



*Ben Plastino*

# Idaho primary system healthy

The record low turnout for the May 24 Idaho primary election stirred up suggestions for changes, a frequent occurrence in the state's history.

Only 131,536 voted, or 25 percent of the state's 525,000 registered voters.

Yet, it must be remembered that Idaho's primary election voting record is one of the best in the nation. That doesn't speak highly for voters wherever in the nation they live.

Idaho's primary turnout is generally above 30 percent of the registered voters. It reached a record of 41.3 percent in 1980. In most of the nation the primary turnout is generally below a third. Idaho also is near the top in the nation in general elections. It totaled 71.4 percent in the 1986 non-presidential election. It has reached near 80 percent in most presidential elections.

The unusual lack of contests was the main reason for the light turnout this year. It is doubtful if it would have been any greater if the election had been held at a later date, such as in August. This was the case before 1979.

Perhaps the most asinine suggestion came from Ada County Clerk John Bastida to give each person who voted a \$5 credit on a state tax, which would have cost an estimated \$2.5 million. Imagine rewarding voters for a citizenship privilege.

Gov. Cecil D. Andrus expressed

keen disappointment. "If only 20 percent decide, it means 80 percent don't care."

"We run a very real risk of having the minority decide for the majority," he said. "Our system is not supposed to work that way. But the thing to remember is that we give the government its power ... we select the legislators and the mayors and the governors. If we don't like what they're doing, we can change them and give someone else the opportunity. We can have say, however, only if we exercise the privilege of citizenship and vote."

The Bonneville Democratic Central Committee at a recent meeting adopted a resolution to move the primary election date closer to the November general election. It pointed out the campaign extending from April to November is too long.

Yet when the primary elections were held in August before 1980, there were protests by the state and national candidates that they didn't have enough time to campaign and that too many voters were away on vacations. The same arguments were used to a lesser extent for primaries suggested in June or July.

County election clerks also objected to the primary being too close to the general election since it wouldn't give them enough preparation time. Their point should be ignored because the system should be

arranged for convenience of thousands of the voters, not the 44 county election clerks. The computer age has also nullified the clerks' complaint.

Yet, Idaho legislators, surprisingly, frequently have paid more attention to the county clerks than the electorate.

Tinkering with the primary election laws has been a favorite pastime for some legislators. Only in the last session the Senate State Affairs Committee turned down a proposal by Idaho Republican Party Chairman Blake Hall of Idaho Falls that would have required voters to declare party affiliation when they register. The committee also properly withheld action on a proposal to return the selection of general election candidates by party convention rather than open primary elections. Hall suggested each candidate should receive at least 25 percent support in party convention to qualify for the primary. A system was tried before for primary candidates to get at least 20 percent party convention support to get their names on the ticket. It was started in 1963, but junked in 1971 on grounds it was tailored for party bosses, not the public.

In 1960 and 1962, there were runoff elections for primary candidates who did not receive at least 50 percent of the votes. This was scuttled after runoffs attracted extremely small turnouts. Critics contended the outcome didn't properly reflect the

preference of the electorate. If not, it was the voters' fault.

Few states, if any, have had the wide experience with direct primaries as Idaho has. The first primary law, adopted in 1910, permitted preferential voting. This permitted voters to list in order their preference from among candidates for a certain office. It proved disastrous and confusing and was tossed out after one trial.

A new primary law was passed for the 1932 election. Then in 1937, the Legislature liberalized the law so that a voter could obtain the ballot of either party. The method is still in use.

Idaho's first presidential preference primary in 1976 drew 36 percent of the voters. It was then decided to move the presidential primary to the same date as the presidential preference primary, or the fourth Tuesday in May. The first one was held May 26, 1980, and it attracted 40 percent of the voters, despite few contests.

In 1969, the Legislature adopted the bill to continue primaries, but moved them from August to May. It has been that way ever since, despite frequent legislative efforts for changes.

*(Ben Plastino is a Post-Register columnist.)*