

GOP's closed primary: Mission Accomplished - almost

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter nearly played out his string in Tuesday's GOP primary election.

Idahoans are simply getting tired of him.

His scandals.

His corporate cronyism.

His stalled economy.

His failed highway funding package.

His support of state schools Superintendent Tom Luna's heavy-handed public education overhaul package, which voters repealed at the polls two years ago.

Still, the incumbent had everything going for him in his quest for a third term: Confidence, organization, experience, poise and resources. His opponent, state Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian, had little money and a message that seemingly failed to resonate beyond his own narrow ideological band.

Yet, Otter's base - Ada, Canyon and Kootenai counties - deserted him. Clearly the people who knew Otter best - those who have been voting for him nonstop since 1986 as lieutenant governor, 1st District congressman and governor - liked him least.

Otter is far too flamboyant for Mormon-rich eastern Idaho's tastes. So why did the voters of the 2nd Congressional District all but rescue the governor, handing him the bulk of his narrow 51.4 percent statewide win?

Look to Congressman Mike Simpson's coattails. The 2nd District congressman waged a spirited campaign against Club for Growth-backed challenger Bryan Smith.

By mobilizing his slice of the party base, Simpson sent Smith and the Club for Growth packing with a 61.1 percent win. Once at the polls, Simpson's more moderate supporters hung in there for Otter.

But everywhere else where Otter performed poorly, the closed primary was beginning to work as planned. Apparatchiks were determined to drive away anyone not willing to register as a rock-ribbed member of their right-wing ideological brotherhood.

In four years, the number of Republicans nominating a governor or a member of Congress is down 5 percent.

When 8,000 moderate voters stay home, the far right gets a stronger hand. Not in all cases, certainly. Establishment figures such as Simpson or Attorney General Lawrence Wasden cruised to re-election.

But in the margins, especially if turnout ceded a disproportionate share of the field to the rank and file, a pattern began to take shape:

- In the Panhandle, right-wing challengers deposed Sen. John Goedde, R-Coeur d'Alene, and Reps. George Eskridge, R-Dover, and Ed Morse, R-Hayden. Sen. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint, had a close call. So did Rep. Luke Malek, R-Coeur d'Alene. Likewise, any attempt at going after conservative incumbents such as Sen. Bob Nonini, R-Coeur d'Alene, or Rep. Shannon McMillan, R-Silverton, were doomed.
- As the Tribune's William L. Spence noted Thursday, north central Idaho backed non-establishment candidates across the GOP ballot - from Fulcher to Idaho County Commissioner Jim Chmelik for lieutenant governor to Chris Troupis for attorney general.
- Virtually every establishment figure lined up behind deputy Ada County Clerk Phil McGrane and against former House Speaker Lawrence (Boss) Denney, R-Midvale, for secretary of state. But low voter turnout - compounded by the fact that 18,000 people passed on this race after voting for governor - meant Denney's solid core of 37 was just enough to cinch the nomination.

For the people who closed Idaho's GOP primary, it's not Mission Accomplished.

But it's getting there.

Ask Otter if you don't believe us. - M.T.