

Idaho's voters look like the people they elect

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune Editorial Board

In Idaho, the richer you are, the more you count.

Likewise, the older you are, the more clout you have.

Why?

Because that's who votes in Idaho's elections.

No wonder the people elected to tend to Idaho's affairs have a blind spot when it comes to children, the poor and education.

For years, two trends have worked in tandem: While fewer Idahoans voted, more Republicans got elected.

Since 1980, turnout dropped from 69 percent to 57.6 percent in 2012. Meanwhile, Democrats have all but ceased to be a political force in Idaho. The GOP controls all statewide offices, all four congressional seats and 80 percent of the Legislature.

Here's one theory: More of the dropout voters are young, poor and less educated.

You could draw that picture courtesy of numbers unearthed by the University of Idaho's McClure Center and the UI Social Science Research Unit.

Tasked with surveying Idahoans' attitudes toward public transportation funding, the UI research team filtered for people who said they always or almost always voted - or at least infrequent voters who said they'd probably cast a ballot this November.

Here's the profile of Idaho's likely voters:

- Gray hairs - If you're 65 or older, you account for one of every seven Idahoans - but you control better than one of every five votes cast. In Idaho, one of every 10 people is between the ages of 18 and 24, but that group is good for only one of every 17 votes cast.

Is it any wonder Idaho's leaders cut higher education budgets and allowed college tuition to soar beyond the reach of Idaho families?

- Affluence - If you live in a household making more than \$75,000, consider yourself privileged. Only one in four Idahoans is that wealthy. But you cast one of every three votes.

If your household is at the bottom of the income scale, living on less than \$25,000, you also constitute one of every four Idahoans - but you cast only one in seven votes.

Could that explain why Idaho's elected leadership was stunned last year when the state ranked at the bottom or near bottom for per capita incomes and wages - and came close to leading the nation in the share of its workers earning the minimum wage?

- Schooling - Idaho is one of the most poorly educated states in the country. Only one in four working-age adults has a bachelor's degree, but they account for nearly half - 42 percent - of the votes cast. One of every 10 Idaho adults failed to complete high school, but that group makes up only one of every 50 voters.

Idaho now ranks dead last in the amount of money it spends on each child's education. It also has one of the lowest tax burdens in the country. Maybe it's only a coincidence that a disproportionately educated electorate has no sympathy for those without an education.

Maybe it's not.

Demographics is not necessarily destiny.

Women trend Democratic nationally. In Idaho, they slightly outvote men. But there has been no discernible tilt against the GOP.

And even if blue-collar voters returned to Idaho's politics in force, there's no guarantee they wouldn't back Republican cultural values over Democratic economics. That phenomenon has generated reams of speculation, most notably in Thomas Frank's "What's the Matter With Kansas?"

But let's find out. Why not follow the lead of Oregon and Washington by implementing vote by mail? If nothing else, you'd activate people who have dropped out of the system simply because they're so busy trying to survive that they have no time to stand in line on Election Day.

There's just one problem: The politicians elected under the current set of rules have nothing to gain by reforming them. - M.T.