

# Missing the debates

**Randy Stapilus/Ridenbaugh Press**

When Republican Senator Mike Crapo was last up for election, and was overwhelmingly favored for a re-election he easily won in a landslide, he showed a little vulnerability at one point.

That was amidst his debate with Democrat Tom Sullivan, who lobbed one tough debate point after another at Crapo. In Idaho terms it was not out of bounds but was pungent. What went on inside Crapo's mind only he knows, but he looked to be steaming, furious, and he didn't come across well. If the race with Sullivan had been close, it might have been seriously up for grabs after that debate.

Crapo's first Senate debate, in 1998, was a different matter. There, his sparring with Democratic Boise attorney Bill Mauk was no less intense than the 2010 model. But it also was so high-minded, so intelligently geared to ideas and issues that people spoke of it afterwards in terms of being Idaho's version of a Lincoln-Douglas debate. It may be the best joint debate performance I've ever seen in Idaho. One of the things it accomplished was this: Whether you were a Republican or a Democrat, you got your side of the case made solidly by those two candidates.

Today, if you're an Idaho Republican, you may not feel as if you need your side of the case explained: Unless the state this year takes an abrupt left turn from what it's done for the last quarter-century, it will vote down the line Republican, mostly if not entirely in landslides. Still, absent some kind of formalized debate – and Idaho's debate structure is better formalized than some states have – there's no explanation for it. An unchallenged position can become a mindless one.

But if you're an Idaho Democrat, when you heard that the state's three Democratic candidates for Congress – Jerry Sturgill for the Senate and James Piotrowski and Jennifer Martinez for the House – all missed the filing deadline for the debates, you probably were appalled. The phrase “political malpractice” circulated around Democratic circles, and for good reason.

For Democrats, the debates are not only the best place during campaign season they have to make their own case, and the best place to criticize the Republicans, they're also the one singular spot where they're on a playing field with Republicans that's level. Differences in money, in organization, in incumbency, in interest groups – none of it matters.

In a debate, there's just two candidates saying their piece. It's the most dramatic point in a campaign: Two antagonists going head to head. The presidential debate on Monday will get a big audience for that reason. The Idaho debates could draw a decent audience too, in Idaho terms. They still have the potential to change a few minds.

How it happened that all three Democratic congressional candidates missed the deadline for filing is unclear. The Idaho Debates organization, which includes people from Idaho Public Television, the League of Women Voters and the Idaho Press Club, for years have been the organizers of the state's only statewide debate series; the filings they require are intended among other things to show that the candidates involved are running serious campaigns.

The Democratic candidates and the state party were, at this writing, trying to put together another debate series through some other media outlets. Whether they can get the media support and the Republicans to go along is another question.

Incumbents generally would just as soon pass on debates if they can; it's probably the most stressful single point along the way for a strongly-favored incumbent, as the current Idaho three are.

But they could pick up some points for participating. And it would keep them in practice for when the next closer call comes around. In the larger picture, everyone gets something useful out of campaign debates, even if it's sometimes just an uncomfortable look in the mirror. Or sometimes, a stretch into stronger thinking and communicating.

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