

## ANALYSIS: A NOVEL VIRUS EXPOSES AN OLD RIFT WITHIN IDAHO'S GOP

Kevin Richert 05/21/2020

Gov. Brad Little had a big week on CNN.



Gov. Brad Little delivers his State of the State address on Jan. 6, with Lt. Gov. Janice McGeachin seated behind him. McGeachin has been among the state's most vocal critics of Little's coronavirus response. Sami Edge/Idaho EdNews

news media — but yet, here we are. And while the growing rift between Little and McGeachin makes an interesting national storyline, factions within the Idaho GOP aren't news. Ask anyone who watches the state's politics closely.



First, "Reliable Sources" host and media watcher Brian Stelter praised Little for a weekend tweet thanking local journalists for "keeping Idaho informed" during the coronavirus pandemic. Then, on Tuesday, CNN editor-at-large Chris Cillizza wrote about Little's "biggest coronavirus critic." Lt. Gov. Janice McGeachin, a fellow Republican.

It's sad that a politician can go national by merely saying something civil and complimentary about the

The Little-McGeachin divide is something we all could see coming — grounded, in part, by the fact that Idaho elects its governors and lieutenant governors independently. Little has no more say in this matter than any individual Idaho voter. While it's unlikely a vice president will publicly say, "Um, it's not a great idea to take hydroxychloroquine to try to prevent coronavirus," an Idaho lieutenant governor is an independent contractor, not a

running mate. (The two don't even need be members of the same party; Republican Butch Otter spent his first eight years as lieutenant governor as second in command to Democratic Gov. Cecil Andrus.)

Now, some more recent history. McGeachin, a former legislator from Idaho Falls, ran sharply to the right in a crowded five-person Republican primary in 2018. Campaigning as an unabashed Trump Republican, McGeachin captured 29 percent of the vote. No mandate, but enough for a nomination that positioned her to win comfortably in the November general election.

Arguably, any of the four other candidates in the lieutenant governor's primary would have more closely aligned with Little — if not on the issues, then at least in terms of governing approach. We'll never know that for sure.

But Little and McGeachin represent two very different groups within the Idaho GOP; Little represents a business-centered mainstream, McGeachin represents an ideological conservative core. These are the constituencies who carried Little and McGeachin through their respective, and difficult, primaries. These constituencies vote in Republican primaries, but define Republican politics differently. The coronavirus didn't create the rift, but instead brought it into public view.

The pandemic provided McGeachin a podium — an abundance of rallies and photo ops where she has slammed Little for ordering businesses to close in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus.

During an AARP Idaho telephone town hall meeting Tuesday, it didn't take long for politics to come up. One of the first callers praised Little's response to the pandemic, and then she turned to McGeachin. "I think the lieutenant governor is being disrespectful."

Little thanked the caller for her support but said nothing about McGeachin — instead pointing out that the two were separately elected. "That's part of the system we have here."

It's tempting to start thinking about how this might play out in 2022, the earliest Little and McGeachin would appear on a statewide ballot. The big question is whether they run for the same job.

But even if McGeachin doesn't run against Little, the coronavirus controversy has left its mark. In some conservative circles, the governor has been branded a tyrant; state Rep. Heather Scott's "Little Hitler" label comes to mind. In other circles, Little has been criticized as unwilling to enforce his directives. This also surfaced during the AARP town hall, when a caller said Little has the right idea about combatting coronavirus, but said the governor's plan amounts to little more than a "casual suggestion."

Through it all, Little has tried to depoliticize the pandemic, suggesting that critics such as McGeachin are out of step with Idahoans who are taking a measured approach to reopening the state. “The vast majority of the people are all-in on this,” Little told AARP members Tuesday.

Maybe Little is right.

His coronavirus response has earned him a 67 percent approval rating, according to SurveyMonkey data reported by the Washington Post Tuesday. The Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry — a business lobbying group that falls right in line with Little’s core constituency — released a poll last week that found 75 percent support for Little’s coronavirus response.

But those numbers don’t necessarily reflect the Republicans likely to vote in a closed primary election. Nor do they reflect the makeup of the Legislature — where hardline conservatives such as Scott are a significant presence.

Again, it’s that tension between factions of the Idaho Republican Party. Nothing new. But something the coronavirus has put into sharper focus.

Each week, Kevin Richert writes an analysis on education policy and education politics. Look for it every Thursday.