

Wondering what's the matter with Idaho?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

About a decade ago, author Thomas Frank chronicled how low-income Kansans consistently voted against their own economic self-interests by electing Republicans who looked out for the wealthy.

He called his book: "What's the Matter with Kansas?"

He might consider applying his analysis to the Gem State. Earlier this week, with the government shut down and a debt ceiling crisis looming, Idahoans were telling the state's congressional delegation to keep it up.

The margin was running two to one in favor of fiscal brinkmanship.

How can that make sense when the shutdown hurts Idaho more than most places? WalletHub.com, a financial social network, ranked the states in terms of shutdown damage. On the list are the usual suspects - heavy, government-laden economies such as the District of Columbia, Virginia and Maryland.

But Idaho comes in ninth, well ahead of its neighbors, including Utah and Nevada.

In large part, it reflects Idaho's relative poverty. With its per capita income second lowest only to Mississippi and its average weekly wages trailing only Puerto Rico, Idaho needs every federal dollar it can get.

When the spigot closes off, ordinary people get pinched. Here, according to

WalletHub, is how:

- Government contracts - Idaho takes in \$2.4 billion, ranking it ninth per capita. Many of those employees - notably thousands at the Idaho National Laboratory near Idaho Falls - face unpaid furloughs.
- Small businesses - With so many small firms, Idaho generated \$1.15 billion in small business loans - the eighth highest amount per capita. When the Small Business Administration is shuttered and the Internal Revenue Service lacks staff to verify income, many loan applications get stalled.

IVeterans - Idaho has 138,000 vets, ranking it 11th per capita. The government shutdown means new applications for services are held up.

- Federal employees - Idaho has more than 10,000, ranking it 23rd per capita. Many of them have been deemed non-essential and sent home.

- Real estate - Construction and the buying and selling of real estate account for 15.5 percent of Idaho's gross state product. That's the 17th highest ranking in the country. When government agencies can't process loans, Idaho's economy suffers more than elsewhere.

Even if you're not a furloughed federal employee or work for a federal contractor, odds are you know someone who does. If nothing else, you're part of the collateral economic damage.

How could Idahoans be so disconnected from their economic reality? How can they encourage their elected officials in Washington to continue hurting them?

When Caller No. 1 tells her congressman: "Don't cave in to the Democrats," what does she really mean?

Translation: Second to last isn't good enough for you? Let's go for broke. Literally.

Caller No. 2: "Obamacare is the worst thing in the world. Worse than communism. Worse than socialism. It's a disaster."

Translation: Keep your socialist fingers off my Medicare.

Caller No. 3: "House Speaker John Boehner is a centrist, establishment RINO. I don't trust him."

Translation: I loathe the Republican Party almost as much as I hate my government.

Caller No. 4: "This talk about a shutdown and federal default is all hype."

Translation: Whatever news I don't get from Fox, I pick up from Rush Limbaugh.

Caller No. 5: "That Sen. Ted Cruz has got it right. He's a breath of fresh air. He's with the party activists."

Translation: Michele Bachmann? Sarah Palin? Raul Labrador? Too tame for me.

Just what is the matter with Idaho?

How much time have you got? - M.T.