

Idaho Dems leader says time is ripe for party

Chairman predicting solid gains in wake of Republican flubs

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

The newly elected chairman of the Idaho Democrats thinks his party is poised to pick up additional seats in the Legislature and contend for statewide office over the next few years.

Former Pocatello lawmaker Bert Marley was elected to the party's top spot earlier this month, replacing Larry Kenck, who resigned for health reasons.

Marley, 67, said Idaho Democrats are at a "tipping point" as Idaho voters look for alternatives to the recent scandals and missteps coming from the state's Republican majority.

"I really think we're trending in the right direction," he said. "A lot of Idahoans identify as independents, rather than Republican, and I think we're going to start seeing more of them lean towards Democrats."

That positive outlook isn't readily apparent from recent election results. It's been 55 years since Democrats held a majority in the Idaho House or Senate. The party currently holds 21 seats - out of 105 total - and no Democrat has held statewide office since Marilyn Howard was elected Superintendent of Public Instruction in 2002.

And to a large degree, the Republican dominance is coming essentially by default. In the 2014 election cycle, for example, Democrats failed to field candidates in 46 legislative races. They lost another 38 contested races by an average margin of 66 percent to 34 percent.

Nevertheless, Marley sees hope even in these underdog results.

"You have to look at it from a different perspective," he said.

Despite another "Republican wave" nationwide - when the party secured a majority in the U.S. Senate and added to its majority in the House - Marley noted that Idaho Democrats actually picked up a seat.

"The last time we had a Republican wave, in 2010, we lost five seats," he said. "This time we protected the seats we had and gained one. We did better than they did. So if Republicans want to think I'm delusional (about the positive trend), then I'm tickled - because we're coming."

Marley, a retired educator, served two terms in the Idaho House and three terms in the Senate from 1998 to 2006. He later ran unsuccessfully for state superintendent of public instruction and lost the lieutenant governor's race to incumbent Brad Little last year by 30 percentage points.

While Republicans have been successful in casting Democrats as the party of big government and big spending, Marley thinks the party's core values are shared by most Idahoans.

"We believe in education, number one. That's a huge core value for us," he said. "Jobs and minimum wage, maintaining roads and bridges, access to health care, protecting public lands - if you just put those values on paper and don't tell people where they come from, I think most would look at them and say they agree."

Since Republicans "can't compete with us on the core values," he said, they resort to scare tactics, such as telling voters Democrats "want to take your guns away."

"They have a culture of fear," Marley said of Republicans. "We offer a culture of hope. We believe we can provide health care, grow the economy and make lives better."

The first step toward achieving those results, he said, is to elect more Democrats to public office. Fielding candidates in every available race, however, "isn't our first priority, or even our second or third priority."

"Just filing for races isn't going to help us move the ball forward," Marley said. "Our focus will be on races where we have a chance to win. We have to work in areas where voters are willing to look at and compare candidates."

The state party has a strategic plan for improving its electoral chances. Although Marley wasn't willing to discuss details, he said he expects to see continued growth in the next two election cycles.

"I think we'll pick up seats in the Legislature and be successful in a statewide race," he said.

The filing period for the 2016 elections runs from Feb. 29 to March 11.

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