

Voter Void

Interest lags at the polls

By Amy Stahl

'Whatever the reason, voters nationally are staying away in record numbers.'

For Ben Ysursa, there's nothing worse than throwing a party and having no one show up. "It's sad in our business," says Idaho's deputy secretary of state. As the coordinator of statewide elections, Ysursa worries about a trend that shows fewer Idahoans going to the polls.

Idaho has long enjoyed a tradition of strong voter turnout. Forty-six years ago, the Gem State ranked No. 1 nationally. But the numbers are slipping. In 1996, after sinking to 15th, the state climbed back up to 11th.

Political experts disagree on why more voters are skipping the ballot box on Election Day. Some claim that Idahoans — like voters across the country — are growing more apathetic. Others say that voters are uninspired by issues or feel disenfranchised from distant candidates.

Whatever the reasons, voters nationally are staying away in record numbers. In 1990 voter turnout in a non-presidential election year fell to a post-World War II low of 33 percent, according to the U.S. Census. For the "off-year" election in November 1994, 36 percent of registered voters cast their

ballots, and for the 1996 presidential election the turnout was 46 percent.

Idaho fared considerably better. In the 1996 general election, overall turnout was 60 percent.

Veteran political observer Jim Weatherby says that traditionally, Idahoans have considered voting to be a civic duty. "We're historically high given our strong interest and feeling that it is a duty to participate in elections and public life. In a large measure that comes from strong religious strains in our political life — particularly the LDS church in southern Idaho," says Weatherby, chair of Boise State's public policy and administration program.

Yet fewer people are voting than in years past. Why? Weatherby thinks that voters today just don't find much in the political arena that excites them. They're not moved by the issues or candidates.

For the most part Idahoans are content, says Weatherby, citing statistics from the last nine years of the Idaho Public Policy Survey. In the statewide polls conducted by the university's College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs, Idahoans consistently indicate year in and year out that they are satisfied. "A satisfied electorate doesn't turn out. The years of biggest turnout are when people are angry and want to make changes," he says.

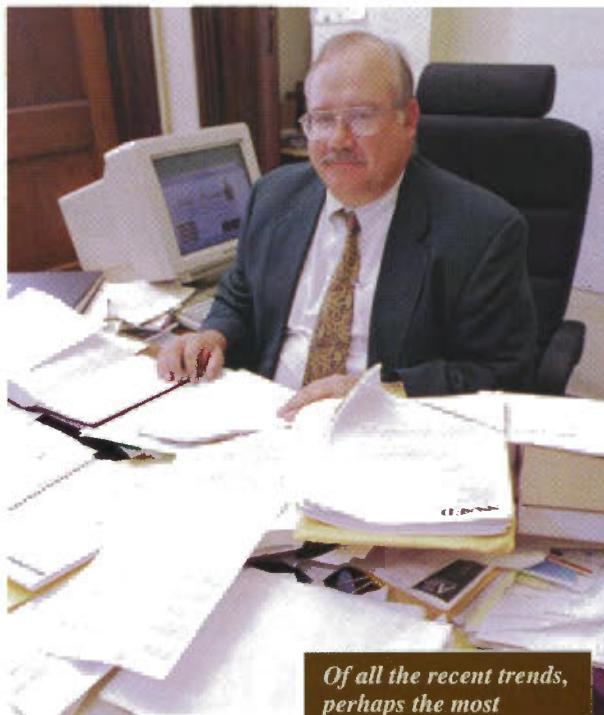
To encourage more people to vote, the state has embarked on several new initiatives. The secretary of state's office now registers voters by mail and has eliminated confusing categories for absentee voters. In 1994, Idaho joined six other states to offer same-day registration.

That year, 10 percent of voters who cast ballots registered at the polls.

However, it's not enough. Vote-by-mail — pioneered by Oregon — is another option. However, Ysursa doubts that Idaho lawmakers will give it serious consideration. A change wouldn't benefit incumbents who are likely to balk at the hefty price tag. "There's no question it increases turnout," says Ysursa. Conversely, "it's an American tradition to go to the polls. In some communities, the polling place is a neighborhood hangout."

Of all the recent trends, perhaps the most troubling to Ysursa is lagging interest among voters ages 18-24. Voter turnout for young Americans has been on a steady decline since 1972, the first election year after the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18. In 1972, 49 percent of young voters cast their ballots; in 1996 the total was 32 percent.

Idaho's not immune. For the 1996 general election only 36 percent of eligible 18 to 24-year-olds voted, compared with nearly 70

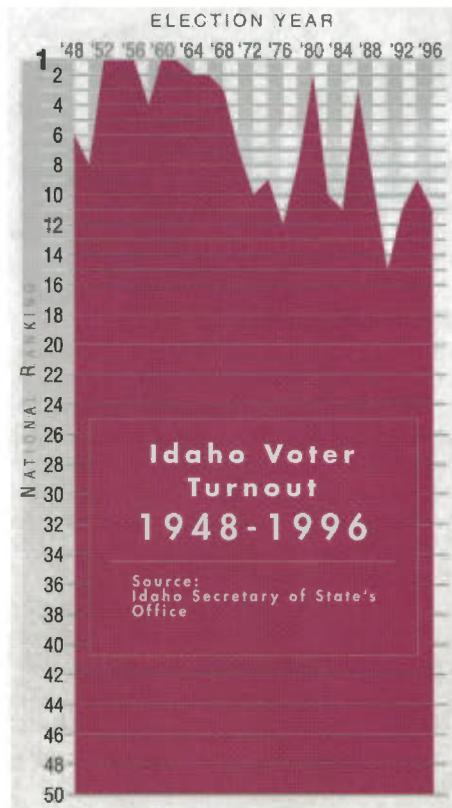


CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

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percent of senior citizens age 65 and older who went to the polls.

Current and past Boise State student leaders hope to convince students that their votes make a difference. Two years ago, the Associations Students of Boise State University (ASBSU) registered nearly 1,400 students to vote at booths set up around campus. Former student body president Dan Nabors



considers Election Day that year to be a highlight of his term in office. "You had to wait 45 minutes to vote at University Christian Church," he says proudly of the polling place most frequented by Boise State students.

Student leaders also enlisted the aid of Rock the Vote, a national MTV-sponsored campaign devoted to getting America's youth to cast their ballots. The rock network hosted high-profile concerts in major cities. It also supplied buttons, fliers, a web site and free phone services to campuses across the country.

Rock the Vote makes a difference for young voters, says 25-year-old Nabors. "Students see it on MTV and then see it in the Quad. That was encouraging."

Current ASBSU President Christine Starr, 33, worked with Nabors on the 1996 voter registration drive. She's determined to continue the tradition this year. ASBSU is again teaming with Rock the Vote and plans to register student voters at booths on campus.

She agrees that issues are the biggest motivator for young voters. "From 18-24, they're just trying to figure out their life," she says. "Not everybody feels it's their responsibility as an American citizen."

Starr and Nabors believe that students were motivated to vote in 1996 by the proposed 1% Initiative. The initiative aimed to limit property taxes to 1 percent of a property's assessed value. Opponents claimed that the initiative would hurt higher education by reducing available revenues and passing added costs on to students.

In protest, Boise State student leaders coordinated debates, rallies and a statewide student walkout. The initiative served as a catalyst for previously politically inactive students, says Nabors, who works now as a manager at Spur Wing Country Club. "It's important for them to relate to the issues."

"At that age there are so many other things going on," says Ysursa. "They haven't settled down into a pattern, and they haven't gotten a regular paycheck. I think a paycheck and taxes turn people around."

Controversial initiatives or legislative issues also drive voters to the polls, Ysursa says. "Once in a blue moon big issues will catch people's fancy," he says. Right-to-work and abortion legislation motivated voters in recent years.

Voters are often lulled into complacency, says former legislator Pam Ahrens. "In politics, perception is reality. There's no doubt about it. If people think their tax dollars are being well spent, they're more likely to go with an incumbent."

Legislators face an uphill battle in the race

The Democrats' Diva

By Chris Bouneff

Given time, Bethine Church's memories usually gravitate to the 1956 campaign, a golden age in Idaho politics when an unlikely victory sparked a 24-year dynasty.

Husband and wife, on the stump, were basically homeless after selling their house and moving in with her parents to finance then 32-year-old Frank Church's run for the U.S. Senate. They drove from small town to small town in the family's Kaiser, trying to shake 500 hands a day at a time when, outside of Boise, grasps were as scarce as for Hands Across America.

They'd walk into a community newspaper office and type a press release, not a scathing attack that passes for a campaign platform today, but one strictly on the issues. And the editor printed it. On the campaign trail, no audience or community was too small, not even a handful of farmers to which Frank Church delivered a two-hour speech.

Nine months on the road cost \$49,000, including several spots on a fledgling medium called television.

Bethine Church and her stories remind the Idaho Democratic Party of its majestic days. U.S. Senate, Congress, governor, Legislature, statewide offices. Democrats, though never dominant, were at least a force.

Though she has a library full of polished anecdotes from those days, don't count her among the political dinosaurs yet.

After all, the Churches didn't win four terms in the Senate and four presidential primaries by living in the past.

Almost 20 years after her husband left the Senate, she continues to oversee the annual Frank Church Conference on Public Affairs at Boise State University, deliver policy addresses at gatherings like the Idaho Democratic Party convention earlier this year, and counsel young Democrats, such as congressional candidate Dan Williams, who still seek her advice before they test Idaho's political waters.

"After all those years with Frank in politics, you'd think I'd just bow out," Church says. "But democracy is only served well if everyone serves."

Bowing out is not in her personality. Behind that motherly smile, rivaled in size and warmth only by her late husband's, is a burning partisan soul who remains optimistic about a party with fortunes more endangered than Idaho's salmon.

Politics have always been part of her life, coming from an Idaho family rich in the sport of public service. Her father Chase Clark was mayor of Idaho Falls, state senator, governor in 1941 and later a federal judge, while her uncle served as Idaho Falls mayor and governor in the 1930s. A cousin, D. Worth Clark, held the same Senate seat that Frank Church later occupied.

Politics also dominated discussions among friends and family. As high school kids, she and her group of friends, including Frank Church, talked politics in the kitchen for fun while the boys

raided the refrigerator.

But younger generations are different, she concedes. In her day, people followed politics. Today's world sandwiches families between raising children and supporting parents, and they have no time, and no stomach, for today's political action.

As for Idaho's Democratic Party, it lacks a charismatic leader, she says. The party needs a Frank Church or Cecil Andrus who rises above partisan appeal to carry an election on the issues.

A lack of party structure is part of the problem, Church says. Many promising Democrats hesitate to seek office or continue in office in a strong Republican state. And money scares many

people. Candidates spend more time on the phone asking for donations than in the field shaking hands, she complains. And a two-hour speech to farmers in rural Idaho? Not likely.

Most campaigns debate through short television commercials, and the media dedicate fewer resources to political campaigns, showing interest only when controversy erupts.

"Unless you're making some scandalous impact of one kind or another," she says, "getting the media to cover you is almost impossible."

But even her party's poor position in Idaho and the discouraging state of modern politics can't dampen her enthusiasm. She still likes the action and is ready to hit the campaign trail for the party, as if it were 1956 again, with the odds just as long.

"It isn't just the Democratic Party that's disenfranchised; it's the moderate Republicans, also," she says. "There's almost no two-party system in this state. As an eternal optimist, I'm really looking forward for this next election to turn this around a bit." □



Bethine Church:
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to engage the public. "It can be frustrating to get your message out," says Ahrens, director of the state's Department of Administration. Yard signs, brochures and door-to-door conversations just aren't enough for many candidates, particularly those in the larger metropolitan areas.

Voters must choose from a sometimes confusing ballot of names and issues. Savvy candidates know that advertisements will boost their name recognition. But the expense can be daunting for candidates running for a citizen legislature.

Controversial races can be strong catalysts for voters. The highest voter turnout in the last 20 years, 69 percent, was in 1980 when voters were riveted by a contentious Senate race between Steve Symms and Frank Church. "But competitive races are few and far between right now. Right now there are some coronations going on," says Ysursa

Weatherby agrees. "Our races are becoming less and less competitive."

Some pundits blame low turnout on our current system of presidential primaries. The West, they say, is too often ignored by candidates looking for votes in densely populated states. The Western Regional Primary, as touted by Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt, would solve the problem. Western states banding together for an early primary would boost their voting power, he says.

Ysursa is skeptical about the likelihood of Idaho joining such a coalition. While intended to give the Intermountain West more clout, the primary would be expensive for small, rural states such as Idaho. Ysursa says an additional primary would cost between \$750,000-\$1 million.

Declining voter interest could also be due to Idaho's changing demographics, says Randy Stapilus, editor of several influential political books and newsletters.

"A lot of newcomers in Boise don't feel a great tie—understandably—as people who have been here for awhile. If people don't have a strong reason to vote, they'll vote for the incumbent whose name they recognize. A challenger needs to provide a strong rationale."

Rural roots strengthen ties to the community—and to candidates. "You see the highest voter turnout in Idaho in the smallest communities," Stapilus says.

"In Boise, you learn about politicians through the media. In small towns you walk up to a candidate and start grilling them. You want to meet your congressional candidate and look them in the eye."

Urban or rural, Ahrens believes that Idahoans owe it to themselves to make voting the source of pride it once was. Parents can help, she says. "Citizenship needs to start with mom and dad and the family. It has to be instilled in us when we're young that it's an important thing to do." □

Redrawing the Lines

By Amy Stahl

When the federal government issues U.S. Census results for 2000, Idaho will embark on a new process for redrawing the lines that form legislative and congressional districts. A newly formed bipartisan commission will tackle the difficult task of reapportionment.

Created by the Legislature, the six-member Commission for Reapportionment is charged with redesigning 105 legislative seats and two congressional districts using fresh population statistics.

It's hoped that a bipartisan commission can avoid some of the messy battles that stymied previous reapportionment efforts.

Former legislator Pam Ahrens is optimistic that the new commission will succeed where others have struggled. Ahrens, a former BSU Foundation member who is now director of the Idaho Department of Administration, served on two previous reapportionment efforts.

"I saw the very best and the very worst of people," she admits.

In 1980, the Legislature's plan was rejected by the state Supreme Court, which then assumed the task of redrawing the lines. The 1990 reapportionment process was also arduous and painful, Ahrens says.

"When I went in I firmly believed the Legislature could do it. It's very difficult to do surgery on yourself," says Ahrens, who represented House District 13 in Boise for 14 years. "Everyone at the table had their own idea starting with their own district."

As the commission grapples with maps and statistics, Ahrens urges members to be cognizant of voter behavior patterns. True, the statute instructs the commission to follow county boundaries, avoid oddly shaped districts and preserve traditional neighborhoods and "communities of interest."

But Ahrens contends that the lines

should also reflect where voters shop, the area's media outlets and other common ties that aren't readily evident. Inconsistent data further exacerbated



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the sometimes emotional debate that plagued the last two reapportionment committees. Ahrens says she pushed for computerized solutions but was overruled. "We ended up with an abacus and crayons," she says.

The new reapportionment process should go more smoothly thanks to the Internet and other electronic tools, says Deputy Secretary of State Ben Ysursa. "People are going to have so much more information to come up with a plan. It's really going to be a numbers game," he says.

Experts agree that growth in urban areas—particularly Ada, Canyon and Kootenai counties—will require the commission to give population-heavy cities more legislative seats. The inevitable result? Incumbents in some rural areas will lose their seats.

Special interest groups are already positioning themselves for a Legislature with a more urban slant. This fall, the Agriculture and Natural Resource Industry PAC met to organize and boost fund-raising activities. The new political action committee is dedicated to electing officials sympathetic to the state's agriculture and natural resource industries.

"Idaho's cities need to have their needs met, but the state's elected officers need to be sensitive to rural areas as well," says Emmett rancher Jim Little, the PAC's new chairman. □

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