

Idahoans may forgive casual voting; will GOP?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Odds are most Idahoans won't give gubernatorial hopeful Tommy Ahlquist a bad time for his casual voting habit.

After all, who among them is going to be the first to cast stones?

As Kimberlee Kruesi of The Associated Press reported earlier this week, Ahlquist was the most infrequent voter among the four men seeking the GOP nomination for governor in next May's primary election.

The results show:

- Lt. Gov. Brad Little voted in 29 elections since 1998.
- Former state Senate Republican Caucus Chairman Russ Fulcher of Meridian participated in 24 elections since 2000.
- Congressman Raul Labrador cast a ballot in 21 elections since 2000.
- By contrast, Ahlquist voted 11 times since 2000, which means he showed up for general elections - including presidential and mid-terms - but for only one primary cycle, the last one.

And his decision to vote that year occurred just as rumors about his intended entry into Republican politics began to surface.

That's far from the indifferent voter state schools Superintendent Sherri Ybarra proved to be before making her bid for political office in 2014. Ybarra missed voting in 15 of 17 elections since moving to Mountain Home in 1996.

Instead, it turns out Ahlquist was your typical voter. That puts him in good company.

Most voters will show up in November. If it's a mid-term, at least half of the registered voters will cast a ballot; in a presidential year, the turnout can go as high as 77 percent.

The spring primary election is an entirely different story. You'll see anywhere from one-quarter to one-third of Idaho's registered voters participate in that election, even though in a one-party state, it tends to be the decisive political contest.

It should come as no surprise that Little, Fulcher and Labrador have been heavily engaged in both primary and general election politics. After all, they've been on the ballot in many of those elections. Ahlquist, a physician and developer, has been on the outside looking in on the political process.

"As a doctor and a builder, Tommy has spent his entire adult life working to help the injured, heal the sick, strengthen Idaho's communities, and missed some elections in the process, which he regrets, but his commitment to his community has never wavered," said campaign manager David Johnston.

Saying your guy was too busy to vote may not be the most tactful way to explain it. But for Ahlquist, the issue is not how the average Idaho voter responds to all of this.

Ahlquist now is running in a GOP primary the party faithful closed to all but registered Republicans since 2012. Prior to that change, anyone who registered could vote in the GOP primary, the Democratic primary or stick to the nonpartisan judicial elections - and no one was the wiser.

Under the new rules, the GOP's faithful can track who has signed up as a Republican to vote in their primary. It's a matter of public record.

For instance, you can identify prominent Democrats who elected to vote in the other side's elections. Back in 2012, it turned out Kermit Kiebert - who served nearly eight terms as a Democratic state senator from the Panhandle - went through the formalities of declaring his allegiance to the GOP - albeit temporarily - in order to have a voice in the GOP primary.

Kiebert's supposed defection made a headline.

Now the reverse is emerging with Ahlquist - who stayed out of the primary process until he registered as a Republican to vote in the March 2, 2016, Idaho presidential primary. Then on May 17, he cast a Republican ballot in the primary election that covered all state, judicial and county offices.

That Ahlquist waited that long to sign up as a Republican - plus the fact that he contributed \$5,000 to 2014 Democratic gubernatorial candidate A.J. Balukoff - may paint him as too independent for the comparatively smaller group of partisans who will decide his fate come next spring.

In other words, the closed GOP primary is working just as its architects intended. - M.T.