

# OPINION: Idaho wobbles its way toward more imbalance

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Idaho's primary is two months away. The general election is eight months off.

Yet the just-closed candidate filing all but completes the Idaho Republican Party's purge of its moderates in the state Senate. Conservative excess once restrained by pragmatism will find its fullest expression yet in the 2013 Idaho Legislature.

The only question now is who - if anyone - will rise to check it.

For some time, the Idaho House has been a hotbed of right-wing radicalism, irresponsibly passing bills it knew - or counted on - the Senate would reject. If the U.S. Constitution could not discipline the House against attempts to defy the federal health reform act, the Senate could. If House members insisted upon enabling college students to carry concealed pistols into classrooms, dormitories and sporting events, the Senate would play the grown-up and say no. And if the House persisted in raiding the state treasury in the name of tax cuts for a few, the Senate would resist.

Little by little, however, the moderate majority in the Senate eroded. It may have no more than a two- - or even one- - vote margin.

That's about to change.

The Senate is losing a handful of moderates to retirement. Among them are Joyce Broadsword, R-Sagle, and John Andreason, R-Boise. Scandal-plagued Sen. John McGee's departure also was a loss for the moderate wing.

Redistricting-inspired races pitting moderate against conservative incumbents may cost others, such as Tim Corder, R-Mountain Home.

Several House conservatives seem headed toward the Senate - among them Bob Nonini, R-Coeur d'Alene, Marv Hagedorn, R-Meridian, and Robert Schaefer, R-Nampa.

If things go right for them, conservatives could hold a five-seat margin in the Senate.

Meanwhile, the House is losing some of its senior moderate members - Tax Committee Chairman Dennis Lake, R-Blackfoot, Moscow's Tom Trail, Leon Smith of Twin Falls, Mack Shirley of Rexburg and Bert Stevenson of Rupert.

So who's going to stop this crew from:

- Expanding tax cuts even as public schools remain \$100 million short of recovering pre-crash resources?
- Bashing the federal government and veering toward an even more extreme application of the 10th Amendment?
- Pursuing social legislation that assaults reproductive rights and the separation of church and state?
- Imposing public school vouchers?
- Ignoring discrimination against gays and lesbians?
- Refusing to pass binding ethics reform, continuing Idaho's slide into cronyism and corruption?

Maybe serendipity will rescue us. Before Republicans acquired a veto-proof majority over then-Democratic Gov. John Evans in the 1980s, they often passed bills knowing they'd never become law. Once Evans' veto got neutralized, many of those bills never returned. So it's possible conservative legislators will become chastened by their newfound responsibility.

Or it could be Idaho's perennial minority party. Democrats fielded candidates in 25 of Idaho's 35 Senate seats and 56 of Idaho's 70 House races - a big improvement over past years. At least most voters will have a choice in November.

Perhaps it will be Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter. While he shares the ideology of the House, Otter, on occasion, has demonstrated some restraint. Case in point was his veto of a much-diluted nullification bill that reached his desk last year. He'll have more opportunities.

Possibly it could be the courts. A conservative legislative majority cannot eviscerate *Roe vs. Wade*. If the U.S. Supreme Court overturns California's Proposition 8, conservative Idaho lawmakers may find themselves implementing gay marriage. Should the Legislature continue to undermine education funding, it will run afoul of a state constitutional mandate to provide uniform and thorough public schools.

Or even the people. When lawmakers refused to act, Idahoans modernized their Fish and Game Department through a 1938 ballot measure. Voters insisted upon politicians declaring their sources of campaign cash through the 1974 Sunshine Initiative. In the next decade, they required state lawmakers to give homeowners a break on property taxes.

Wait too long to enact ethics reforms, continue to seal off access to GOP primary elections, fail to bring Idaho's sales tax into the Internet era and lawmakers may well see ordinary citizens pass their own laws at the ballot box.

Two decades of one-party rule by an increasingly ideological GOP has taken Idaho off balance. Only time - and the Idaho voter - will determine when and how that balance is restored. - M.T.