

Democrats acting a bit more feisty than usual

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

All things being equal, this should have been the year Idaho Democrats kept their heads down - or as political historian Randy Stapilus put it last week, "position themselves not to lose, or at least not lose badly."

Usually, that translates into a bunch of Democrats running as Republicans-lite - pro-business, pro-jobs, pro-economic development but just a little more supportive of education.

That's because presidential election years bring out Republican voters in spades - enough to swamp vulnerable Democrats in swing districts.

At the moment, one of those swing districts includes Nez Perce and Lewis counties, where House Minority Leader John Rusche is facing a rematch with Republican Mike Kingsley - after surviving a near-death experience two years ago by 48 votes.

In Boise, however, it was all Democratic counter-punch and Republican defensiveness.

In the Senate, Moscow's Dan Schmidt made expanding Medicaid coverage to 78,000 low-income working adults a personal crusade. He got the issue before a Senate committee hearing. He tried to force the Senate GOP majority to bring Medicaid coverage to the floor for a vote. He drew attention to the issue by first quitting his seat on the board that manages Idaho's Catastrophic Health Care program and then by canceling the state-sponsored health insurance policy he's entitled to receive as a legislator.

House Democrats refused to go along with a State Arts Commission budget, which exposed the lack of GOP support. Under the "Bedke Rule" - House Speaker Scott Bedke's insistence that any bill pass with at least 36 GOP votes - that wasn't supposed to happen. And it exposed Bedke's willingness to bottle up legitimate Democratic bills - such as Rusche's proposed Inspector General response to the GOP's private prison and wasteful Idaho Education Network scandals - while allowing an anti-Muslim measure a formal committee hearing.

House Democrats also staged an attempt to force the House to vote up or down on a minimum wage hike that had been buried in committee.

And why not?

Pollster Dan Jones found 70 percent support for a minimum-wage law, 61 percent support for Medicaid expansion and 67 percent for a bill the GOP refused to consider - protecting members of the LGBT community from discrimination on the job, in housing and in public accommodations.

Republicans, on the other hand, played it safe. They focused on an education budget virtually everyone could support, threw a few political bones to the base - Bibles in the classrooms, ending concealed weapons permits, blocking cities and counties from banning plastic bags or raising the minimum wage and passing symbolic anti-abortion bills - and sprinted toward an early adjournment.

Then came the real surprise. The GOP's lock on Idaho's four electoral votes notwithstanding, Democrats turned out in huge numbers - literally lining the streets of Boise, for instance - for the presidential caucuses and then delivering a blowout 78 percent for self-described socialist Sen. Bernie Sanders.

Such passion is hardly what you'd expect from the heretofore moribund Idaho Democratic Party.

So what are Idaho Democrats seeing?

- An Idaho GOP establishment that can't react to public demands for Medicaid expansion, human rights laws and raising the minimum wage without splitting itself open.
- A national party that is moving inexorably toward nominating Donald Trump for president - which even for Idaho may portend problems for down-ticket Republicans.

None of this is a substitute for recruiting quality candidates and then providing them with competitive campaigns.

But if Idaho Democrats expect to lose this year, they don't act like it. - M.T.