Reports of Nez Perce Democrats' demise premature

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune
In the aftermath of the drubbing they took last month, Nez Perce County Democrats are walking around with the proverbial tombstones in their eyes.

If their county was no longer an island of blue in Idaho's red political sea, at least they thought it could swing either way - depending on the breaks.

But even the Republicans are a little bewildered. Winning in Nez Perce County takes work - usually. This year, it looks like the GOP would have prevailed if it had stayed home and watched "Jeopardy" on TV.

As the Tribune's William L. Spence noted earlier this month, the county elected an all-Republican legislative delegation for the first time in 16 years.

Sen. Dan Johnson, R-Lewiston, ran unopposed.

In the contested House races, the margins were devastating. Rep. Mike Kingsley, R-Lewiston, defeated former Rep. John Rusche, D-Lewiston, by 2,412 votes in Nez Perce County and boosted his 6th Legislative District margin with another 718 votes in Lewis County.

Rep. Thyra Stevenson, R-Lewiston, outpaced Lewiston City Councilor Bob Blakey by 1,743 votes in Nez Perce County and then racked up another 713-vote margin in Lewis County.

As bad as that was, here's what had Democrats whistling past the political graveyard - Democrat Justin Coleman's undervote in Nez Perce County.

Unopposed in his bid to become prosecutor, Coleman collected 13,430 votes - which means 1,826 of the people who voted for the unopposed Johnson took a pass voting for a Democrat. Had a Republican run for the spot, he probably would have been the county's next prosecutor.

This is not a case of a surge of inactive Republicans coming out of nowhere on election day. Roughly the same number of people voted in this presidential election as the last one - 17,792 last month vs. 17,267 four years ago.

But this was the year of the "Trump bump."

Nez Perce County flocked to Donald Trump in a way it did not for Mitt Romney. Trump collected 10,699 votes last month, compared to 9,967 for Romney four years ago.

Moreover, Hillary Clinton proved to be a downright toxic candidate. She collected 4,828 votes from Nez Perce County - or 1,623 fewer than Barack Obama received in 2012.

And once voters picked a side at the top of the ticket, they tended to vote the party line.

All of which has some Democrats dreading a decade-long drought for their candidates in a Nez Perce County transformed into a Republican stronghold as reliably red as Kootenai or Canyon counties.

Hold up making the self-fulfilling prophesies for a moment.

In Idaho, Democrats tend to make up ground in the mid-terms - primarily because many of the same Republicans who vote en masse during the presidential years stay home two years later.

For instance, 2012, the last mid-term, Democratic gubernatorial challenger A.J. Balukoff came within 227 votes of taking Nez Perce County from Republican incumbent C.L. "Butch" Otter. Rusche outran Kingsley and former Rep. Dan Rudolph, D-Lewiston, ousted Stevenson - albeit narrowly.

Two years from now, the path for local Democrats may still be difficult - especially if they can't effectively recruit candidates. But they will be free from the drag of a Clinton candidacy or an Obama White House.

Meanwhile, Idaho Republicans may have to run on their own records - for a change.

So wait until then before consigning Nez Perce County to the solid red column. For all we know, 2016 was just a momentary hiccup. - M.T.