

# Kemp takes a long shot from half-court

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**Marty Trilhaase**

Jana Kemp has left the Idaho Republican primary election behind.

By declaring herself an independent candidate for governor, the former one-term Ada County legislator is betting many of her fellow Republicans will do the same.

It's a long shot. Unorthodox challenges typically spring from the right, not the center. But year after year, Idahoans tell pollsters their top priorities are education, the economy and the environment. That puts them out of step with a Republican governor and legislators who cut school budgets, have few economic development ideas beyond cutting corporate taxes and believe the only good wolf is a dead one.

Since 1994, the Republican supermajority has owned Idaho, making the GOP primary in the spring the decisive election. Few voters participate in those contests. Those who do tend to be conservative activists. Over time, these partisans have taken their party and state government increasingly to the right - and they intend to drift even farther in that direction by closing the primary to all but registered Republicans.

In that setting, a moderate like Kemp has no hope. So she's running an insurgency in the general election, presumably against Gov. Butch Otter who has not formally announced whether he'll seek another term.

Consider her logic:

I GOP dominance at the polls is showing signs of wear. When Dirk Kempthorne first ran for governor in 1998, he carried 68 percent. That margin dropped to 56 percent when he ran for re-election in 2002. Four years later, even in the midst of an economic boom and after his party delivered property tax relief, Otter won office only by 52.7 percent.

I Democrats have picked up a handful of House seats, mostly by defeating Republicans in Boise.

I Last year, Walt Minnick became Idaho's first Democratic congressman since 1994.

Only one in four Idahoans consider themselves Democratic. So if Democrats are winning elections, they're attracting disaffected Republicans.

What's likely to resonate with Idaho voters? Otter's record of cutting public school budgets and dealing ineffectively with the Legislature? Or a moderate who sees education as a key to economic competitiveness in this young century? During her single term earlier in this decade, Kemp broke with Republican leadership on issues such as high school reform and openness in government.

The smart money says Kemp gets thumped next year, especially if the Idaho GOP rides the coattails of a nationalized referendum on Barack Obama and the Democratic Congress.

But what else does the Idaho GOP offer these voters? Suppose moderate Republicans and independents seize on Kemp's candidacy as a protest vote. Even if she doesn't prevail, winning a percentage large enough to embarrass the Republican establishment would change the conversation.

This is unusual terrain for a moderate. But if you're a center-right voter who feels alienated from the Republican Party, what else can you do? -M.T.