

Make any choice you'd like - as long as it's GOP

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

In the early 1990s, Idaho Democrats were at their zenith.

Led by Gov. Cecil D. Andrus, they held a majority on the state Land Board.

Half the state Senate and one-third of the House were in Democratic hands.

And the party held both of Idaho's seats in the U.S. House of Representatives.

All that was swept away by the 1994 GOP landslide - ushering in an era of one-party rule. At the time, three outcomes seemed inevitable.

Fighting among themselves, Republicans would move toward the right-wing fringe.

The incestuous relationship between politicians and corporations would evolve into corruption.

And as the pendulum swung back toward the political center, Idaho Democrats would rebound.

First prediction?

Right on schedule. As the GOP has taken Idaho further to the right, a Tea Party insurrection in the May 20 primary will determine if Republicans achieve even greater ideological purity.

Second forecast?

Bingo.

Under Republican control, Idaho has seen its private prison contractor, tax commission, transportation department and education program stung by revelations of insider deal-making and cronyism.

What happened to the third? The Democratic Party has resigned itself to controlling one-fifth of the state Senate and a slightly smaller share of the House.

Only three Democrats won major races - former Controller J.D. Williams, former Superintendent of Public Instruction Marilyn Howard and former 1st District Congressman Walt Minnick.

Democrats remain competitive in only a handful of counties - Latah, Nez Perce, Ada, Blaine and Bannock among them. Elsewhere, they frequently fail to recruit candidates and are usually shut out even when they do.

The post mortems lead to the usual suspects:

- Money - There is none. Right to Work sapped organized labor's strength. Watching one presidential candidate after another crater in Idaho has discouraged the national party from getting involved in Idaho, leaving locals to fend for themselves.
- Organization - After relying on Andrus and former Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho, the party failed to develop a bench of candidates who could succeed them.
- Message - Republicans have done a better job of defining Democrats as offshoots of the more liberal national party than have the Idaho Democrats themselves.
- Migration - The people who streamed into Idaho from California and elsewhere were more conservative than the folks already here. Even the once reliable north became a GOP stronghold.
- Polarization - Nothing helps Idaho Republicans more than a Democrat in the White House. So a state that had been ticket-splitters began voting the party line - going so far as to oppose a Democratic county clerk in order to send a message to President Barack Obama.

For Democrats, this must seem like playing Monopoly with the Republicans holding hotels on Park Place and Boardwalk. You might pass Go and collect \$200 here and there, but eventually, you're going to be wiped out.

And yet, there are some glimmers of change.

Two years ago, more Idahoans voted against GOP schools Superintendent Tom Luna's education overhaul than supported Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney.

As with the rest of the country, Idahoans are walking away from the social conservative prejudice against gays and lesbians. Seven Idaho cities - including Idaho Falls - have passed anti-discrimination ordinances because the GOP-dominated Legislature refused to act.

Ask around. Possibly nothing is more unpopular with Idahoans than the Idaho GOP's support for repealing the 17th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and taking away their right to vote for their own U.S. senator.

When or if any of that adds up to Idaho Democrats ever gaining a beachhead is anyone's guess. Perhaps the primary will deliver Republican nominees so flawed voters will defect to the Democratic alternative in November.

But until equilibrium is restored to Idaho politics, voters will have to settle for the choice next week's GOP primary election offers them - even if it's only between crazy and cronyism. - M.T.