




ELECTION 2022 GOVERNMENT + POLITICS

Primary elections 2022: The state of the Idaho Democratic Party

Democratic leaders sense momentum but struggle to recruit candidates in a vital election year

BY: **CLARK CORBIN** - APRIL 21, 2022 4:30 AM



 In 2018, Capitol Park near the Idaho Statehouse was renamed to honor former Idaho Gov. Cecil Andrus. Former Boise Mayor David Bieter officially renamed the park at a celebration attended by about 300 people, including members of the Andrus family. (Otto Kitsinger for Idaho Capital Sun)

Coming Friday in the Idaho Capital Sun: The state of the Republican Party heading into the 2022 elections.

Long the political underdogs in deep red Idaho, Democrats say a rise in extremism among the far right wing of the Republican Party has given them an opportunity to gain political ground in the Gem State.

Between Republican-led moves to [reduce funding for higher education](#), cut money for the [library commission](#), attempt to eliminate [protections that keep librarians from being jailed](#), pass a [Texas-style abortion law](#) and a barrage GOP-sponsored bills to make [last-minute changes to voting and registration laws](#) that critics say would make it more difficult to vote, Idahoans are showing an appetite for something different, said Rep. Lauren Necochea, D-Boise.

“I think we have more momentum in our party since the days of Cecil Andrus and Frank Church,” said Necochea, who was elected party chair in March. “Idahoans in all walks of life are seeing extremism play out in the Idaho Legislature and are deeply concerned about the future of our state.”



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But gaining major ground looks more like a long term goal for the Democrats. Major changes in the short term will be difficult given churn with the Democrats’ leadership ranks and a lack of candidates Democrats are running in this year’s legislative races.

Necochea referenced two of the Idaho Democratic Party’s most beloved officials – Andrus, who served as governor for a total of 14 years over two stints and Church, the former U.S. senator who was instrumental in creating the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, which was renamed in his honor.

But those leaders were from a different generation, and a new group of Democrats will need to overcome a set of current and historic challenges if they are to gain ground.

Church left the U.S. Senate in 1981, and Andrus left office in 1995. Since those days, it’s been largely downhill for Idaho Democrats, who have been on the wrong end of a supermajority for years now. Heading into this year’s elections, Republicans control the Idaho Senate 28-7 and hold a 58-12 advantage in the Idaho House of Representatives.

Necochea, who also serves in Democratic leadership as the House assistant minority leader, believes that can change.

“We want to flip at least five legislative seats this year, and we want to do that by focusing on a few areas where we are reaching out to voters,” Necochea said.



📷 Assistant Minority Leader Rep. Lauren Necochea, D-Boise, listens to debate on the House floor at the Idaho Capitol on Jan. 17, 2022. (Otto Kitsinger for Idaho Capital Sun)

It seems like a cliché, but the 2022 elections in Idaho are the most important in years. All 105 seats are up for election this year, as is every statewide office – including governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state and superintendent of public instruction. On top of that, all of the state’s legislative and congressional districts were redrawn in 2021 during the redistricting process, and some officials are predicting [the potential for record turnover](#) in the Idaho House of Representatives or Idaho Senate in 2023.

For those reasons, the decisions Idahoans make at the polls during the May 17 primary elections and Nov. 8 general election will shape state government and Idaho politics for years to come.

Idaho Democrats have so few candidates the Republican majority will continue no matter what

Even with pushback to extremism that Necochea cites, Democrats struggled to recruit candidates and are not fielding candidates in most Idaho races this year.

There is not a single contested legislative Democratic primary election this May.

Of the 105 seats up for election in the Idaho Legislature, Democrats aren't running for 60 of the seats, ensuring the Republican majority will continue into 2023 before even a single vote is counted this year.

On top of that, Sandpoint Mayor Shelby Rognstad [failed to qualify to appear on the Democratic Party's primary ballot](#) because he was still registered as a Republican, the Idaho Secretary of State's Office said.

"Democrats face a few struggles, and one is perhaps even being able to recruit candidates to run," said Jaclyn Kettler, associate professor of political science at Boise State University. "That seems to be a major challenge for legislative races where democratic candidates aren't on the ballot."

David Adler, a political scientist who is president of the nonprofit Alturas Institute in Idaho Falls and has studied Idaho politics for decades, said a pattern of Republican dominance works against the Democrats.

"A pattern of one-party dominance in this state depresses participation in Democratic primaries and races for the simple reason that potential candidates see the prospects for winning are dim," Adler said. "So it takes a real commitment, perseverance and courage from Democratic candidates willing to enter a race."

Idaho Democrats haven't won a statewide election since 2002, when Marilyn Howard was re-elected to the position of superintendent of public instruction.

Democrats haven't controlled the majority in the Idaho Legislature since 1959, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower was in the White House – although the Idaho Senate was split 21/21 in 1991, the last year that there were 42 seats in the Idaho Senate.

Necochea acknowledged recruiting legislative candidates was a challenge this year.

"That is priority for us, and we are building a bench of candidates, starting at the local level, starting with the county commission on up," Necochea said. "A challenge we've seen in the last few years has been a rise in extremism and threats against elected officials across the county, and that is true in Idaho, too. A majority of Idahoans don't want or support this vitriol. We understand we might disagree ... but it is unacceptable [to go to private homes](#) of elected officials and that is what we are up against. It does make it a little bit harder to recruit candidates in this tense environment."

Tom Luna, state party chair for the Idaho Republican Party, said there are major differences between Republicans and Democrats and the GOP has a message that Idahoans have embraced.

"We have a physiological difference on the proper role of government," Luna said. "You have one side that really believes the answer is bigger government and more programs, right, more government programs. On the other side, Republicans insist on less government and know you need strong families. So everything we do should be building strong families, whatever

your definition of families. We don't need big government where families are weak and not able to function as a unit and rely more and more on government programs."

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Despite challenges, Democrats hope to pick up legislative seats this year

Despite their challenges, Democrats aren't giving up.

Necochea said Democrats support several policies that would benefit Idahoans and are popular politically. Democrats support re-indexing the homeowner's exemption to control property tax rates and repealing the sales tax on groceries.

"We continue to push a suite of policy solutions that lift up working families that stand in stark contrast to the policies Republicans keep passing that benefit profitable corporations and the people at the top of the income spectrum," Necochea said.

Democrats are also working to build relationships with Latino and Hispanic voters. Last year, Democrats hired their first outreach coordinator to build those bridges and work on concerns that Latinos have.

"We are focusing very intensely on reaching out to Hispanic voters" Necochea said. "Idaho Democrats and the Latino community have many shared values."

Adler said it is possible for political power structures in the state to change, but it will take hard work and it won't happen in one or two election cycles. Adler said for change to happen, Idahoans would need to decide that the policy platforms and laws don't represent the immediate or long term interests of ordinary working Idahoans. He said an example of this is the Republican-controlled Legislature focusing its efforts on a major income tax cut in 2022 rather than focusing on policies that would help more middle class Idahoans and improve the quality of life for more people. Adler said it is the Democrats' job to educate the public about those areas where policy doesn't align with public interest. Then, Adler said Democrats should focus on attracting independent voters and moderate Republicans to the Democratic Party, instead of allowing independents or Democrats to affiliate as Republicans in an attempt to block the far right from within the Republican Party.

Adler said the key, instead, is to attract people to cross over and reshape the Democratic Party to reflect the interests of more and more everyday Idahoans.

"It would marginalize the far right in Idaho; it would place them on an island," Adler said. "If they truly want to marginalize the far right and truly want to create better policy programs and laws that don't reflect extremism, this is the way to accomplish that mission."

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Clark Corbin has more than a decade of experience covering Idaho government and politics. He has covered every Idaho legislative session since 2011 gavel-to-gavel. Prior to joining the Idaho Capital Sun he reported for the Idaho Falls Post Register and Idaho Education News. His reporting in Idaho has helped uncover a multimillion-dollar investment scam and exposed inaccurate data that school districts submitted to the state.

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