

Little Changes in Idaho politics

Randy Stapilus/Ridenbaugh Press

For all that nothing has changed in the numbers of Republicans and Democrats in the Idaho congressional and legislative delegations, the state's battleground picture may have shifted a little.

Not a lot. But in some notable places.

Of the 105 seats, 21 were unopposed (one of those a Democrat, Michelle Stennett of Ketchum), and 58 more were decided in true landslides of 60 percent or more of the vote, so 79 of the 105 seats were generally not competitive at all. If we scale back a little further and look at races won only by realistically close margins – under 55 percent – then just 14 races, out of the 105, remain.

When you look at where in the state they were, the geography of the races makes sense.

Two of those close races were in the new District 5, which meshes Democratic-leaning Latah and Republican-leaning Benewah counties. Democrats won two of the three races there, but the closest legislative contest in Idaho this year resulted in the Republican win of Cindy Agidius (helped by strong connections in Moscow) by 123 votes over Democrat Paulette Jordan. The third-closest was the win of Democratic incumbent Senator Dan Schmidt over the man he beat more easily two years ago, Republican Gresham Bouma. This will be a hotly-contested district in 2014.

The second most competitive race was in District 26, the big Magic Valley district where the largest population base is in Democratic Blaine County. In House A, there was just enough Republican support in Gooding County to deliver a win for Republican Steve Miller. This may be a more competitive district now than it has been. Races in Lewiston and Pocatello ran close too, reinforcing that these are truly competitive areas, not the Democratic-leaning cities of yore.

Another district represented twice in this group may augur more for the future. Democrats made a strong bid for the seats in District 15, which is on the west side of Boise and historically has been solidly Republican, though electing relatively moderate Republicans. Did redistricting create a district more open to Democrats than the area had been in the past?

The top line in 15 is that Republicans Fred Martin won the Senate seat (52.1%) and Mark Patterson won the House B seat (53.1%). But these contrasted sharply with Republican wins in the old, differently mapped District 15, where Republicans often won landslides and in the last decade never got closer than the 53.2% (in 2002). Precinct results show the two Democrats there, Betty Richardson and Steve Berch (respectively), won a batch of precincts in the middle of the district that could form a clear base for Democrats in future races. District 15 has emerged as a true battleground.

In 2010, the foremost battleground in Idaho was District 18. on the southeast side of Boise: Republican Mitch Toryanski won the Senate seat there by just 103 votes over Democrat Branden Durst, and in House A the Republican Julie Ellsworth beat Janie Ward-Engelking by just nine votes. It was hard-fought this time too, but not quite as close – and running in the other direction. Democrats Durst won with a margin of 1,496 votes, and Ward-Engelking by more than that, 2,259 votes. The trend line suggests 18 may be following the rest of Boise in a Democratic direction.

These are of course changes at the edges. As a while, the Gem State is as Republican as it ever was.

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