

Idaho voter turnout hits historic heights

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune Donald Trump had the poorest showing in Idaho of any Republican presidential candidate in 20 years, but the angst and animosity of his hard-fought national campaign still drove voter turnout to historic levels.

That was bad news for down-ballot Democrats, who lost four legislative seats in part because of the high turnout - including three in north central Idaho.

Trump received 407,219 votes, or 59.2 percent, of Tuesday's general election results. That was down from 420,911 votes and 64.5 percent cast for Mitt Romney in 2012, and was the lowest percentage for any Republican presidential candidate in Idaho since Bob Dole garnered 52.2 percent in 1996.

Support for Democratic challenger Hillary Clinton was equally subdued. She received just 27.6 percent of the Gem State vote, equaling Al Gore's performance in the 2000 election and well below the 32.6 percent President Barack Obama received in 2012, or the 36.1 percent he captured in 2008.

Nevertheless, while enthusiasm for Trump or Clinton may not have driven people to the polls, overall interest in the presidential campaign sparked a surge in voter registration and led to a record 688,255 ballots being cast for all presidential candidates combined.

The final turnout percentage won't be known for some time because of Election Day registrations, but it could exceed 80 percent - something that's only happened once since 1980.

That high turnout was at least a contributing factor in the four losses Idaho Democrats suffered in state legislative races in Moscow, Lewiston and Pocatello.

"I think we had a good game plan. I looked at it again this morning and we actually came in 1,000 votes over what I thought we needed, but turnout was huge," said Sen. Dan Schmidt, D-Moscow, who lost his 5th Legislative District re-election bid to Republican challenger Dan Foreman.

The 5th District includes Benewah and Latah counties. Voter turnout in Latah County hit 86.7 percent, up from 69.7 percent in 2012.

Nez Perce County saw a similar jump: Turnout topped 88.4 percent this year, compared to 73.8 percent during the last presidential election.

"I figured turnout would be 75 to 80 percent," said House Minority Leader John Rusche, who lost his 6th Legislative District seat to Lewiston businessman Mike Kingsley by 3,130 votes.

A 10 percent increase in voter turnout equals about 1,900 votes, so turnout alone wasn't the whole story, Rusche noted. However, when combined with anger at Congress and national-level concerns, it proved to be too steep a hurdle to overcome.

"When I was knocking on doors, the first thing people wanted to talk about was the presidential race and why Congress doesn't work," Rusche said. "But it could also be that, after 12 years, I've worn out my welcome. People in the district were clearly ready for change."

Foreman said frustration with status-quo politics factored into Trump's defeat of Clinton and likely spilled over to his race as well, helping him defeat Schmidt by just 327 votes.

"I got the impression people were fed up with business as usual," he said. "Then along comes a guy who says, 'I'm upset, too.' They liked the sincerity; I think that got me enough votes to survive."

Foreman, an unabashed conservative, took his message into the heart of Moscow, feeling if he could win votes there he could prevail throughout the district.

"I knew we had Benewah County and rural Latah County, but Moscow was in question," he said. "So my wife and I did a lot of door-to-door campaigning. I felt I owed people that; it was important to me that they understood my message. I told them what I honestly believe, and let the chips fall where they may."

Rep. Caroline Troy, R-Genesee, also did a lot of door-knocking during her 5th District House B race, driving an average of 1,000 miles per week around the district. She also signed and mailed more than 6,000 letters and made about 400 personal phone calls.

"It's a ground game," she said of campaigning. "I had great volunteers, but the general better be out there on the ground with them. I tried to make it as personal as I could."

Even with all the hard work, though, she expected a close election - something along the lines of Foreman's 327-vote victory. So she was quite pleased to receive 50 percent of the vote, compared to 39 percent for Moscow Democrat Laurene Sorensen and 11 percent for St. Maries independent Ken De Vries.

"The turnout was amazing," Troy said. "I think everyone expected it to be up, but nobody imagined this. I heard Payette County actually ran out of ballots."

Tim Hurst, chief elections officer with the Idaho Secretary of State's Office, said Payette County wasn't alone in coming up short.

"They ran out of ballots by 1 p.m.," he said. "They got more printed, so everyone was able to vote. Other counties ran out as well, but were able to duplicate ballots. Most ordered enough for about 90 percent of the registered vote total, but it was up to the individual county clerks to decide."

Turnout in Ada County, the most populous county in Idaho, hit 88.1 percent, up from 73.2 percent in 2012. Canyon County topped 87.5 percent, compared to 72.1 percent four years ago.

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