

# Two months to go; where are the Democrats?

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Idaho Democrats have about two months to field candidates to challenge Sen. Mike Crapo and Congressmen Raul Labrador and Mike Simpson.

No names have emerged.

Expect to hear some grumbling about that.

After all, what is the point of running a political party if you can't offer the voters an alternative choice in the next election?

There's also the fact that the national Republican Party seems determined to blow up on the tarmac. Say Donald Trump emerges as the GOP's presidential nominee. Or it's Sen. Ted Cruz. Even if the ultimate nominee is a more centrist figure, he will preside over a Republican Party that is severely fractured and alienated from the vast majority of voters.

For Democrats, the opportunities seem undeniable. Idaho Republicans might stay home in November while the enthused Democratic base is mobilized. Sounds like a tempting possibility until you consider the following:

- It doesn't seem to matter what Idaho Democrats do. Work hard. Raise money. Campaign aggressively. Or serve as a placeholder and sit on their hands.

In an era of nationalized politics when voters will oust a county clerk to vent their anger with Barack Obama, Idaho Democrats usually wind up getting 40 percent of the vote or less.

- Even when Democrats find an independently wealthy candidate who can erase the GOP's traditional fundraising advantage by self-financing his campaign - such as former Ambassador Alan Blinken in the 2002 U.S. Senate race or Boise School Board member A.J. Balukoff in the 2014 gubernatorial contest - nothing changes. Blinken got 32.5 percent of the vote against former Sen. Larry Craig. Balukoff's challenge to Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter stalled out at 38.6 percent.
- Democrats win when they face a badly flawed Republican incumbent.

Such as Sen. Herman Welker, who lost to Democrat Frank Church in 1956.

Or Gov. Don Samuelson, who got beat by Democrat Cecil D. Andrus in 1970.

Or Congressman Bill Sali, who lost to Walt Minnick in 2008.

It's the exception to the rule, however. Crapo, Labrador and Simpson are anything but flawed or vulnerable.

So give Democratic Chairman Bert Marley points for being candid when he told the Idaho Statesman last week his priority will be the down-ticket races - courthouse and legislative campaigns.

"You'd have to be a pretty big optimist to say we're gonna beat Crapo, Labrador, Simpson," Marley said.

He's pledged to recruit challengers at the congressional level - although he hasn't got them, yet, and time is getting short.

Marley's strategy concedes the obvious: Focusing on the marquee races at the expense of marshaling resources at the local level has been a trap for Idaho Democrats. If he's going to break the cycle, Marley needs to begin building a bench of successful city, county and legislative candidates. More seats in the Statehouse translates into more influence for Democrats. They'll have something to trade. They can forge coalitions with moderate Republicans. And over time, as they build appeal with the voters, Democrats can broaden their reach into higher offices. The winner of a legislative seat today could be a credible statewide or congressional candidate a decade from now.

It's been done before. The last time Idaho Democrats startled the GOP, it was in 2006, when they ousted several veteran Boise Republican lawmakers and converted the city into an oasis of blue.

It could happen again. By closing its primary, the GOP has tied itself to people such as Rep. Heather Scott, R-Blanchard, and Sen. Vito Barbieri, R-Dalton Gardens - lawmakers who are out of step with the political mainstream.

Such a methodical approach to politics may not sit well with the Democratic faithful who still believe lightning can strike at the congressional level. But as Boise State University emeritus Professor Jim Weatherby puts it, Idaho Democrats have gone from being minority party to a minor party.

Something has to change.