

GOP centrists learned how to win - and lose

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Said the practitioners of conventional wisdom on the eve of last week's Idaho primary election, you could count on this much:

Hard-right extremists from California had so overrun northern Idaho that the region's two remaining pragmatic Republicans - Sen. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint, and Rep. Luke Malek, R-Coeur d'Alene - were doomed to lame-duckhood.

Meanwhile, eastern Idaho's more traditional conservative voters would remain a bulwark against the radicals who occupied so many Republican legislative seats elsewhere in the state.

As it frequently does, conventional wisdom landed on its ear.

Keough and Malek won their contests convincingly.

Meanwhile, northern Idaho tossed out ultra-conservatives such as Rep. Kathleen Sims, R-Coeur d'Alene, Sen. Sheryl Nuxoll, R-Cottonwood, and Rep. Shannon McMillan, R-Silverton.

Even embattled centrist Sen. Abby Lee, R-Fruitland, hung on - albeit by a slim 28-vote margin.

But in eastern Idaho, it was just the reverse.

There, voters fired centrist Reps. Paul Romrell, R-St. Anthony, and Merrill Beyeler R-Leadore.

Far-right conservative Bryan Zollinger prevailed in the race to succeed retiring Rep. Linden Batemen, R-Idaho Falls.

Rep. Ron Nate, R-Rexburg, darling of the Idaho Freedom Foundation, held on to his seat in spite of being challenged by the scion of the Ricks family, Madison County GOP Chairman Doug Ricks.

Endorsements - whether the source was Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter or Freedom Foundation President Wayne Hoffman - didn't matter.

What happened? Jim Weatherby, Boise State University's emeritus professor, offered the best explanation Friday on Idaho Public Television's "Idaho Reports."

It's voter turnout, pure and simple. The higher the turnout, the better for moderates; the fewer the voters, the easier the victory for hard-right candidates.

That's because, to win the closed GOP primary election, centrist Republicans need the help of independents. But those voters are reluctant to affiliate as members of the GOP. They need to be coaxed to the polls.

So in northern Idaho, people who supported Keough and Malek launched a get-out-the-vote campaign:

- Turnout in Legislative District 1 was up nearly 15 percent over two years ago. Keough's margin over challenger Glenn Rohrer reached 849 votes - almost double what it was over challenger Danielle Ahrens two years ago.
- Turnout in Legislative District 4 increased nearly 17 percent. And Malek, who clung to a 180-vote margin two years ago won by 649 votes this time.
- In District 7, turnout expanded by 10 percent over 2014.
- Even the exception proves the rule. In District 9, Lee sat on a 742-vote cushion two years ago when voter turnout was 12.1 percent greater.

Just the reverse occurred in eastern Idaho.

Two years ago, 2nd District Congressman Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, was in the fight of his life against Club for Growth-backed challenger Bryan Smith. So it was Simpson's turn to whip up a massive get-out-the-vote effort.

Not only did Simpson win his re-election, but his voters stuck around to boost the prospects of other like-minded candidates. Notably among them was Otter, whose lead over GOP primary challenger Russ Fulcher in the 2nd Congressional District compensated for the governor's poor showing in the 1st Congressional District.

But Simpson faced no such challenge this year - and without his get-out-the-vote effort, Republican turnout in the 2nd Congressional District slid 18 percent. And the drop in turnout was bad news for many of the region's centrist Republican legislators:

- Two years ago, Bateman, running unopposed, collected 3,560 votes in the GOP primary. The two men running for his seat this year - collectively - received 23 percent fewer votes.
- Turnout in District 35, where Romrell lost, was down 8 percent.
- In District 8, where Beyeler was defeated, nearly 6 percent fewer voters showed up.
- And again, the exception proves the rule. Rep. Kelley Packer, R-McCammon, earned Hoffman's scorn by calling him out on the bias of his organization's legislative voting index. She survived - but a 6 percent slippage in voting turnout coincided with her margin dropping from 1,446 in 2012 to 608 votes this time.

All of which shows Idaho's beleaguered rational Republicans learned how to win in the hostile north - and they lost in the east only because they were caught snoozing.

Odds are they won't repeat that mistake in 2018. - M.T.

