

More of the same

Randy Stapilus/Ridenbaugh Press

For the last generation of general election days, in Idaho, if it's breathing and Republican, it gets piles of votes.

This year even more than usual. By some measures, this was the most Republican general election in Idaho since 2000. And that's saying a lot.

Donald Trump did very well, obviously, nationally, but his just-short-of-landslide in Idaho (59.3%) was striking. Considering how decisively he lost the Republican primary a few months ago, and how much significant parts of Idaho society (notably many members of the LDS Church) disliked him, he exceeded expectations. Evan McMullin, who only a few weeks ago seemed to be exciting a lot of interest in eastern Idaho and talked a lot more like traditional Republicans (Mitt Romney, say) do, could manage only 6.7%. His problems may have been various, but crucially he didn't have the R behind his name.

The legislature, already one of the most Republican in the nation, moved further in that direction, which barely seemed possible. The long-time House Democratic leader, John Rusche of Lewiston, lost (it wasn't even close, a margin of more than 3,000 votes) – should Lewiston now be accounted as a Republican city, period? - along with one of the few Democratic state senators, Dan Schmidt of Moscow.

That means in the whole of Idaho north of Boise, just one Democratic legislator is left. She is Paulette Jordan, representing the Moscow-based district, and she won this time by fewer than 300 votes. She'll be targeted next cycle.

Among Republican legislators, the most controversial probably was Heather Scott, known for her alt-right leanings, whose followers were said to have engaged in harassment of her political opposition. Scott won with 62.5%, just a little shy of the average for Republican legislative candidates throughout the north in "contested" races.

A couple of strong campaigns by Democrats to break through in Twin Falls were smacked down, rolled under Republican landslides.

The picture differed in only a few places.

The city of Boise remained Democratic-leaning, its Democratic legislators re-elected easily. But the west Boise district 15, which has been on the edge between the two parties, remained just out of Democratic reach. It's still distinctly purple territory (the Republican legislators won there with just 56.3%, 50.8% and 56.2%), but tinged on the red side.

And District 26, the central Idaho district anchored by Sun Valley and Ketchum but surrounded by more conservative farming areas, remained the most competitive region in Idaho. It is one of the few legislative districts split by parties (two Democrats, one Republican), all three of whom won with less than 60% of the vote.

The district centered on the city of Pocatello, district 29 (Idaho State University is located there), traditionally has been the lone Democratic stronghold in eastern Idaho. It's a stronghold no more;

Democrat Mark Nye, running for the Senate, was held to 48.1%, and he might have lost but for the incursion of a Libertarian in the race. The other House seat, which Nye had held, went to Republican Dustin Manwaring. The other Democratic representative there, veteran Elaine Smith, was unchallenged this year, but don't expect that to repeat next time. This district shows the signs of flipping Republican.

Actual competitive politics in Idaho has boiled down to one or maybe two legislative districts, out of 35.

Talk about species on the verge of extinction.

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