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Voters shut out

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Marty Trillhaase |

JEERS ... to former state Senate Majority Leader Rod Beck, R- Boise. Beck was the loudest voice to push for closing his party's primary election.

He did so despite the fact that the Idaho Republican Party dominates congressional, statewide and legislative offices.



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He did so in spite of widespread opposition from his party's own elected leaders.

He persisted in the face of overwhelming public opposition to changing Idaho's traditionally open primary.

When the GOP party faithful followed Beck into a courtroom, they secured a ruling ordering the primary closed. Said the courts: The party had a right of association, and if it didn't want moderates, independents and, perhaps, a few mischievous Democrats adulterating its candidate nominations, they could be purged.

And you got to pay for it all. The party of small government stuck Idaho taxpayers with the legal bills - a cool \$100,000.

By all accounts, Idaho's already abysmal voter participation rates plummeted even further. People didn't like broadcasting their party affiliation. Some feared it would undermine their professional standing. Among those was former Idaho GOP Chairman - and now U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals Judge - Randy Smith.

Secretary of State Ben Ysursua says 23 percent of registered voters cast ballots Tuesday - the worst showing ever.

In Nez Perce County, turnout slumped to 17.9 percent, down from 20.2 percent two years ago.

But for all that work discouraging ordinary Idahoans from exercising their franchise, what did Beck and his cronies accomplish?

Did they purge RINOs - Republicans in Name Only - from the public office?

Hardly.

The man they'd most like to beat, Congressman Mike Simpson, actually had a better night in Tuesday's closed primary - he drew 70 percent of the vote against right-wing challenger Chick Heilesen. Two years ago, Simpson got only 58.3 percent in a four-way race also featuring Heilesen as his main opponent.

And where was this wave of vanquished GOP legislators under siege from right-wing challengers?:

- Sen. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint, dispatched Tea Party acolyte Daneille Ahrens. Rep. George Eskridge, R-Dover, also defeated challenger Pam Stout.
- House GOP Caucus Chairman Ken Roberts, R-Donnelly, took 45 percent in a three-way race, despite the opposition of his own House speaker and majority leader.
- Sen. Patti Ann Lodge, R-Huston, and Rep. Christy Perry, R-Nampa, won solid victories against candidates who accused them of being too ideologically soft.
- So did budget committee Co-chairman Dean Cameron, R-Rupert, Sen. John Tippetts, R-Montpelier, and Rep. Dell Raybould, R-Rexburg.

Closed or open, the GOP primary yielded the same result. Incumbents prevailed because they're in lockstep with the mainstream of their own party. Which is a lot more than Beck and his allies can say at the moment.

JEERS ... to Idaho GOP Chairman Norm Semanko. Along with Beck, Semanko championed closing his party's primary to anyone who wouldn't sign on as a member of the Republican Party.

Tuesday's numbers showed voter participation going off a cliff. But rather than admit a mistake, Semanko went into a defensive crouch - and started shopping around for different numbers.

Not the 167,366 people who cast a vote for Congress this year. That's down 9 percent from two years ago.

Nor the Republican congressional vote of 144,772. That's nearly 36,000 votes short of two years ago.

No, to turn his political lemon into a triumph, the GOP's generalissimo reached all the way back to 2008 to find a lower turnout - 126,573 votes cast for GOP congressional candidates - to put a little rouge on this year's anemic tally.

"The increase in the number of Republican voters in the two congressional races demonstrates the excitement and enthusiasm that exists about our prospects for making Barack Obama a one-term president," Semanko said.

Nice tap dancing, Norm, but four years ago, neither Republican Congressmen Bill Sali nor Mike Simpson faced any kind of a credible primary opponent. There was little to draw people to the polls.

Besides, nobody was actively turning them away. That's not a claim Semanko can make this time around.

CHEERS ... Idaho's 2nd Legislative District. Voters evicted tax scofflaw and public timber thief Phil Hart from the Idaho House. Hart lost by only 238 votes. But nearly 69 percent of the people - split among three Hart opponents - fired a man who refused to pay his taxes and then hid behind his public office.

Voters didn't reject Hart's ideology. His allies won. Sen. Steve Vick, R-Dalton Gardens, carried nearly 62 percent. Rep. Vito Barbieri, R-Dalton Gardens, got 57 percent. They just didn't like his behavior.

JEERS ... to Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho. Last week, he joined fellow Idaho Republican Mike Crapo and more than two dozen senators to urge House-Senate conferees to extend funding for the Secure Rural Schools and Payment in Lieu of Taxes programs.

So far, so good.

Both programs are vital to Idaho's rural counties, where so much of the land is federally owned and therefore tax exempt. Idaho County, for example, receives about \$8.4 million from SRS and \$1.5 million from PILT.

But unlike Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho - who opposes extending PILT and SRS as budget-busters - Risch wants it both ways.

He supports authorizing SRS and PILT under the Senate transportation bill. But when the entire Senate transportation package comes up, Risch declares it too expensive and votes no.

Risch is for SRS and PILT and against federal deficits.

Pore over the names of senators who signed the letter. You'll find only two - Risch and Utah's Mike Lee - who cherry-picked. Crapo missed the vote but says he also would have opposed it. Everyone else stood up for SRS and PILT when it counted. - M.T.

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