

Go Ahead. Make Rod Beck's day; get unaffiliated

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Before former state Sen. Rod Beck, R-Boise, weighed in, anybody who so desired could - within the privacy of the voting booth - participate in Idaho's GOP primary election.

Idaho voters liked the flexibility of participating in the party primary that, given the relative weakness of the Democratic Party, became Idaho's de facto election. But Beck, who had been having trouble winning election in the Republican primary, figured the pesky Democrats were fouling the works by crossing over. The candidates he preferred - rigid ideologues on the GOP's fringe - couldn't win nomination.

So he led a court battle to close the GOP primary to anyone unwilling to register as Republican.

He won. U.S. District Court Judge B. Lynn Winmill said the Idaho GOP could follow through on its plans.

Beck got what he wanted. A lot of you stayed home.

Idaho's 2012 primary saw voter turnout slump to a record low - 24.45 percent of registered voters and only 16.12 percent of the voting age population cast a ballot.

But you have one card to play. As a concession to the GOP moderates who opposed closing the primary, Beck's side agreed that people who were unaffiliated with any political party could register as Republicans at the polls and then vote in the party's primary.

According to Idaho's secretary of state, that category covers 439,471 people.

Another 240,728 signed up as Republicans.

That leaves 56,656 Democrats, 3,412 libertarians and 1,698 Constitution Party members who would be barred from voting in the primary.

Unless they opt to change their status to unaffiliated.

Here's the kicker - they have about a week to act. Friday is the deadline to file the Idaho Political Party Affiliation Declaration Form with your county clerk. More information is available at the secretary of state's webpage (www.sos.idaho.gov).

Friday also is Idaho's filing deadline. If you wait until all the candidates for office have signed up before deciding whether you want to preserve your option to vote in the GOP primary, you've waited too long.

On primary election day, you can decide for yourself whether to sign up and vote as a Republican. You can always turn around and once again declare yourself unaffiliated if the GOP label bothers you.

Plus the May 20 primary is Idaho's first mid-term election conducted under Beck's rules. It could be unlike anything in the recent past - a virtual GOP civil war.

Both establishment and insurgent wings have fielded tickets for the top spots, everything from the governor's office to the superintendent of public instruction. Every seat in the Legislature and many of the county courthouse offices also are up for grabs.

Some of these races are crowded. For example, four Republicans want to succeed outgoing Secretary of State Ben Ysursa. It's not inconceivable that someone will win these races with a third or even a little more than a quarter of the vote.

Just because it's cliche to say every vote counts doesn't make it less true - especially when fewer than 145,000 people participated in the last GOP primary. An influx of unaffiliated voters could make the difference between a slate of moderate or extreme GOP nominees - who more likely than not will go on to win office in the November general election.

A wave of voters changing their affiliation next week in order to influence the GOP primary in May is not what Beck had in mind.

Can you think of a better reason for doing just that?- M.T.