

# Democrats take turn at exploiting GOP missteps

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Idaho Democrats emerged from their state convention at Moscow last weekend having accomplished everything they had set out to do.

The GOP implosion of a week earlier - no platform adopted, no officials elected and an ever-widening schism between its establishment and Tea Party wings - served as a perfect foil. Idaho's perpetual minority party demonstrated discipline and cohesiveness - leaving behind a party platform that was more aspirational than confrontational. After all, who could argue with "an economy that works for everyone," "a world class system of public education," "safe communities where families thrive" or "Democracy based on honesty"?

When Democrats took a stand, it was to secure equal rights based on sexual orientation and gender identity. They acknowledged climate change and stood up for reproductive rights. And Democrats made clear corporations would be expected to "contribute their fair share and operate responsibly."

But let's not get carried away.

No Idaho Democrat sits in a state or congressional office - and the party holds 20 percent of the Legislature by virtue of its pockets of support in Blaine, Latah, Nez Perce and Bannock counties and Boise's North End.

Marc Johnson, chief of staff to former Gov. Cecil D. Andrus, recently observed that Democrats win when the GOP falters.

It happened in 1956 when a young Frank Church ousted Sen. Herman Welker, R-Idaho, who had become too chummy with red-baiter Sen. Joseph McCarthy, R-Wis.

In 1970, Andrus bested Gov. Don Samuelson, who was in over his head.

Again, in 1984, a Democrat - Richard Stallings - prevailed in Idaho's 2nd Congressional District against a Republican incumbent, George V. Hansen, who had one foot in the federal penitentiary.

And in 1998, Democrat Marilyn Howard defeated state Superintendent of Public Instruction Anne Fox, who had stepped into one controversy after another.

The last such Democratic victory came in 2008, when Walt Minnick defeated 1st District Republican Congressman Bill Sali, a polarizing figure within his own party.

If history is going to repeat itself, here are some possibilities:

- Otter fatigue - Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter won renomination to a third term over Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian, by a mere 51.4 percent - and lost Idaho's three largest counties, Ada, Canyon and Kootenai. Nor is it the first time Otter has underwhelmed. Four years ago, an even weaker GOP field led by veterinarian Rex Rammell held Otter to less than 55 percent. In 2006, Democrat Jerry Brady kept Otter below 53 percent.
- The "Boss" - Is there an Idaho politician of the modern era carrying more baggage than the GOP's nominee for secretary of state, former House Speaker Lawrence (Boss) Denney? On his watch, ethics took a backseat to favoritism and the former speaker's penchant for partisanship hardly recommends him to succeed Ben Ysursa as Idaho's chief elections officer.
- Buyer's remorse - In 2006, Howard's chief deputy, Jana Jones, came within 11,158 votes of defeating Republican Tom Luna for state schools superintendent. Today, Luna is synonymous with the since-repealed laws that bear his stamp and an era of policy paralysis and polarization - while Jones probably hasn't lost a single vote she carried eight years ago.

One convention season does not rewrite the political map of Idaho. But Democrats can take this much from their gathering: They showed a desire to win.

The longer Republicans prefer to fight each other, the better the odds for an upset. - M.T.