

Presidential caucus causing confusion: To have a say in November, people must participate in March 6 or April 14 caucuses

By **William L. Spence** of the Lewiston Tribune

BOISE - Idaho Republican Party officials may be happy with how the new presidential caucus is playing out, but at the local level it's causing more confusion than joy.

The main point people need to understand is this: If they want to vote for a presidential candidate before November, they have to participate in the March 6 Republican caucus or the April 14 Democratic caucus.

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Unlike previous years, the names of presidential candidates will no longer be included on the May primary ballots.

Consequently, unaffiliated or independent voters will no longer have even a symbolic say in who the nominee should be. Nor will anyone who can't attend the caucus in person, since absentee ballots aren't accepted.

The new system stems from a decision by Idaho Republicans to move their presidential nomination process up from May to Super Tuesday, when almost 20 percent of the delegates needed to win the Republican nomination will be up for grabs.

"It used to be, with the May primary, the nominee was already chosen," said Idaho Republican Party Executive Director Jonathan Parker. "We wanted to have a say. That was the number one reason we moved the primary to March - and it appears to be working."

The 10 states that caucus on Super Tuesday will award 434 delegates in the Republican presidential race. Idaho will award 32 of those.

As a result, the four main Republican contenders all made campaign stops in Idaho in the past week or two, something Parker said was unprecedented.

Ron Paul spoke in Moscow Feb. 17, making him the first presidential candidate to visit north central Idaho in more than 30 years. He also stopped in Twin Falls and Boise.

Rick Santorum visited Coeur d'Alene and Boise, while Mitt Romney held a fundraiser and rally in Boise. Newt Gingrich was in Coeur d'Alene Thursday.

The May primary will still take place, but it will only select congressional, legislative and local candidates. Legislation removing the presidential candidate names from the May ballot was approved in the Senate on a narrow 17-16 vote Thursday.

Senate Majority Leader Bart Davis, R-Idaho Falls, cast a protest vote, saying he objects to the "exclusionary" nature of the caucus.

"My parents likely won't be able to vote, because they have an assignment from our church that night,"

he said. "Our military won't be able to participate. Many of you (legislators) won't be able to participate. In Idaho, we've always had a process where we invited everyone to participate. I find value in that. As a result, I want for at least a brief moment on the floor of the Idaho Senate to say I disagree with the process of disenfranchisement because we want to have presidential candidates come to Idaho."

Latah County Republican Chairman Walter Steed said the new system is confusing to local voters.

"The big mystery is whether five or 500 people will show up," Steed said. "We're finding that even politically astute people have no clue how it works."

In Latah County, the party is going out of its way to make the caucus convenient for voters. It has four locations where people can attend, whereas most counties only have one location.

The procedures for the March 6 caucus include:

- * Only registered Republicans will be allowed to vote; people can register at the event, but there may be lines.
- * Participants must bring a photo ID and sign in to vote.
- * Each county will hold its own caucus, with the voting scheduled to begin at 7 p.m.
- * Voting will proceed in rounds, by secret ballot. After each round, the candidate with the fewest votes and any candidate with less than 15 percent of the votes will drop off. The rounds continue until one candidate receives more than 50 percent of the votes.

The caucus only applies to the presidential nomination. The primary election for congressional, state and local races will be held May 15.

Locations for the county caucus events in north central Idaho:

Clearwater County - To be announced (see www.idaho-republican-caucus.com for updated information)

Idaho County - Grangeville Elementary School

Latah County - Moscow Junior High Field House, Princeton Community Center, Troy High School, Kendrick Fire Hall

Lewis County - Kamiah American Legion Hall

Nez Perce County - Lewiston Community Center