

A freebie for the GOP - and no T-shirt for you

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

You'd be blind not to see how the Idaho Republican Party benefited from Tuesday's presidential primary.

But what did you receive in return?

Sure, Idaho Republicans got access to a ballot. But that's been the case dating back to 1976, when the state held a May presidential preference vote. That year, Republicans went for Ronald Reagan over President Gerald Ford; Democrats chose favorite son Sen. Frank Church over Jimmy Carter.

Over time, Idaho's perennial late primary came up short. By the time the Gem State cast its vote, the quest for the Republican and Democratic presidential nomination was over.

So first the Democrats and then - four years ago - the Republicans moved up the schedules by staging party caucuses in March with an eye toward influencing the selection.

The GOP had modest success in 2012. Three presidential candidates - Congressman Ron Paul, former Sen. Rick Santorum and frontrunner and former Gov. Mitt Romney - visited the Gem State and presumably took away at least some concept of what was on the minds of Idaho Republicans.

Romney won Idaho handily.

But parties self-finance their caucuses. As Kimberlee Kruesi of The Associated Press noted, the GOP found staging these sessions drained its bank accounts. The party that rules the Idaho Legislature sought and got its own presidential primary this year, at taxpayer expense.

Democrats, however, will hold a presidential preference caucus on March 22.

A second statewide primary for some congressional, legislative and local offices will be held May 17.

The cost to you is \$2 million, which - as Kruesi notes - frees the Idaho GOP to devote its own resources to fighting Democratic candidates in the fall campaign.

And what did you get for that?

Well, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz showed up this weekend, first in Coeur d'Alene and then Boise.

Florida Sen. Marco Rubio made several trips to Idaho - including his weekend stops at Idaho Falls and Boise.

Both - but especially Cruz - talked more than listened. They also spent a little money on television advertisements.

But the national frontrunner, Donald Trump, was nowhere to be found. In fact, Trump lavished no more attention on the Gem State than to inform "Good Morning America" viewers Tuesday: "I'm doing well in Idaho. I love their potatoes."

Just to make certain you got the message, Trump told supporters: "We have Idaho! We love Idaho potatoes, right? Who doesn't have potatoes from Idaho?"

Of course, he was speaking to a rally at Concord, N.C.

And Ohio Gov. John Kasich - who had Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's endorsement - hadn't set foot in Idaho for more than a year.

The visit worked for Cruz. Idaho gave him 45 percent and his only victory of the night. The win netted him 20 of

Idaho's 32 delegates.

It didn't work for Rubio, who came in third with 16 percent and left without any of Idaho's delegates.

Trump's 28 percent isn't necessarily small potatoes. He got 12 of Idaho's delegates in a night where he swept Michigan, Mississippi and Hawaii.

That's after making no effort at all to even consider what you had to tell him.

So don't be surprised if the poor Idaho taxpayer settles for a little gallows humor this week.

Here's a suggestion: "I gave the Idaho GOP a \$2 million freebie - and I didn't even get a lousy T-shirt." - M.T.