

When political parties lose, Idaho voters win

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Want to fix what ails Idaho politics?

Take power away from the political parties.

And hand it over to the voters.

That's the idea behind Washington's top two primary, which empowers the voters to decide which two candidates - Republicans, Democrats or independents - advance to general election in November.

And it's the inspiration behind a top two primary bill sponsored by Sen. Grant Burgoyne, D-Boise.

Washington's top two primary was a reaction to a court ruling invalidating its wide-open blanket primary - which allowed voters to skip across the ballot. They could vote in the GOP contest for governor and then flip over the Democratic contest for the Senate.

When Washington's party bosses prevailed in court, top two primary advocates took to the ballot with a successful initiative campaign.

Burgoyne's idea is a reaction to the state's GOP successfully expelling anyone from its primary who wasn't willing to affiliate as a Republican.

Dire predictions that the hyper-partisan wing that dominates the GOP primary would eradicate its more pragmatic elected leaders - deemed Republicans in Name Only - have not come to pass.

Yet.

But in a one-party state, the GOP nomination is tantamount to being elected. So roughly 120,000 Idaho Republican primary voters impose their choices upon 710,000 general election voters, who essentially ratify the results the following November.

Burgoyne's bill liberates the voters. Nobody would be required to declare a party affiliation in order to vote in the primary.

Likewise, anyone - Republican, Democrat, Libertarian or independent - gets the same shot at winning a space on the general election ballot. Those candidates are free to have their party affiliation listed on the top two primary ballot - or not.

That kind of an approach favors moderate Republicans. Finishing second in the primary is good enough to survive until November, when a broader and more diverse electorate makes the final call.

All of which would take enormous pressure off people such as Sen. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint, or even 2nd District Congressman Mike Simpson - who are more popular with the general electorate than the ideologues within their own party.

But it's hard to see how this does Burgoyne's own party much good. It's been more than a generation since Idaho's Democrats held the governor's chair or even a sizeable number of legislative seats.

A top two primary would seem to consign Democrats to permanent minority status.

Across last spring's primary ballot, Democrats ranked no better than third place in three Senate races and 15 House seats - to say nothing of another Senate seat and a dozen House races where no Democrat filed for office.

Had Idaho operated a top two primary in its last round of campaigns for statewide offices in 2014, the subsequent fall campaign would have been mostly an all-Republican affair:

- Democrat A.J. Balukoff would not have appeared on the November election ballot. In the primary, Balukoff came in a distant third behind incumbent C.L. "Butch" Otter and Republican challenger Russ Fulcher.
- Democrat Bert Marley would have been eliminated from the contest for lieutenant governor because former Idaho County Commissioner Jim Chmelik ran second to incumbent Brad Little.
- The race for secretary of state would have featured former House Speaker Lawrence "Boss" Denney and Republican Phil McGrane, who came in second, not Democrat Holli Woodings. In the primary vote, she came in fifth.
- In the fall campaign for superintendent of public instruction, Sherri Ybarra would have faced No. 2 Republican Randy Jensen instead of Democrat Jana Jones - whose tally trailed all four GOP candidates.
- The same goes for Attorney General Lawrence Wasden, who would have faced Tea Party challenger Christ Troupis instead of Democrat Bruce Bistline.
- No Democrat filed against Controller Brandon Woolf, who would have faced off against his GOP challenger Todd Hatfield in November

The one exception was state Treasurer Ron Crane, who would have faced Democrat Deborah Silver in the general election.

To Burgoyne's credit, he's not deterred. He says it's up to his party to find a way to reach Idaho voters again.

He's right. The way Idaho nominates and essentially elects its leadership is askew. If you help voters by opening the primary election, how can that not improve the state's political culture? - M.T.