

Hawaii DINOs meet Idaho RINOs

James Weatherby/Lewiston Tribune

Pity Idaho's poor majority party fighting to keep its nominating process free from intruders: independents and unfriendly partisans.

Never mind that this highly successful party has dominated state politics for decades and that its opposition struggles to field credible candidates willing to run. Despite their seemingly powerful positions, party leaders often have limited say over who will be their general election candidates; that's left to the primary election voters who may or may not be well intentioned. In an open primary system, voters choose a party ballot without having to register a party affiliation. There is much speculation concerning the motivations of crossover primary voters (independents and members of another party). Some seek to nominate the weakest candidate, easy prey for their preferred general election candidate. Others vote for a candidate who is more compatible with their more centrist views. Either choice cancels out the vote of many of the hard-line party faithful.

Though it took a lawsuit in federal court against the state's chief election official to overrule legislation passed by a Republican legislature, GOP party activists won the day and successfully closed the Republican primary, reversing the open system in place since the 1970s. Forcing Republican stalwarts to affiliate with primary voters who refuse to affiliate with them is a violation of the U. S. Constitution's First Amendment right of association or, more relevantly, freedom of non-association, according to U.S. District Judge B. Lynn Winmill's 2011 ruling.

So why rehash the battle already won by Rod Beck and other Idaho GOP activists? Well, I'm not only writing about Beck and his allies, but also about his like-minded strange bedfellows: liberal Hawaii Democrats.

Just as the GOP activists in Idaho want bad-intentioned Democrats and free-thinking independents out of "their" nominating process, so do Democratic Party leaders in Hawaii, complaining about the rascal Republicans and fickle independents. Mirroring Idaho Republicans, Hawaii Democrats recently filed suit in U.S. District Court to keep the crossover undesirables from voting in their primary. And again, as in Idaho, many elected officials, Democrats in this case, opposed the lawsuit. According to Gov. Neil Abercrombie, who is a Democrat, "The Democrats have been inclusive, drawing strength from bringing together a diversity of people and perspectives."

But those in support of the lawsuit thought a closed primary would "ensure Democrats are elected at the primary stage by their fellow Democrats" and that the potential for crossover voting in the open primary weakened the party and made it more difficult for its views to be seriously considered.

Sound familiar? Different set of actors, same dialogue and same play!

In Idaho there's fear that the radical right, empowered by a closed primary, will overreach. And in Hawaii there are similar fears of the excesses of the radical left.

Closed primaries in states with a one-party system typically produce more extreme candidates - and it appears that's the goal of hard-core activists in both Idaho and Hawaii.

Activists expect their party platform, often driven by their ideology, to be supported by their elected officials and not ignored. They abhor the RINOs (Republicans in Name Only) or DINOs (Democrats in Name Only - I'm not sure they use this term in Hawaii, but maybe they should) who seem to be more concerned about reelection and/or dealing with the pedestrian details of governing than in maintaining partisan or ideological purity.

As Idaho and Hawaii activists have demonstrated, the struggle to assert partisan power is not the sole province of either Republicans or Democrats. Both struggle with what to do with independent or weakly affiliated voters. Both are concerned about the declining clout of their respective parties despite their long list of electoral victories, too many of which have not been translated into policy victories.

That both parties fight to control their candidate nominations should come as no surprise. The Progressives who championed the primary over "the smoke-filled rooms" of a century ago were largely anti-party and worked to develop a system that would empower the average voter and weaken the grip of party leaders on what is one of the most important decisions made in a democracy - the selection of a party nominee.

The fight over nominee selection processes never ends, and to a large extent that's understandable. Idaho has tried a whole variety of nominating systems. We've had conventions, closed primaries, then open primaries and now one closed primary in 2012. Were Idaho Republican politicians satisfied with the 2012 track record of their closed primary? We didn't hear a lot of objections from the winning candidates. But some GOP activists have tried to further narrow the process - unsuccessfully proposing central committee endorsements as a prerequisite for candidates running in their closed primary. Other Republicans, especially elected officials, want to revisit the closed primary that produced an abysmally low voter turnout and they still worry about excluding the growing numbers of independent voters.

What you see is not what you get in observing Idaho or Hawaii's politics. On one dimension, they're both one-party states. On another dimension, they are multi-party states featuring fiercely divided factions within the dominant party and minor parties struggling to be relevant.

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