the primary.

Since then, turnout dropped, flattening after the GOP assumed total dominance in Idaho in the mid-1990s. Depending who was running and what issues were raised, registered voter turnout has swung as high as 33 percent and as low as 25 percent.

With the GOP in firm control, the primary became Idaho's real election, so the decline in turnout is counter-intuitive. But last week, Idaho Secretary of State Ben Ysursa confirmed what most expected: By closing its primary election to everyone but registered Republicans, the Idaho GOP plunged voter activity to an all-time low.

Among registered voters, 24.44 percent showed up at the polls.

And in the broader population, eligible voter turnout slipped to 16.12 percent.

Turnout was greater in Idaho's rural counties, lower in its population centers.

But here's the bottom line: As of Election Day, 1,156,869 Idahoans were eligible to vote. Of them, 970,391 took a walk.

In fact, the legion of Idaho non-voters is growing about a third faster than the state's population of eligible voters as a whole.

Not voting is becoming acceptable behavior for most Idahoans. It's a way of life.

Now the Idaho GOP has compounded the problem by driving away active voters.

Some stayed home because they did not want their party affiliation to become a matter of public record. Declaring a party allegiance might violate the standards of their professions, undermine their business or even jeopardize their employment.

Others considered it dishonest to declare a party preference when they had none.

Finally, there were voters who were simply appalled at the GOP for prying into the ballot box.

Intertwined throughout is a sense of alienation from the political process.

Such alienation is fatal to a democratic republic. It breeds cynicism. It invites polarization. It provokes extremism.

Idaho's GOP didn't create that alienation. But closing the primary certainly made it worse.

The party leaders who insisted on closing their primary did so in the belief it would help the conservative wing of the party. Whether they helped their cause is in doubt. Most moderate incumbents prevailed last month.

But they hurt the body politic. They made Idaho's system less open and less representative. They put aspirations for their party first, the welfare of their state and the voters second. - M.T.