

# Ysursa's successor can champion the voters

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Barely a week ago, Ben Ysursa announced his plan to retire when his term as Idaho secretary of state ends about 14 months from now.

And the list of would-be successors has already swelled to five:

- Former Idaho House Speaker Lawrence Denney, R-Midvale.
- Rep. Luke Malek, R-Coeur d'Alene.
- Former Sen. Mitch Toryanski, R-Boise.
- Phil McGrane, chief deputy clerk in Ada County.
- Sen. Marv Hagedorn, R-Meridian.

Denney is running; the others are considering the race.

But why all this interest in secretary of state?

Is it the salary of \$99,450 or the comfortable pension?

Is it a launching pad for political advancement?

Or do these people want to do the work?

Because here's the problem: Idahoans have stopped voting. Not all of them, of course. But a lot of them.

When Ronald Reagan ran for president in 1980, nearly 31 percent of Idaho's voting age population participated in the spring primary election. In November of that year, 69 percent of the eligible electors cast a ballot in the general election.

Fast forward to 2012: The percentage of voters who cast a ballot in last year's primary election dropped to 16.1 percent. Turnout for the general election also is trending down - to 57.6 percent in 2012's presidential election, but as low as 56 percent in 2000.

Part of that is culture. Americans across the country are less engaged in government of self-rule than their forebears.

Part of the fall off is by design. By closing their primary to all but registered Republicans, the Idaho GOP got what it desired - driving away voters it didn't want involved in nominating its candidates.

What will Idaho's next chief elections officer do about it? The candidate willing to embrace reform can transform the campaign into a referendum on the following:

- Pry Idaho's traditional open primary election free of the grip of the narrow-minded Tea Party fringe now ruling the Idaho Republican Party. A secretary of state who runs on that pledge could carry the mandate to both the party and the Legislature - and if they fail to reopen the primary to all voters, he can begin leading Idaho toward a top two primary. Political parties would detest a process whereby the top two vote recipients - regardless of affiliation - would advance to the general election in November. But the voters might be pleasantly surprised with the results.

At the very least, if the GOP insists on making the primary a private affair, the secretary of state should support having the party - not the taxpayer - cover its costs.

- Enable Idahoans to vote by mail. Now embraced in Oregon and Washington, vote by mail would remove all practical barriers to voting. Rather than taking time from work and standing in line on Election Day, Idahoans could study their ballot, the candidates and issues and make a thought-out choice in the comfort of their homes.
- Short of adopting vote by mail, at least make voting less difficult. For instance, why are elections held during the work week? Why not on weekends? Or how about establishing a holiday for elections? Idaho allows people to register at the polls, but how about enabling them to sign up when they renew their driver's licenses?

Safeguarding the integrity of the franchise is the secretary of state's primary responsibility. Idahoans have come to rely on the even-handed approach Ysursa and his predecessor, Pete T. Cenarrusa, brought to the job.

The candidate who runs and wins on these issues will have a mantle of credibility - not only to take his case to the Legislature but ultimately to the initiative process if lawmakers and party bosses refuse to comply.

By taking this stance now, he immediately establishes his independence from the partisans of his own party. Voters won't have to wait until a razor-thin election requires a recount or a party operative tries to skirt Idaho's Sunshine Law to find out if their secretary of state stands with them or with the party bosses. - M.T.