

Do Idahoans truly want what they voted for?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho just hit the electoral jackpot. Too bad the Gem State doesn't play the game any better than it does.

As a rural state, Idaho enjoys two advantages. Its 1.6 million people have the same two seats in the U.S. Senate as do the 39 million residents of California. And that edge bleeds over into the Electoral College.

States such as Idaho banded together - along with some of the rust-belt including Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania - to hand the White House to Donald Trump in spite of the fact that Hillary Clinton's lead in the popular vote is now at 2.8 million and growing.

All of which prompted Steven Johnson to muse in the Dec. 3 New York Times about the irony of rural states hewing to the Tea Party ideal of being under-represented and overtaxed.

Under-represented?

"The right way to think about the political conflict in this country is not red states versus blue state, but red country versus blue city," Johnson wrote. "And yet we are voting in a system explicitly designed to tip the scales toward the countryside."

Overtaxed?

Not really. The politically disenfranchised urban blue states subsidize the empowered red states. As the Tax Foundation computed it, California gets 78 cents back in federal revenue for every \$1 it sends back to Washington, D.C. New Jersey gets only 61 cents back.

The same goes for this region's blue states - Washington gets 88 cents back while Oregon receives 93 cents for every \$1 in federal tax paid.

And Idaho?

That bastion of self-reliance?

The home of rugged individualism?

The citadel of pulling yourself up by the bootstraps?

In 2005 - the last year in the Tax Foundation report - Idaho got \$1.21 back for every \$1 it paid in federal taxes.

And the federal support has been higher - as much as \$1.39 in 1989, when Idaho was the sixth most subsidized state in the union.

It's not as if Idaho is a hotbed of federal employment - such as Virginia.

Instead, it's a poor state - so it doesn't pay a lot of federal income taxes - with a lot of needs.

It's the only place outside of the Deep South running a minimum-wage economy. At \$36,734, Idaho's per capita income falls below 47 states and the District of Columbia.

That's why Idaho relies on food stamps to augment the wages of its working poor.

That's why so many of its children depend upon the State Children's Health Insurance Program.

A poor, sprawling state such as Idaho can't afford to maintain its roads and bridges; it draws upon the generosity of federal highway funds.

Someone has to prop up rural Idaho public education and counties with Secure Rural Schools and Payment in Lieu of Taxes.

Idahoans like to complain about the heavy hand of the federal landlord. But study after study makes it clear they'd either go broke trying to manage those acres - or wind up selling them off to the highest private bidders.

Who is going to pay for subsidies to Idaho's farmers?

But Idahoans didn't vote to keep the money flowing in. They responded to campaigns that promised fewer taxes, less government and a balanced budget.

Presumably, that's going mean that the good people of California, New Jersey, Oregon and even Washington are going to keep more of their money at home instead of sending it to Idaho.

Meanwhile, low-wage Idahoans will have even less to get by with. Their children may not get the medical attention they need. Schools and counties will have to scrimp more. Highways and bridges will get less maintenance and become more congested. And farmers will be at the mercy of a hostile climate and unfriendly markets.

Unless, of course, Idaho's anti-government Legislature decides to boost state taxes just to balance the books.

But you can hardly blame the blue states for giving Idahoans exactly what they voted for. - M.T.