

Primary election limit bill poses questions

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A Republican sponsored bill that would limit the field in primary elections for governor, senator and congressman could touch off a partisan hassle with the Democrats.

Such a bill, promoted by the Idaho Republican Party under the chairmanship of Dennis M. Olsen, Idaho Falls attorney, is designed to prevent recurrence of the overcrowded field the Republicans suffered in the 1978 gubernatorial contest which many said may have cost them the governorship.

The bill is now only in its embryonic state, but generally would require candidates for governor, senator and congressman to get at least 25 percent of the party convention votes to qualify for the primary.

Other provisions would permit a candidate with more than 10 percent but less than 25 percent of the convention vote to qualify if he also got a sufficient number of signatures and also endorsements from party legislative chairmen.

The main purpose of such a bill is to eliminate minority candidates who have little or no widespread support, noted Olsen.

The Republican Party leadership is scheduled to meet at Boise Jan. 27 to consider action on such a bill preparatory to its introduction in the Idaho Legislature by the Republican leadership.

The Democratic leadership, under Chairman George Klein, however, appears less than enthusiastic. Klein contends this plan or one like it was tried from 1959 to 1970 and was discarded as undesirable.

Klein said he has sent copies of the proposed Republican bill to the Democratic Executive Committee for comments, but so far the response has been negative. He said he expects some formal action will likely be taken when the committee meets Feb. 24 at Boise in connection with the annual Jackson-Jefferson Day Dinner.

Klein pointed out the Democrats in the 50s and 60s had the same problem the Republicans encountered in their last gubernatorial primary. He contended the convention endorsement plan didn't work anyway, because minority candidates won enough endorsements and also the primary elections, but lost in the general elections.

He recalled this happened when two gambling advocates, Vernon Smith and Robert Derr, won Democratic primary elections but lost to Republican Gov. Robert E. Smylie, who was highly vulnerable and likely would have been beaten by other acceptable Democratic candidates.

It is also recalled that the 1964, Dick Smith, Rexburg, was the heavy Republican favorite for Congress but an Alameda mayor by the name of George V. Hansen got one vote above the 20 percent required in the state convention which was then held in Idaho Falls. Hansen sprang one of the biggest political upsets in Idaho to defeat Smith for the Republican nomination and then unseated Democratic U.S. Rep. Ralph R. Harding in the general.

(Alameda has since been incorporated by Pocatello.).

The Republican bill has two outstanding advantages, but a number of disadvantages.

It would generate more party interest where the precinct committeemen and convention delegates would have a greater voice in determining their nominee and it also would upgrade the importance of the state party conventions, which presently are comparatively dull affairs.

One of the drawbacks is that aspirants who are newcomers on the political scene would have little chance of getting a convention party endorsement.

For example, Hansen barely got the support out of pity when the Bonneville and Bear Lake delegations gave him enough votes to qualify. Steve Symms, when he ran for Congress, likely would have never won the party endorsement.

In the last election, Allan Larsen, Vernon Ravenscroft

and Larry Jackson, as party stalwarts, probably would have been endorsed, while C.L. "Butch" Otter, a party maverick, Jim Crowe and Jay Amyx would have been eliminated. Whether Larsen would have won or not in a three-man field is a moot point.

Whether an election law should be drastically changed because of the experience on one election is highly debatable.

Olsen argues with merits that the same situation could happen to the Democrats but even this doesn't change the reasons.

Klein contends, with some justification, that the proposal would be a step backward to revive a system that did not prove workable for a dozen years.

"It was tried and found wanting," says Klein.

Klein admits he likes the endorsement plan for promoting greater party interest and authority, but the advantages more than offset this.