

Voting Got Lost In Idaho's 2014 Election

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Just before Idaho voters went to the polls Nov. 4, Phil McGrane, the chief deputy Ada County clerk who almost became Idaho's next secretary of state, and Anthony Lock-Smith, the Ada County clerk's performance analyst, made a somber predication:

After all the campaigning, television advertising, direct mailing, handshaking and cajoling, only 40 percent of the state's voting-age population would go to the polls.

Turns out they were being optimistic.

Certified results show voting participation dropped to a modern low of 37.59 percent - breaking the previous record low of 40.21 percent for a midterm election set just four years ago. That translates into 12,000 fewer votes cast in a state where the population is growing.

For the last three decades, turnout for Idaho midterms has bounced along 40 to 50 percent. It reached its zenith of 56.7 percent in 1986. That was the year right to work was on the ballot as well as the race for governor between Democrat Cecil D. Andrus and Republican David Leroy and the U.S. Senate bid between Republican Steve Symms and Democrat John Evans.

"Abysmal" was how retiring Idaho Secretary of State Ben Ysursa described the turnout to the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell. "We broke through a barrier that we didn't want to break through."

Final numbers won't be available until January, but there's no reason to believe the thrust of the McGrane-Lock-Smith analysis won't hold up: The younger you are, the less often you vote. And you're not likely to pick up the voting bug as you age, buy a home, raise children and pay taxes. Only in the group 60 and older does a majority take the time to vote - which probably helps explain why Idaho elects one of the oldest, most conservative collection of politicians in the United States.

It varies a little by region. Turnout is lower in the Magic Valley, average in the Treasure Valley and the north - and highest in the mountainous, more remote communities of central Idaho.

How do you turn it around?

Making voting more convenient is one obvious answer. If people don't have the time to get to the polls, bring the polls to them. Washington's vote by mail system has boosted turnout in that state above its nadir in 1978 and 1990. Washington Secretary of State Kim Wyman's office told Russell turnout will exceed 40 percent in spite of the lack of competitive, statewide races.

If not vote by mail, at least consider McGrane's idea of setting up voting centers at key locations around town - something like a fireworks stand where voters could access their ballots at computerized terminals.

But let's face it: Election officials talk about convenience because it's something they can control.

What they can't do much about is deliberate and defiant nonvoting: The fellow who believes he can escape another civic obligation - jury duty - by keeping his name off the voting rolls. The woman who is so turned off by Idaho's non-competitive politics, negative campaigns and government scandals that she gives up in disgust. The people who believe the system is the problem.

Ysursa called it "a cycle of non-voting. We've got to reverse that trend. I don't know what the magic answer is - I've been trying for 40 years."

Forty years ago, it was impossible to imagine two-thirds of the people ceding control over their lives to the remaining one third.

Any idea what that picture will look like 40 years from now? - M.T.