

Paths upward

Randy Stapilus/Ridenbaugh Press

The allegations by Idaho state Representative Heather Scott that female legislators get ahead at the Statehouse by exchange of sexual favors has continued to go viral. Last week, the speed may have slowed with her apology to the House.

Scott in any event was wrong: Her contention has never been the path to advancement for female legislators in Idaho, or I suspect many other legislatures. I've never heard evidence of a specific Idaho case or even a rumor of one. Affairs between legislators? That's nothing new (though the headlines about it are a new wrinkle). Back in the 70s the reporter corps would occasionally snicker at lawmaker couples who thought they were undiscovered but weren't. But those activities usually have held legislators back more than advanced them.

There's also been talk that the pulling of committee assignments from Scott had to do with her ideology.

Nonsense. Ideology hasn't been a blocking point for legislators past, or present.

Asked about moving on up, Representative Stephen Hartgen said, "I've been here almost 10 years. People get ahead here on the basis of merit, in my humble opinion. I've never seen anything that would cause me to question that premise."

Well ... Sometimes legislators do become influential on specific subjects (say, the budget, or health care, or water law) when they have a strong expertise in it. But influence at the legislature usually comes down to other things. In this cynical era, when the darkest possible explanation often is the most easily believed, a quick look at what does yield Idaho legislative influence seems in order.

Seniority, probably foremost. Most committee chairs (which generally are important posts) usually go to the senior member of the majority party who doesn't already have another chairmanship or leadership post, or (sometimes) isn't on the budget committee. Seniority weighs heavily on the committees.

Personality does matter, and so do personal relationships. The legislature is a little "in-a-bubble" society. Legislators learn who they can trust and who they can't, who will come through in a tough spot and who might cave, and who is essentially decent and fair-minded and who could use a little more of those qualities. There are plenty of personal friendships in the legislature, and that can affect a lot of votes. Legislators who develop strong friendships easily can be important in the legislature, whatever their other qualities. A vote for someone to lead the caucus often comes down to those kind of personality factors: Who am I comfortable with, and who can I trust?

Sometimes the flip side can apply as well: Committee spots and other goodies sometimes have been said to be horse-traded in return for leadership votes. So a skillful deal-maker can advance as well.

What kind of group are you in? Is it large enough to have decisive influence? Democratic legislators are, in their two caucuses, part of small groups, and so often have little

influence. If the majority Republicans are split, however, the Democrats' unified caucuses can matter. The same goes for the various factions within the Republican caucuses, some of them based on personalities or backgrounds (veteran watchers still recall "Sirloin row" in the Senate) and some based around issues or ideology.

Many a veteran legislator has remarked on how the legislature is a study in people. If someone rises toward the top, or is slapped down, look there first for the explanation.

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