

Idaho Debates plays it safe and forgets voters

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Two years ago, Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter pointed the proverbial gun to the heads of the people running the Idaho Debates.

Either allow everybody seeking the GOP nomination for governor on the stage, Otter extorted, or he would boycott the session.

On the Republican primary ballot that year were not only Otter's legitimate challenger, Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian, but two attention-seekers: Harley Brown of Boise, described by the Idaho Statesman as a man who engages in a "sour soup of racism, sexism and poor taste," and Walt Bayes, an anti-abortion rights zealot who Mother Jones magazine said "resembles a 19th-century gold prospector."

Neither Brown nor Bayes even approached meeting Idaho Public Television's threshold as candidates waging an active campaign - they lacked organization, resources and credibility. Otter's agenda was clear enough: The more television time Brown and Bayes ate up, the less time he'd have to defend his miserable record.

So public television faced a choice - put Brown and Bayes on stage or forfeit the one opportunity to have Otter debate Fulcher.

What emerged wasn't pretty - Brown and Bayes were a pair of oafs whose antics were more worthy of Comedy Central. Idaho Public Television got red-faced. But it made the right choice. The voters were served. If anyone should have been held responsible for the Brown-Bayes clown show, it was Otter - which may be one reason why the governor's renomination was tighter than it should have been.

Unfortunately, this year's Idaho Debates organizers - public television, the Idaho Press Club and the League of Women Voters - seem to have drawn the wrong lesson: Never again will the rules be waived. Never again will the debate managers risk being embarrassed and face ridicule from those who argue rules are there for a reason.

Which becomes a problem when the three Democratic candidates for Congress - 2nd Congressional District challenger Jennifer Martinez, 1st Congressional District candidate James Piotrowski and U.S. Senate hopeful Jerry Sturgill - broke rule No. 1.

In order to exclude fringe candidates, debate organizers sought a modicum of proof that the candidates were operating genuine campaigns. Candidates were to submit that information by Sept. 2.

For whatever reason - miscommunication, campaign staff upheaval or simple inattention to detail - all three Democrats blew the deadline.

Piotrowski and Sturgill sought a reprieve and submitted the required paperwork by Sept. 14.

Last week, a divided Idaho Debates committee refused - and settled on hosting one forum between Idaho Supreme Court candidates Robyn Brody and Curt McKenzie.

To do otherwise, committee members argued, would have required waiving the rules for two Constitution Party candidates who had failed to meet the viable campaign test - Senate candidate Ray J. Writz of Coeur d'Alene and Anthony Tomkins of Twin Falls, who is seeking the 2nd Congressional District.

So what?

How does it serve the greater good to allow U.S. Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, to go another six years without debating his Democratic opponent?

How does the public benefit by sparing Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, from appearing with his challenger?

Who gains if Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, is allowed to skip a round of debates?

There is no equivalent to the Idaho Debates.

For 30 years, incumbents who otherwise ignore their adversaries have found the time to appear on the Idaho Debates. Only a few officeholders - such as U.S. Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho - are arrogant enough to beg off.

It is the only forum that is broadcast live across the state. Any other debate will be limited to the media market in which it airs.

It is often the one time an underfunded and unknown challenger can gain an equal footing with an incumbent who otherwise can cruise to re-election on money, superior organization, the strength of the Republican brand and his own name recognition.

Come on. Only an organization stuck in a defensive crouch and becomes blind to its broader mission can make such a goofy decision. What's the point of having the Idaho Debates - warts and all - if you don't have debates?

Think of the voters.

Reconsider. - M.T.