

Nez Perce County no longer a blue island

William L Spence/Lewiston Tribune

When 105 Idaho lawmakers take the oath of office in Boise today, it will mark the first time since 2002 that Nez Perce County hasn't had at least one Democrat representing it in the Legislature.

That doesn't seem like very long, but it's actually just the third Republican sweep in the past 90 years.

House Minority Leader John Rusche served 12 years in the Statehouse before losing to businessman Mike Kingsley in the November election. He was the latest in a long line of Lewiston Democrats to represent Nez Perce County, joining the likes of Bruce Sweeney and Mike Mitchell.

Sweeney served two terms in the Idaho House in the 1970s, followed by eight terms in the Senate, from 1983 to 1998. Mitchell, who also served as chief of staff for Gov. Cecil Andrus, had a legislative career that spanned five decades; he first served in the House from 1969 to '70, then moved to the Senate from 1971 to '82, before returning to the House for two more terms from 2003 to '06.

Between the three of them, Mitchell, Rusche and Sweeney gave Nez Perce County a strong Democratic voice in Boise in all but four of the past 48 years.

Those four years began with the 1998 election, when Sweeney retired. He was the last Democratic senator to represent the district. Joe Stegner won the open seat, joining fellow Lewiston Republican Rep. Frank Bruneel and Rep. Dan Mader, R-Genesee.

According to news reports at the time, the '98 election was the first time since 1926 that the district containing Nez Perce County had an all-Republican delegation.

Mader became the first Republican in 26 years to win a House seat in the district when he defeated incumbent Deanna Vickers in 1992. Bruneel joined him in 1994, but both seats went back to the Democrats in 2002. Mader chose not to run for re-election that year; Democrat Mike Naccarato won his open seat, while Mitchell defeated Bruneel.

Democrats maintained their hold on the House for the next 14 years. Prior to this year, Republicans had only won twice - once in 2010, when Jeff Nasset defeated Liz Chavez; and again in 2012, when Nasset ran unsuccessfully for the Senate and Thyra Stevenson won his open seat.

Stevenson lost to Democrat Dan Rudolph after one term, but returns to the House today, joining Kingsley and Sen. Dan Johnson, R-Lewiston.

Looked at in isolation, the Republican sweep could be seen as a short-term aberration. It could also be viewed as the latest step in the long-term Democratic decline throughout north central Idaho.

In 1990, for example, Democrats held all three seats in the 6th Legislative District, which included Nez Perce County, as well as the adjacent 7th District in Idaho, Clearwater and Lewis counties. Democrats also held all three seats in the overlying 8th District, which represented Latah, Nez Perce, Idaho, Clearwater and Lewis counties.

The only Republican legislators in the entire region were Reps. James "Doc" Lucas and House Speaker Tom Boyd, R-Genesee, who both represented the 5th Legislative District in Latah County.

That's a total of 10 Democrats in 12 legislative seats. A quarter-century later, the formerly solid-blue 6th and 7th districts have turned blood red and the only Democrat left in all of northern Idaho is 5th District Rep. Paulette Jordan, D-Plummer.

House Assistant Majority Leader Brent Crane, R-Nampa, suggested Democrats give some thought to "how far off base" their values are with Idaho voters.

"I think the election results show they have a lot of work to do," he said. "Voters are excited about the Republican agenda, which is about personal responsibility, liberty and jobs. The Democratic message is more government, more regulation and increased taxation."

That's not necessarily how an Idaho Democrat would phrase it, but the description certainly applies to national Democrats - and until Idaho voters see a distinction between the two, their fates will be interlinked.

"I remember coming through northern Idaho in the '90s and they were all Democrats," Crane recalled. "Then President Clinton came in and his environmental policies decimated the economy. Those folks haven't forgotten."

Rusche said this year's election results "show the Idaho Democratic brand is structured by what people see on the nightly news, not by what happens with Democrats in the Legislature."

"For every effort we make to re-brand ourselves, Republicans try to tie us to the national Democrats and paint us with that brush," he said. "But we'll continue to try and find good candidates with knowledge and skill sets and a strong history of community involvement."

For now, though, it's up to Republicans to deliver on the change voters asked for.

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