

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### IDAHO POLITICAL PERIODS

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Gold discoveries in the Clearwater country a few weeks before Lincoln's election as president in 1860 led to the creation of Idaho a little over two years later, and national issues associated with the Civil War dominated the political history of the new mining territory for almost a decade. With a population derived primarily from western Oregon, Washington, and California, the Idaho mining area supported the United States government against the southern Confederacy at first. Yet the miners voted strongly Democratic. Before the end of the Civil War, Confederate refugees from Missouri reached Idaho in numbers sufficient to give the new territory a very different political complexion. Southern Democrats and their allies finally gained control of the legislature, elected delegates to Congress, and opposed Idaho's radical Republican territorial executives with all the vigor that unreconstructed southern leaders could have asked. For almost two decades after 1864, Idaho remained a firm Democratic stronghold. Although Idaho voters had no chance to participate in presidential elections, and their delegate to Congress had no effective way of influencing national affairs, they paid close attention to national matters during the Civil War decade. By 1870, though, Republican prospects had become so dismal that their congressional candidate did not bother to finish his campaign, and wandered off to Elko to start a newspaper there before election of another Democratic delegate confirmed his fears.

A new era in Idaho's political development emerged in 1872. With a survey of the Utah boundary, a number of substantial Mormon settlements began to participate in Idaho, instead of Utah elections.

This shift increased Idaho 1870 census population by 18.4 per cent. Since 28.4 per cent of the original count had been voteless Chinese, this Utah acquisition had an even greater impact upon the electorate.

Mormon influence in Idaho came largely from a powerful system of voting almost unanimously for Democratic candidates from 1872 until 1884. A solid Mormon vote preserved Idaho's Democratic majority. If the Saints had chosen to become Republicans, they could have shifted the territory to Republican control: their position in Idaho affairs therefore became decisive. After 1872 North Idaho renewed an earlier effort to achieve some kind of boundary reform that would erase the line separating their section from neighboring Washington. (They preferred to have a new territory with Washington east of the Cascades or Columbia, but were prepared to accept annexation to all of Washington territory if a new commonwealth could not gain

congressional approval.) North Idaho's efforts to get out of the territory, and Mormon strength in the section that would have been left, brought important local issues into prominence for the rest of the territorial period. An anti-Mormon campaign introduced turmoil in the southeastern area in 1874, with results disastrous to the Saints until the anti-Mormon bipartisan combine fell apart in 1880. North Idaho developed its own independent political party to achieve annexation to Washington after Boise forces turned back the northern threat in 1874. North Idaho voted as overwhelmingly for annexation as the Mormons voted Democratic, and Idaho did not return to normal national party lines until after achieving state admission.

Democratic control of Idaho came to an abrupt end in 1882, a year of national Democratic triumph. An enterprising Republican carpetbagger won election to Congress by a bold new sectional political approach. He adopted an anti-Mormon program popular in the southern counties. Equally as important, he gained decisive support by endorsing northern aspirations to gain admission as a state with Washington. This political upheaval led to a still more important anti-Mormon victory in 1884. United States Marshal Fred T. Dubois reestablished a bipartisan Independent Anti-Mormon Party of Oneida County which gained control of the legislature in 1884 by combining with Republicans and other anti-Mormons. Before the end of 1884, legislation was enacted to prevent any of the Mormons elected in 1884 from taking office. And early the next year, an additional test act was approved to prevent any Idaho Mormon from voting, holding office, or serving on a jury. Excluded from Idaho politics for eight years, the Saints established their own independent party and did what they could to combat the offending statutes. But they lost their constitutional challenges in hostile courts and failed to block Idaho admission as an anti-Mormon state in 1890. By that time, Idaho had become a thoroughly reliable Republican territory, eligible for admission primarily to provide essential Republican votes in Congress after the 1880 election had given the Republicans too slender a margin of control for convenient legislative operations. Sectional dissension between the northern and southern counties, still in collision over Idaho's unfortunate boundary problem, had endangered the state admission movement more than the Mormon issue had. A scheme to divide Idaho between Washington and Nevada gained strength enough that an act giving Washington the land north of the Salmon had passed Congress in 1886-1887. Idaho had survived intact only because President Cleveland had refused to approve that initial step. North Idaho finally was placated in part by location of the university in Moscow, and the Coeur d'Alene mining country had little enthusiasm for any attachment with Washington. Disregarding Mormon misgivings and northern reluctance, Idaho's Republicans and Democrats had joined enthusiastically to take advantage of a partisan national situation favorable to Idaho admission, and their new state showed great promise during the years immediately following the end of the frontier.

Voting contrary to the national trend--in conformity to a long

tradition--Idaho delivered the Republican congressional delegation that had been anticipated in 1890. But new developments in the silver coinage battle shattered the structure of Idaho politics for a decade after that. Both Idaho parties had been plagued by factionalism all through the territorial era, and party splits grew more severe after state admission. Idaho now gained a voice in national affairs. At the same time, political parties disintegrated during the strain of the silver controversy. In the presidential contest of 1892, Grover Cleveland's managers arranged a Democratic-Populist combine that yielded Cleveland only two popular votes in all of Idaho. Idaho's electoral vote went Populist that year. A Republican minority controlled state elections through 1894 with their opposition split between Democrats and Populists. In this new complex of political affairs, the Mormons at last were allowed to participate again. They no longer voted as a unit, but arranged to divide along party lines. They had plenty of parties to choose from. In 1896, Idaho's Republican party selected William Jennings Bryan for a presidential candidate. A few McKinley Republicans dissented and finally delivered a small vote for the national Republican ticket. Idaho's Silver Republicans retaliated by attempting to join in a Democratic-Populist fusion that swept the state. A Silver Republican and Democratic combine dominated Idaho in 1898 and 1900. Finally in 1902, regular national party politics prevailed in Idaho--a novel experience that marked the end of a decade of political turbulence.

In contrast to the nineteenth century, when Idaho always picked a losing presidential candidate, the state consistently supported the winner after 1900, aside from an extremely close national contest in 1960. William E. Borah organized a progressive Republican victory over a progressive Democratic slate in 1902. Then Fred T. Dubois (an anti-Mormon who had led the Silver Republican Organization into Idaho's Democratic party, which he took over after 1900) decided to try anti-Mormonism again. (As an anti-Mormon Republican, he had led in ensuring final destruction of Idaho's Democratic party supremacy after 1882; now as an anti-Mormon Democrat he managed unintentionally to ruin any Democratic chance for victory after 1902.) Borah won a contest in 1906 to displace Dubois in the United States Senate; in 1908, anti-Dubois Democrats finally recaptured their three party organization after the party had fallen apart completely. Their success came in the courts, rather than at the polls. But with the Mormon issue buried at last in 1908, the Idaho Democrats finally returned to power during the national Democratic victory of 1910. By that time Idaho had turned again to progressive reform. Direct primary and local option legislation had come out of the 1909 legislature, and with Dubois' anti-Mormon fiasco out of the way, the state followed a more normal course with more attention to national issues. Senator Borah had a leading part in sponsoring important national progressive reforms--particularly constitutional amendments for direct election of senators and an income tax. He eventually got both measures through a reluctant United States Senate, along with

legislation to establish the Department of Labor and the Children's bureau. Idaho finally emerged as a progressive state, in the tradition of Populist reform that had gained popularity after 1892.

From 1910 to 1918, Idaho generally had a Republican congressional delegation and Democratic governors. The Republicans had something of a circus with Senator Borah constantly battling a hostile state party organization. This class, which went back to the election of 1902 and continued until 1940, matched factional rivalries in the Democratic party that gave state politics a complicated twist. After the Democrats elected Governor James H. Hawley in 1910, they faced a losing situation in 1912. Repeating some unintentional, yet effective, compromise tactics of 1906, the Republicans won with Borah for United States Senate and with a conservative opponent of Borah's progressives for governor. (Actually, without really planning such a strategy, the Republicans tried that pattern six times in a row--every six years. Borah won all six contests, and more conservative organization Republicans became governor in the first four attempts. But Republican organization candidates for governor failed in the last two.) National politics naturally complicated the Idaho situation in 1912. In an unbelievably close primary, a conservative Republican organization candidate got the nomination from Borah's progressive challenger by only fifteen votes. So Idaho Progressives organized a party which put up a ticket that let the Republicans elect a conservative governor. But with Borah declining to take any part in the presidential contest, Idaho voted for Woodrow Wilson for president. In 1914, a Democratic faction opposed to J. H. Hawley elected a Jewish candidate, Moses Alexander, as governor--a national innovation which attracted a lot of attention. Winning with Alexander again in 1916, the Democrats finally gained control of the legislature and the rest of the executive offices. Representing John Nugent's strongly progressive Democratic faction, Alexander's administration completed a reform program that included workman's compensation legislation and the beginnings of a state farm marketing assistance program. Farm demands for state reform proved to be far too progressive even for Governor Alexander, and in 1918 Idaho's Democrats faced another disaster.

Farm protest movements had broken up Idaho party structure more than once before 1918. But the farmers' Non-Partisan League, which reached Idaho from North Dakota, had a new approach. Rather than organize another unsuccessful third party, the Non-Partisan League took over Idaho's Democratic party in the 1918 primary. Repudiating Governor Alexander, they nominated a Republican multi-millionaire (who sympathized with the plight of Idaho's farmers) to take his place. Endorsing Borah and Nugent, this farmers' political upheaval helped them retain their positions in the United States Senate although Borah would have had no problem anyway. In state politics, rejection of the Non-Partisan League's Socialist program returned the state's conservative Republican organization to power in 1918. Disregarding Borah's protests, his Republican opponents repealed the state direct

primary statute and managed to stay in power through 1930. Unable to gain control any other way, Idaho's Non-Partisan League had to organize a progressive party of their own, since they no longer had a Democratic primary to vote in. They made the Democrats into Idaho's Third party in 1922, 1924, and 1926 without gaining quite enough support to win by themselves. A national farm depression that plagued Idaho after 1920 contributed to their strength. This situation induced Senator F. R. Gooding--leader of the state's organized Republicans--to join the farm bloc in the United States Senate. But no decent solution emerged to take care of the farm problem, and Idaho missed most of the benefits of national prosperity prior to the stock market collapse of 1929. Finally in 1930, the Republican organization no longer could elect a conservative governor. Borah gained another Senate term with no trouble, but C. Ben Ross became governor at the beginning of the Great Depression.

Responding to dissatisfaction with a state administration incapable of meeting farm needs (and perhaps some other needs as well), Ross induced a Republican legislature to accept some overdue reform. He got the direct primary restored and a state income tax imposed. With a national Democratic tidal wave in 1932, Idaho entered a New Deal period that turned out state and local (as well as national) Republican office holders. Idaho gained a relatively high level of federal relief and recovery expenditures. A national Civilian Conservation Corps program contributed substantially to the state's economy. Highway and public works programs provided additional benefits. Finally in 1935, Idaho no longer could defer meeting the state's share of the cost of direct relief programs. So Ross prevailed upon the legislature to adopt a sales tax. In a referendum in 1936, though, Idaho's voters rejected that measure. Senator Borah gained a sixth term, doing even better than President Franklin D. Roosevelt in Idaho. But the state retained a Democratic legislature and administration even though Ross failed in an ill-advised effort to replace Borah.

Democratic factionalism and Idaho rejection of the New Deal brought an eight-year period of Democratic ascendancy in state administration to an end in 1938. In spite of his loss to Borah in 1936, Ross managed to defeat his successor as governor in the 1938 Democratic primary. But he lacked the strength to win a fourth term.

And Idaho's New Deal United States Senator James P. Pope also was upset with decisive help from Republican participants in the 1938 Democratic primary. In this new era of Idaho politics, control of the governor's office changed every election. Democrats won in presidential years, and Republicans won the rest of the time. (This pattern continued unbroken from 1936 until 1970, although after 1944, no governors were elected in presidential years.) Elections were decided by small majorities, particularly in 1942. During the war years, state government went into somewhat of an eclipse. But in 1946, with wartime inconveniences out of the way, and with considerable flexibility gained from constant reorganization

associated with changes in administration every two years, Idaho entered a long period of governmental modernization.

Professionalism in government, responding in considerable measure to requirements for state-federal programs in many fields of service, gradually developed in the twenty-four period of stability that came with uninterrupted one-party control after 1946. Relieved from disorder accompanying wholesale administration turnovers every two years, the state began to offer opportunities for careers in government, regardless of political affiliation. More effective administration and more efficient service resulted from this change. Along with the executive branch, the legislature and supreme court also developed professional service and administrative staffs to gain more effective government. A succession of four Republican governors, generally with Republican legislatures, offered about as much variety in outlook as had been obtained earlier with alternate party control.

Robert E. Smylie, a progressive Republican of moderate inclination in national affairs, differed considerably from his predecessor and his successor. But development of a state merit system and non-political personnel administration reduced the impact of these shifts in the governor's office. This trend in state government matched changes taking place all over the nation, in Republican and Democratic states alike. In almost a quarter-century after 1946, government in Idaho went through a transition about as conspicuous as might have been attained by partisan turnover. And although the governor's office did not undergo partisan change, after 1950 some of the state elective offices always were held by Democrats. So Idaho's executive branch generally had a bipartisan aspect even though the governor's office did not switch back and forth.

New issues associated with environmental concerns became particularly prominent in 1970, when Cecil D. Andrus finally broke a long sequence of Republican control. In the years that followed, the trend toward administrative reform led to executive reorganization, accomplished in 1974 after a 1972 constitutional amendment mandated the project. In the process of working out these changes, a Democratic governor and a Republican legislature had to accommodate partisan differences to governmental necessities. With a strong conservative element tempering an independent, progressive tradition, Idaho offers an interesting blend of political opportunities. In 1962 Idaho returned Frank Church, a liberal Democrat, and Len Jordan, a conservative Republican, to the United States Senate in the same election. Similarly fascinating results continue to occur in a still-more diverse era that came after 1970. Frank Church gained reelection to a fourth term in 1974, this time with two decidedly conservative Republican congressional candidates. With a well-established tradition of independence and flexibility, Idaho politics usually does not suffer from dullness. Most states don't try to match Idaho's record for political virtuosity.

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