

Cities are islands of blue in Idaho's red sea

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Cari Miller did more than claim Lewiston's open city council seat. She exceeded all expectations.

Miller came in first with 2,138 votes compared to 1,899 for Mayor Jim Kleeburg and 1,552 for Councilor Ged Randall.

Here's an even more telling number: Lewiston voters selected three councilors among five running at large. In other words, 72 percent of the 2,942 people who cast a ballot supported Miller, compared to 64.5 percent for Kleeburg and 52.7 percent for Randall.

Miller - who manages the Idaho Foodbank's North Central Branch - did all this by running as a decidedly left-of-center candidate whose platform spoke of caring for the disadvantaged.

"What I see in this city is people needing access to things they need to get through day-to-day survival," Miller told the Tribune's Joel Mills. "There are a lot of people who are one paycheck away from a food box."

Credit goes to Miller's campaign organization.

Preliminary campaign finance reports show Miller collected about \$3,329 - and that does not include an end-of-campaign \$1,000 contribution from the firefighters. That's more than her four opponents raised combined.

Miller's campaign also devoted considerable time making door-to-door swings through the Elks, Reno and Normal Hill neighborhoods.

But Miller's success is part of a larger story. Across Idaho Tuesday, Democrats trumped Republicans, moderates bested conservatives:

- The biggest victor of the night was Democrat Dave Bieter, who won an unprecedented fourth term as Boise mayor over Republican Judy Peavey-Derr, a former Ada County commissioner, with 68.8 percent of the vote.
- Coeur d'Alene voters turned thumbs down on two conservatives - incumbent Councilor Steve Adams, who lost to former Kootenai County Clerk Dan English, and Toby Schindelbeck, who failed to unseat Councilor Ron Edinger.
- The same thing happened in Idaho Falls, where moderate incumbent Councilor Tom Hally defeated Evan Bastow by 23 percent and John Radford outran conservative Dean Ellis by 11 percent.
- Boise voters agreed to tax themselves \$10 million during the next two years to help preserve open space and water quality. The property tax levy won by 74 percent.
- Sandpoint passed a 1 percent local option sales tax by 75 percent.

- McCall came within 61 votes of becoming the first city in Idaho to boost its minimum wage.

All of this comes on the heels of a growing number of Idaho cities - including Lewiston and Moscow - bypassing a recalcitrant Idaho Legislature by approving their own ordinances protecting gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people from discrimination on the job, in housing and in public accommodations.

Why do Idaho cities stand out in a state where every major office and 80 percent of the Legislature belongs to a Republican Party ready to wage civil war over who isn't conservative enough?

City elections, of course, are non-partisan. There are no Republican and Democratic labels.

Neither will you encounter many wedge issues - abortion, guns or gay marriage - in a city election.

But the city electorate itself is distinctive. Boise's legislative map is decidedly blue. Alone within the eastern corner of the state Idaho Falls supported the tribal gaming initiative. Lewiston and Moscow voters lean to the left of Nez Perce and Latah counties respectively.

No one is suggesting this portends a realignment of Idaho's politics anytime soon - although it does promise change on the margins. As the University of Idaho's James A. and Louise McClure Center for Public Policy noted last month, people are fleeing rural Idaho for opportunities in the cities, so urban centers will gain more political clout.

Winning at the city level also offers Idaho's fledgling Democrats at least a chance to nurture a bench of candidates who could seek higher office down the road.

Admittedly, that's the long view.

Idaho remains a huge red ocean - with islands that are becoming deeper shades of blue. - M.T.