

# Where safety lies

**By Randy Stapilus/Ridenbaugh Press**

Some weeks ago I chatted with several leading Idaho Democrats who supported Hillary Clinton for president. Asked why they preferred the former secretary of state over Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, the core of the answer was that Sanders would be too risky a nominee.

Meaning: He's viewed as a left-wing extremist, and the "socialist" label would be death in, at least, Idaho. Clinton, in relative terms, was the more centrist and therefore "safer" choice. So far as I can tell, this was the prevailing view across most of the Idaho Democratic leadership.

Nationally, the odds favor Clinton winning the nomination over Sanders. But in the light of last week's caucuses let's revisit the subject of Sanders and Idaho. In those meetings, where turnout busted historical records, Sanders demolished Clinton, with 78 percent of the vote (and he won every county save for the smallish Lewis). And the same day in Utah, which bears some demographic similarity to southern Idaho, Sanders did even better.

That's not the general electorate, of course, only participants in the Democratic meetings. But their unusually large size (for caucuses) coupled with the overwhelming result surely carries a message.

Many of the caucus meetings were much larger than expected, and many participants waited in long lines – four to five hours in Boise – to participate. The actual process often took more hours still, vastly unlike the normal duck-in-duck-out voting in primary and general elections. (A lot of Democrats have complained about the caucus procedures, which also excluded many who wanted to vote but, for illness, employment or other reasons, could not get to the sites on time.)

Consider too: These were public votes, not secret ballots. When Idaho Republicans cast ballots in their recent primary, no one ever saw who you supported. At the Democratic caucuses, you had to publicly endorse your candidate. If you were going to support that New York-accented Democratic socialist from Vermont, as nearly four out of five Idaho Democrats did, in the face of opposition not only from the majority Republicans in the county all around you but also most of the state's Democratic leadership as well, you were doing it as publicly as if you'd taken out a display ad in the newspaper. More: You had to look those people in the eye.

That may not be so big a deal in Latah County or Blaine County, or in Boise. But think about those Democrats in Madison County – which has been called, with justification, the most Republican county in the nation – and in Cassia, Franklin, Lemhi, or Payette. The culture in these counties, in nearly all of Idaho, is overwhelmingly conservative and Republican. Local Democrats most typically keep their heads down. But in significant numbers, in support of a candidate labeled as far-left and "socialist," they were visible last week.

One astonished Magic Valley woman commented at her caucus, “Hey, 140 people in Jerome. I am not alone.” What they did took serious fortitude. (As it would if you were a Republican caucusing for, say, Ted Cruz in an overwhelming liberal Democratic locale.)

What does this imply for politics in Idaho and beyond?

Maybe, maybe, that something is changing in Idaho. It may indicate that there are plenty of Democratic sympathizers out there, unorganized (“unchurched”?) who have little in common with most of the state’s Democratic establishment. Many Idaho Democrats for years have tried to position themselves not to lose, or at least lose badly, and shaped their message to mesh at least partly with that of the Republicans. Maybe these Democrats out there, and possibly others as well, are signaling now they would be more responsive to something else.

After the caucuses, state Democratic Chair Bert Marley, a superdelegate to the national convention with an unbound vote, said he would vote there for Sanders. That may be a first step to one of the most useful things leading Idaho Democrats could do in the months ahead: Make contact with these super-determined caucus goers, and find out what’s motivating them. In many respects these people seem to be the new majority among Democrats in Idaho, and maybe elsewhere.

-----

Randy Stapilus is a former Idaho newspaper reporter and editor, blogs at [www.ridenbaugh.com](http://www.ridenbaugh.com). He can be reached at [stapilus@ridenbaugh.com](mailto:stapilus@ridenbaugh.com). A book of his Idaho columns from the past decade, *Crossing the Snake*, is available at [www.ridenbaughpress.com/crossing](http://www.ridenbaughpress.com/crossing).