

Once again, Idaho bumps along the bottom tier

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon was the place where "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average."

With Idaho's elections, it's the same thing. It's an article of faith that Idaho's system is impeccably fair, free of taint and features a robust electorate.

Would you find it stunning to learn the Gem State's election process is lumped within the bottom tier?

The Pew Charitable Trust pored over 17 indicators in 2012 and ranked Idaho's system of collecting and counting ballots 46th among the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Mississippi came in last.

Idaho has slipped seven notches in four years and finds itself behind Nevada (fifth), Montana (11th), Washington (12th), Oregon (23rd), Utah (27th) and Wyoming (33rd).

Technology tells much of the story. Four years ago, only two states had online voter registration. That's now inching toward 20, but Idaho is not among them.

Neither has Idaho launched a post-election audit. In 30 states plus D.C., election officials compare a sample of ballots with the posted results to double-check the accuracy of their tabulation systems.

Some things Idaho does well.

On average, you have to wait about seven minutes in line to vote - the 14th best in the country.

The Gem State makes a concerted effort to get ballots to housebound voters. Only 13 percent of disabled or ill people told the census they had difficulty voting - the 16th best record in the U.S.

Because Idaho enables voters to register at the polls, it avoids the pitfalls of provisional ballots.

But there are some red flags.

For instance, more than 2 percent of Idahoans invalidated their presidential vote - either by voting twice or leaving the space blank. That's the third worst rate in the country and it suggests something has gone haywire in the ballot design or the voting technology. For instance, Pew cites several Idaho counties that continue to use outdated punch-card machines.

Nearly 14 percent of the military and overseas ballots are rejected, which leaves Idaho with a score of 44. Pew says that's enough of a concern that Idaho ought to get to the bottom of it.

When it comes to voter participation, Idaho is only so-so. Turnout is 61 percent, which puts Idaho in 24th place. Voter registration is 77 percent, good enough for 45th. At a time when Idaho's closed GOP primary has discouraged even more people from exercising their franchise, that's not a trend you'd welcome.

The timing of Pew's report couldn't be better. A five-decade tradition in the Idaho Secretary of State's office - begun by Pete T. Cenarrusa and continued by his successor Ben Ysursa - is coming to a close. Ysursa's retirement has prompted five people to seek the job of Idaho's election officer-in-chief.

Among them are four Republicans - former House Speaker Lawrence (Boss) Denney, R-Midvale; former state Sen. Evan Frasure, R-Pocatello; former Sen. Mitch Toryanski, R-Boise; and chief deputy Ada County Clerk Phil McGrane. The winner of their May 20 primary contest will face state Rep. Holli Woodings, D-Boise, in November.

If the people who want to run the election machinery have an idea or two about any of this, now would be a good time to speak up. - M.T.