

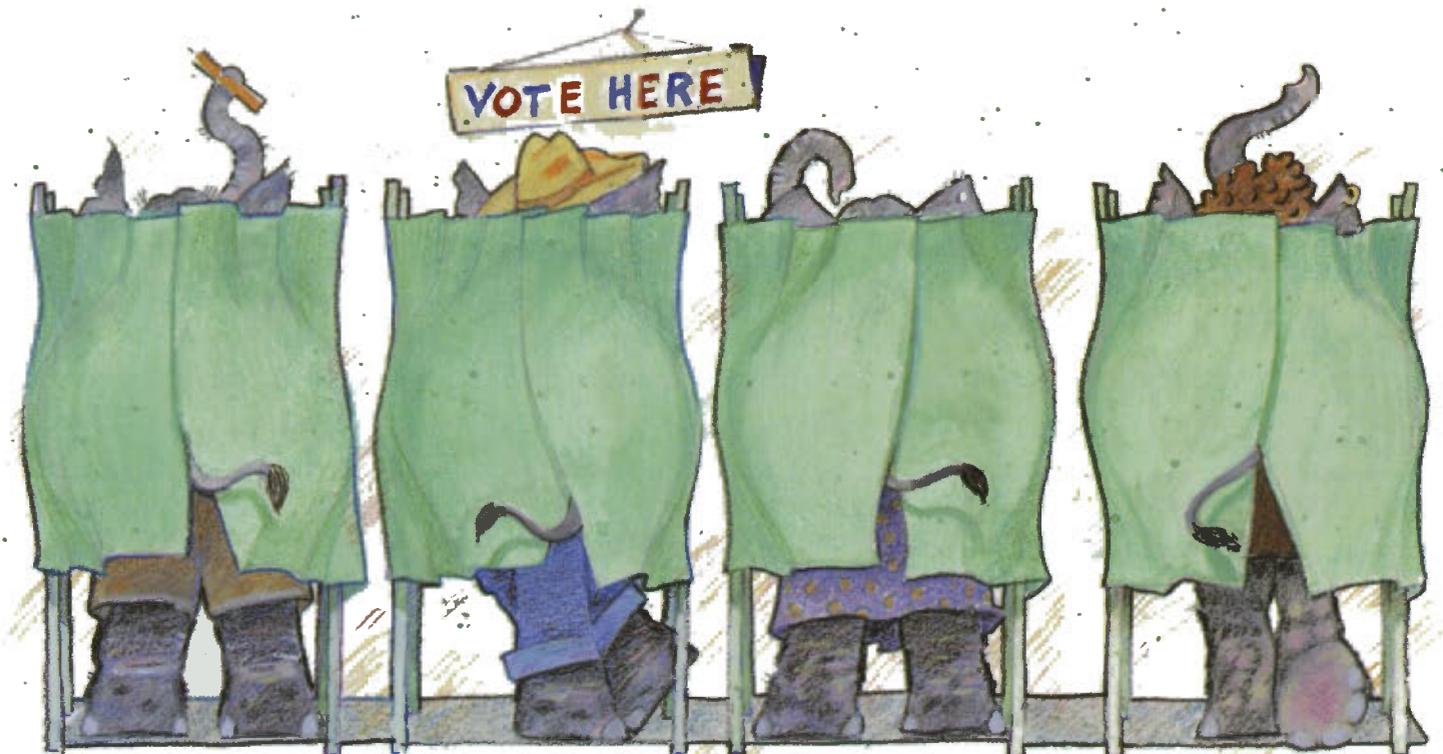
There is no question that the Republican Party strongly dominates Idaho's body politic. But just how did the GOP gain such a strong upper hand? In this issue of *FOCUS* we look at how today's political landscape in the Gem State was shaped from a historical perspective. We also profile some of the key players from both parties and examine how the state's one-party system has even influenced its nonpartisan judicial elections.

# Party Prominence

Flawed or favorable, the GOP's dominance is an Idaho tradition

By **Kathleen Mortensen**

**W**hen Ada County Sen. Betsy Dunklin looks around the state Senate chamber, she could be forgiven for feeling a little lonely. One of only four Democrats in the 35-member Senate, she is the lone Democratic senator in the 400-mile stretch between Ketchum and Orofino. Being the only Democratic voice



on a Senate committee can be difficult, she says.

"When the Republicans are lined up on an issue, and they're not going to debate, it's up to a Democrat to point out flaws in the policy. When you're one person, it's too big a burden."

Welcome to the Idaho Statehouse, where Democrats these days are as rare as the elusive Royal Elk of hunters' dreams. And in case you're thinking this is just a passing fad, think again. It's been that way for most of Idaho's history and may not change soon.

Idaho was granted statehood more than 100 years ago by a Republican-dominated U.S. Congress with the idea that it would be a Republican state. And except for a few brief blips on the historical timeline like the long-forgotten 1896 election that put a higher percentage of Democrats in office than Idaho has seen since, it's remained true to its Grand Old Party roots.

Based on sheer percentages, the Gem State is known as the most Republican state in the nation.

The evidence: Idaho's entire Congressional delegation, 85 percent of its Legislature and all but two of its state-elected officials are Republicans. Democrats haven't held a majority in the Legislature since 1960 and the last Democratic presidential candidate to carry the state was Lyndon Johnson in 1964 — by less than 1 percent.

But some political analysts argue that the issue isn't really as black and white as it appears.

While Republicans may dominate the current political scene, that hasn't always

been the case. In fact, Idaho was largely viewed as a politically competitive state from the '70s through the early '90s, notes Jim Weatherby, Boise State public policy and administration department chair.

During that era the Democrats featured marquee candidates such as U.S. Sen. Frank Church, who held his seat for 24 years. There was also more balance in the Congressional districts, with Richard Stallings elected to four terms and Larry LaRocco to two.

But perhaps even more important, Democrats occupied the governor's office

tor of the *Idaho Public Affairs Digest*. "However, the Democrats are probably just 20 to 30 percent."

And the rest? According to Stapilus, they're independent voters who bounce from one side of the ballot to the other, depending on the candidates. More often than not, they tend to vote Republican, adding to the image of Idaho as a densely Republican state.

Stapilus says independent voters, as well as many Democrats, are often drawn to the Republican message because of its simplicity.

"Lower taxes, less government — get the government off your back," he says. "That's pretty much it. The Democrats are not as easily defined."

Weatherby agrees with Stapilus' assessment.

"Idaho is not as Republican as the number of its elected Republican officials might indicate," he says. Many who claim to be Republican embrace a decidedly more traditional conservatism than their counterparts in other states, meaning they're slow to

accept new policies or expel existing ideas. At the same time, a comparable percentage of Democrats leans to the right.

That trend extends beyond the raw numbers to include a uniquely Idaho approach to the party line. Many Idaho Democrats join their Republican neighbors in embracing a largely conservative "hands-off government" philosophy when it comes to issues like taxes and the environment. Are there states with a more conservative political slant? Neighboring Utah or Wyoming — perhaps.

Compared to the majority of the country,

**As long as the economy  
is doing well and people  
are feeling secure, most  
voters aren't anxious  
to rock the boat.**

for 24 consecutive years — Cecil Andrus from 1971 to 1977, and again from 1987 to 1995, and John Evans, who led the state for the intervening 10-year period.

And a May 2000 survey of more than 700 state residents by Boise State University's Social Science Research Center found only 41 percent of the respondents identified themselves as Republican, although about 50 percent said they were at least somewhat conservative.

"You'll find it said, and I tend to agree, that the Republican population in Idaho is well under half," says Randy Stapilus, edi-



CHUCK SCHEER ILLUSTRATION



*Republican stalwarts such as current Gov. Dirk Kempthorne, left, and former Gov. Phil Batt, extreme right, have helped maintain their party's dominance.*

PHOTOS COURTESY BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Idaho is peopled with “conservative Democrats and moderately conservative Republicans,” Weatherby says, making for a middle-of-the-road philosophy that reflects neither a far right Republican nor a liberal Democratic point of view.

What that means, analysts say, is that as long as the economy is doing well and people are feeling secure, most voters — Republicans and Democrats alike — aren’t anxious to rock the boat by pushing for a change.

But should the economy suffer a drastic collapse, or the Republican Party find itself on the wrong side of an explosive issue, the political landscape could suddenly change, says Weatherby.

The legislative elections of 1990 provide the most recent example. That year was the closest the Democrats have come in recent history to seizing a majority in either chamber of the Legislature, as voters ousted

several Republicans who supported the most restrictive abortion bill in the country.

The Democrats, who were especially well-organized in Ada County, managed to pull even with the Republicans in the state Senate and made some gains in the House.

But the honeymoon didn’t last long. Stung by the 1990 results, the Republicans regrouped under party chair Phil Batt. By 1992, a more organized Republican Party returned to a 23-12 majority in the Senate and two years later celebrated as Batt captured the governor’s office.

Batt credits a strong grassroots effort for the party’s comeback. “We had regional meetings where we emphasized the points we could agree on, and refrained from concentrating on points where we had disagreements,” he says. “We went ahead as a

united front and recruited candidates for every position. It was hard work.”

Maybe, but it worked. Since then, the Republicans have built on strength through an organization that has raised more money, fielded more candidates and won more elections than the Democrats.

There are as many opinions as to why the voters consistently lean Republican as there are analysts and politicians.

Batt cites occasional divisions within the Democratic Party and the influx of conservative voters from out of state looking for strong “family values” and less government involvement in people’s lives.

“Republicans better represent the feelings of most Idahoans that government should interfere with their lives only to a bare minimum,” he says.

Sen. Ken Robison (D-Boise) doesn’t agree with the image of a divided party. “We’re Democrats. We don’t always have to agree statewide on every issue,” he says. “But we have a lot of common ground as well.” That common ground includes a united front on issues ranging from education spending to supporting a minimum wage for farm workers.

Issues at the national level can cause huge ripples in Idaho, as Democrats have learned. Federal environmental policies, for example, are among the reasons cited for a loss of jobs in Idaho’s timber and mining industries. That “lunch bucket” issue has caused a backlash against Democrats in Idaho’s largely rural areas, even though most local Democrats support Idaho’s resource-based industries.

“Most of those policies [such as the Environmental Protection Agency] passed under Nixon, but they were seen as a Democratic move that endangered the lifestyle of Idaho workers,” says Perry Swisher, a former legislator and member of the Public Utilities Commission.

“Workers usually vote Democrat, but those working at the paper mills and mines and such in small communities didn’t like what was happening,” he says.

Andrus adds that President Clinton’s poor public image hasn’t helped the state party. “That lifestyle has tainted the Democratic image in a family image state like Idaho,” the former governor says.

But Laird Noh, a Republican senator from Kimberly, says the imbalance is less a national aberration than a reflection of the spirit of Idahoans.

“Parties ebb and flow based on how well they lead and the issues of the time,” he says. “I think it’s part of the Western tradition that people in Idaho have had to deal

with the realities of a harsh environment. They worked hard to create a living in the desert or mountains. I think that tends to cause people to be self-reliant — they want to see results. The particular label



*Democrats Richard Stallings, left, and Larry LaRocco overcame the GOP's grip on Idaho politics to win six congressional elections between them.*

# Malmen Stumps for Otter, GOP

By Janelle Brown

**B**utch Otter is riding high. Wearing a cowboy shirt embroidered with "Otter for Congress," Wrangler jeans and spit-polished boots, Idaho's lieutenant governor and Republican candidate for the 1st Congressional District strides through the crowd at the Western Idaho Fair, stopping every few minutes to shake hands with well-wishers or banter about politics, farm prices or the sweltering weather.

"If I was in Detroit, I'd probably go to the Ford Motor Co., but in Idaho, this is where it's at," says Otter, sweeping out his arm to encompass the colorful scene.

On the other side of the fairgrounds, Otter's campaign manager, Jeff Malmen, paces back and forth in front of the Idaho Republican booth and talks on his cell phone about Otter's upcoming visit to Coeur d'Alene. Otter, riding a borrowed horse, will carry the state flag in a procession at the North Idaho Fair Rodeo. Malmen wants to make sure the horse is used to big crowds and won't be spooked. It's just one of a deluge of details he'll handle today — little things that alone might appear insignificant, but taken together, shape a candidate and a campaign.

"Outside of Boise, Idaho is still a rural state. People want to look the candidate in the eye and talk to him. That's very important," says Malmen, who studied social sciences at Boise State University from 1985-87 and was involved, not surprisingly, in student government and debate.

Malmen's job is to have Otter in a winning position by Election Day on Nov. 7. From campaign headquarters in downtown Boise, he charts strategy, marshals volunteers, builds coalitions, oversees fund-raisers and schedules his candidate throughout the vast 1st District, which includes 19 counties, two time zones and 582 miles from top to bottom.

Malmen thrives on it all. A veteran GOP campaigner, he has managed the successful bids of Gov. Dirk Kempthorne, Sen. Larry Craig and former Gov. Phil Batt, and also helped get Steve Symms elected to the U.S. Senate in 1986. He has served as executive director of the Idaho Republican Party, as Batt's chief of staff, Craig's field director, Symms' legislative correspondent, and as administrator of the Idaho Division of Financial Management.

"Jeff was a great help to me both in my campaign and as governor," says Batt. "He's intelligent and hardworking. He'll go a long way in the world."

Craig describes Malmen as a "self-starter" who understands how to motivate people. "He has always impressed me with a sharp political mind and attention to detail," Craig says.

Malmen shrugs off the accolades. "I have a healthy fear of failing. That helps drive me," he says. Though Otter appears poised

for an easy victory over Moscow City Council president Linda Pall for the seat held by retiring Rep. Helen Chenoweth-Hage, Malmen isn't taking anything for granted.

"If we buy that, we don't get the signs up, we don't get the information in people's hands. Perhaps most importantly, we forget to go vote," he says. "You always need to be in a position of building. It's difficult to correct a glide."

Besides, as Malmen knows firsthand, elections are never a done deal. At one point in Batt's bid for governor in 1994, he was

38 points behind in the polls, then went on to defeat Larry EchoHawk. "In some ways, it's easier that way,"

Malmen says. "You always know what the target is."

Malmen's days start early and end late. He keeps a notebook by his bed so if he wakes up in the night with an idea, he can write it down. A major task is figuring logistics and priorities for Otter's appearances around the state — everything from a barbecue at Givens Hot Springs in Owyhee County to a fund-raiser in Wallace and a meeting with real estate agents in Caldwell.

"Butch loves to campaign, he loves to be in the middle of people," says Malmen. "He's a little bit of a character — but in the 1st District, they don't demand people be 100 percent politically correct or 100 percent polished. They like someone who is a little rough and tough."

Like any good manager, Malmen plays to his candidate's strengths, keeping Otter on a tight schedule of people-to-people appearances around the district. "Jeff gives me discipline. He keeps me from making silly mistakes," says Otter. "He maintains a healthy schedule for me — it's probably not a schedule he'd like to keep, but he has no qualms about me doing it."

With some 5,000 volunteers and the campaign well on its way toward reaching its goal of raising \$1 million, Malmen is confident the campaign is on track. Still, he expects his days to be increasingly busy.

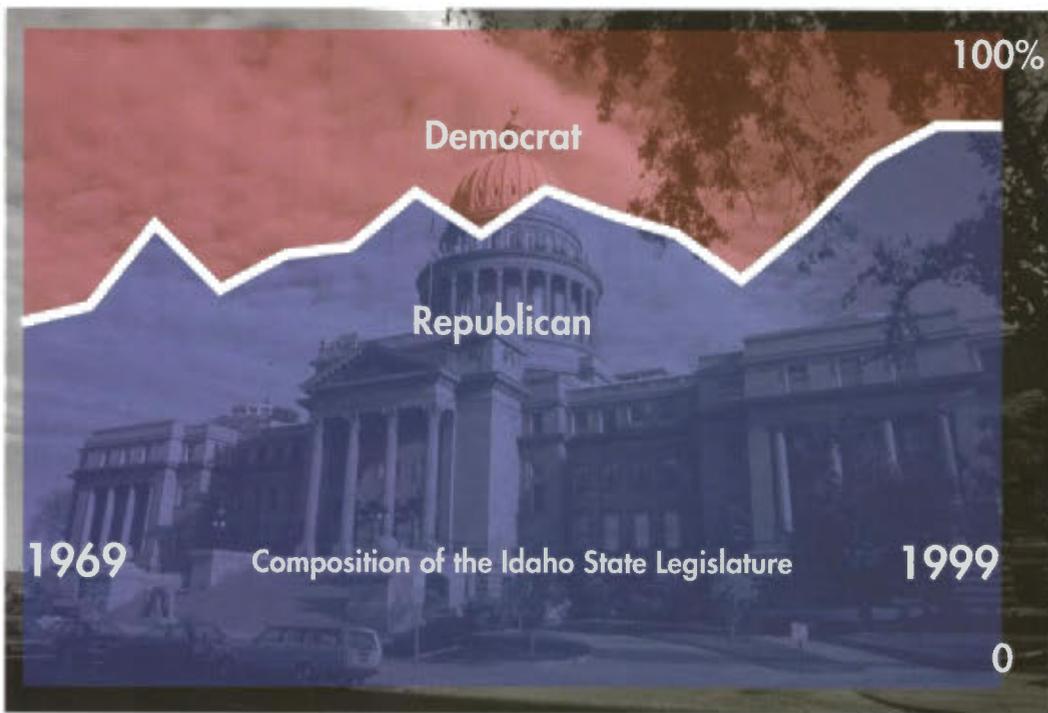
"You can sense when people start to pay attention, when they focus on what the election is about," says Malmen. "That should be happening soon."

He'll make last-minute changes in campaign strategy in the weeks ahead, depending on voter mood and the issues that surface. "The day before the election, you find out if you put everything together right," says Malmen. "But now is the time to make sure that happens." □



Jeff Malmen, campaign manager for Butch Otter, chats with party workers at a Republican Party booth.

OTTER: MICHAEL WATERS



CHUCK SCHERER GRAPHIC

mum wage for farm workers and education spending.

This year Democratic legislators have aggressively sought candidates through the Restore Representative Government committee. Fifty two Democratic candidates are on the ballot.

But Boise State political science professor Gary Moncrief says Idaho still leads the nation in seats uncontested by Democrats. This year Democrats are not contesting seats in six of Idaho's 35 legislative districts. Two-thirds of the Senate and half of the House seats are going uncontested, mostly to Republicans.

One-party domination, says Moncrief, doesn't foster a broad or intense discussion of the issues, whether the setting be a legislative campaign or within the Legislature itself.

"I'm not sure policies would be any different, but the process would be. Most races now are controlled by the primary elections. This results in factional politics where the dialogue is between the conservative and moderate wings of the party. That doesn't include a range of all policy issues," says Moncrief.

Whatever the cause, party politics is likely to remain a lopsided proposition through at least one more election. Whether the future stays true to Idaho's motto, "Let it be forever," remains to be seen. □

[Republican or Democrat] becomes unimportant."

In fact, Noh points out, some Republicans and Democrats have teamed up a number of times in the past few years in order to pass programs they felt were important to the state — such as the creation of a state Department of Commerce to help stimulate the economy.

And finally, Wendy Jaquet, House minority leader from Ketchum, says a lot of her party's trouble can be blamed on bad timing. As agricultural and timber jobs become a thing of the past, she says, unemployment is a very real problem.

"I think it's hard for people not to look for someone to blame," she says, even though local Democrats are mostly supportive of the lunch-bucket crowd.

Robison agrees. "It's guilt by association," he says. Even though most Idaho Democrats are supportive of the timber industry, the national party's stand has hurt local candidates.

Whatever the reason, both sides say the one-party dominance is a detriment to a sound exchange of ideas.

"Even a lot of Republicans are concerned Idaho is so one-party," Weatherby says. "Alternative viewpoints of voters are not being expressed. The Legislature is supposed to make sure alternative viewpoints are heard."

Noh agrees: "It can be a bad thing to the extent that the Legislature evolves into a

'Good Old Boys' or Girls' Club' to the exclusion of new ideas and change," he says. "Power can corrupt, hence we need to be particularly sensitive to the wishes of the public."

Just as the abortion issue divided voters in 1990, so too could some of the issues facing the Legislature today. Democrats hope that may lead to an increase in the number of Democratic lawmakers come November.

"The record doesn't accurately reflect Idahoans," Robison says, citing recent debates over public television, the mini-

## NORTHERN IDAHO DEVELOPING LEAN TO THE RIGHT

By Kathleen Mortensen

Northern Idaho residents could be forgiven for wondering where all the Democrats have gone. Once a stronghold of liberal politicians, the region is becoming more and more Republican with each passing election.

Factors include reaction to environmental policies and a shift in the population base.

The biggest turnaround has been in Kootenai County, which was once almost wholly Democratic. It now has only one Democrat in the three districts it encompasses. The area has seen a huge influx of new residents over the last decade. According to Randy Stapilus, editor of the *Idaho Public Affairs Digest*, many of them came from conservative Orange County in California.

"The biggest indicator to me

[of the change] can be seen in Dennis Mansfield's votes in the last primary," Stapilus says. Very few northern precincts supported his bid for the 1st Congressional District, with the exception of almost all of Kootenai County precincts. In that area, Mansfield's conservative Christian message was a near sell-out.

But environmental factors can't be overlooked, either. Northern Idaho has long been dependent on natural resources, and the national Democratic Party's stance on dam breaching has brought the salmon issue front and center. And in timber country, the party's strong environmental policies have shaken up the area's economy.

"On environmental issues, local Democrats in some places are running with a very different kind of message," Stapilus says.

Many are in tune with local concerns and are pushing to change national policy. But when reality and perception clash, it's often not a fair fight. Perception usually wins.

It also doesn't help that Bill Clinton is a Democrat, says Jim Weatherby, Boise State public policy and administration department chair. "He hasn't helped Idaho Democrats," he says, adding, "He's very unpopular in Idaho."

Both men say the tide could turn back, but don't see it happening in the near future. The pervading thought seems to be, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

"It's hard to make a case for change of leadership right now," Weatherby says. "Public opinion surveys show people have a high regard for their quality of life and feel the state is headed in the right direction." □