

Can the Sanders surge revive Idaho Democrats?

Marty Trillhaase, Lewiston Tribune When 18,000 Bernie Sanders supporters swamped Idaho's Democratic presidential caucuses more than a year ago, it raised these questions:

Was the outpouring of political energy going to be momentary or transformative? Would the thousands of people who waited in lines stay involved? Where was the commitment behind this movement?

To find out, you won't have to wait too much longer.

As the Tribune's William L. Spence observed Friday, the dearth of Democratic candidates for major state and congressional offices almost suggests next year's general election campaign ended before it even began.

Three Republicans want to succeed retiring Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, including Congressman Raul Labrador, Lt. Gov. Brad Little and Boise developer Tommy Ahlquist. So far, the only Democrat to declare for the race is Boise homeless advocate Troy Minton - a former Republican, at least on paper.

So far two Republicans - former Attorney General David Leroy and former state Sen. Russ Fulcher of Meridian - are seeking Idaho's 1st Congressional District seat. No Democrat has filed.

At least four Republicans - including former GOP Chairman Steve Yates of Idaho Falls, former Rep. Janice McGeachin of Idaho Falls, Rep. Kelley Packer of McCammon, Sen. Marv Hagedorn of Meridian - see the state's next lieutenant governor in the mirror. Again, it's an all-Republican affair; no Democrat has emerged.

Nor is this remarkably new.

Since Cecil Andrus left the governor's office in 1995, Idaho Democrats increasingly have drawn party loyalists or neophytes to fill out ballot vacancies - or relied on wealthy candidates capable of self-financing their own campaigns. With an occasional exception, the results have been dismal.

But consider the opportunities being discarded here:

- Idaho Democrats prosper when a Republican is in the White House. There's less opportunity to nationalize an election - especially if the Republican president is unpopular. Under President George H.W. Bush in 1990, Idaho Democrats split the state Senate, held three of the top five state offices and took half of the state's congressional delegation. When George W. Bush was in office in 2006, Democrats converted much of Boise into blue legislative districts.

- Otter's retirement has kicked off a rare game of political musical chairs - and as incumbents abandon their offices to see advancement, more political openings emerge across the spectrum of local and legislative offices.
- Even in defeat, some Democrats have managed to change the political conversation. Democrat Jerry Brady's 2002 gubernatorial campaign accused GOP incumbent Dirk Kempthorne of abandoning school budgets; the following year Kempthorne kept the Legislature in session until he got the tax increase and school funding package he wanted.

Four years later, Brady did much the same thing by challenging Otter's brief flirtation with selling off federal lands. Otter became governor but he knew to leave public land transfers well enough alone.

- If Democrats concede next year's elections, just the reverse will occur.

With no general election campaign to speak of, who will pressure Republican candidates to commit toward investing more money in Idaho's underfunded public schools?

What about extending Medicaid coverage to some 78,000 low-income adults?

Who is going to talk about bringing the cost of higher education within reach of Idaho's working families?

Or expanding the franchise by enabling more people to vote by mail?

Republicans certainly have little interest in clamping down on the political cronyism they've tolerated. If not Democrats, who will propose tighter ethics rules and whistleblower protections?

The people who surged to Sanders' cause have it within their grasp to organize, recruit candidates and energize the next election. If they yield to cynicism and defeatism, they can watch Idaho's Democratic Party continue its slide toward irrelevance. - M.T.