



ELECTION 2022


GOVERNMENT + POLITICS

# Primary elections 2022: State of the Idaho Republican Party

May 17 GOP primary election highlights differences within Idaho's powerhouse party

BY: **CLARK CORBIN** - APRIL 22, 2022 4:40 AM



 The House of Representatives, which has had a Republican supermajority for more than 60 years, in session at the Idaho Capitol on April 6, 2021. (Otto Kitsinger for Idaho Capital Sun)

*In case you missed it: the Idaho Capital Sun's coverage of the state of the Idaho Democratic Party*

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Because they have long held a supermajority and dominated Idaho politics, next month's Republican primary elections are expected to be among the most competitive and influential races in a vital election year for Idaho.

Based on decades of political dominance in Idaho and Democrats not running candidates in most races, the May 17 Republican primary elections will answer the question of who controls the Republican Party and, therefore, sets the policy and political agenda for years to come.

"With the closed primary, that has become basically the general election because Idaho is such a strong red state," said former Republican Speaker of the Idaho House Bruce Newcomb.

The 2022 elections are the most important elections in years. All 105 seats in the Idaho Legislature are up for election, and all statewide offices, including governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state and superintendent of public instruction are up as well.

History and electoral dynamics are certainly on the Republicans' side. Although the Idaho Senate was split 21-21 in 1991 and 1992, the Republicans have controlled a majority in the Idaho Legislature since 1959, with the exception of those two years.



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Republicans have also won every statewide office since 2002, when Democrat Marilyn Howard was re-elected superintendent of public instruction.

And even before a single vote in the 2022 elections is counted, Republicans know they will continue to enjoy a supermajority in 2023. Of the 105 legislative seats up for election this year, there are no Democrats running for 60 of the seats.

For the 2022 elections, the goals are clear, Idaho Republican Party Chairman Tom Luna told the Idaho Capital Sun. Republicans want to retain every statewide office and expand their supermajority in the Legislature. They're also looking to expand their political empire beyond the Statehouse.

"Most recently we have been involved with what traditionally have been nonpartisan offices to get more conservative voices at the school board and city and county level," Luna said. "That is the nature of success, keep what we have and expand what we have."

## Idaho Republicans face division with the party

Supermajorities have interesting and complicated effects on elections and politics, said Jaclyn Kettler, associate professor of political science at Boise State University.

“Republicans holding such a large majority in the state, whether you look at all the statewide offices or a supermajority in Legislature, actually provide some challenges to both parties,” Kettler said. “Republicans have internal division and Democrats face a few struggles, and one is perhaps even being able to recruit candidates to run.”

Luna said the primaries are when Republicans hammer out their differences and decide which direction the party will head.



Tom Luna is the chairman of the Idaho Republican Party.

“As I travel around the state, it’s still very clear to me Republicans agree on 80% of policy and 80% of values, but it is during the primary we debate the 20% we don’t agree on.”

“It’s pretty clear we have legislative candidates that represent different wings of the party,” Luna added. “As a state party, we don’t get involved with supporting candidates in the primary. We let the voters decide.”

But Idaho Democratic Party chair Rep. Lauren Necochea, D-Boise, said division within the Republican Party isn’t merely about debating policies about how to cut taxes and reduce government regulation. She said the Republican Party and the Idaho House have moved farther to the right and pushed divisive and extremism.

“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,” Necochea said. Examples she gave included reducing funding for higher education and the library commission, GOP efforts to remove a statute that protects librarians from imprisonment, passing a Texas-style abortion law and the Republican’s focus on so-called indoctrination and critical race theory in school.

## Did the closed Republican primary election push the party to the far right?

Newcomb, a Republican who held the House’s top leadership position from 1999 through 2006, said he is worried about how the closed Republican primary election, which is only open to voters affiliated with the Republican Party, politicizes the party.

“The big thing is we have become much more partisan, particularly the Republican Party and factions in dissent within the party,” Newcomb said. “If you look at Take Back Idaho, which includes (former state Republican officials) Ben Ysursa, Jim Jones, myself and Bob Geddes, we are concerned about the state Legislature in terms of addressing policy rather than conspiracy

theories. There are factions (in the GOP) where we have CRT, critical race theory and those people buying into those stuff. Basically, in the beginning, hardly anybody could define it and no matter how much you shoot at it, it just keeps rising up. Now it is present in a lot of people's campaigns and it shouldn't be."

Since helping launch the Take Back Idaho PAC and saying he wants to push for the removal of extremists from the Legislature, Newcomb [has been called a RINO](#), or Republican in Name Only.

Newcomb said the name-calling and meanness is illustrative of the party's shift and problems.

"The other thing is campaigns have become so ugly and dissident that good people are reluctant to get involved."

Newcomb said Republicans deserve the blame for the division and extremism that has crept into the party and for underestimating the sophistication of divisive social media content.

"A lot of it is people, like myself, were kind of asleep at the switch and thinking this will correct itself but it just keeps gaining momentum," Newcomb said.

Political scientist David Adler, the president of the nonprofit Alturas Institute in Idaho Falls, said the party has shifted so far to the right he doesn't see much distinction between Idaho Republicans, particularly in the Idaho House of Representatives. If there are differences, Adler said they should be measurable – such as differences in voting records or by elected officials who stand up and denounce policies such as cutting funding for libraries and education or pursuing a bill that critics worried could lead to jailing libraries for material "harmful to minors."

Adler points to two bills over the past two years that he says are illustrative of the state of the Republican Party in Idaho. One is this year's abortion law, [Senate Bill 1309](#). Every Republican but Rep. Fred Wood, R-Burley, voted for it and GOP Gov. Brad Little signed it into law. (Wood is retiring and will not return to the Idaho Legislature next year).

The other is the so-called anti indoctrination, anti critical race theory bill from 2021. The only Republican to vote against [House Bill 377](#) was Sen. Dan Johnson, R-Lewiston.

"It's one thing to say you represent a more moderate wing of the Republican Party and offer a distinctive voice than that offered by the far right," Adler said. "But if in fact your voting record mirrors the far right, then essentially there is no moderate conservative wing in the Republican Party."

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Adler thinks the move to the right could eventually be damaging to the Idaho Republican Party, but it will take Idahoans deciding GOP policies don't work for regular Idaho families and launching a sustained move to attract independent and moderate voters to reshape the Democratic Party.

"It would marginalize the far right in Idaho; it would place them on an island," Adler said.

For his part, Luna disagreed with Adler, Newcomb and Necochea.

"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. It is a different approach, where we want to strengthen families and strengthen the support system."

Luna said Republicans resisted extremism and anti-government activist Ammon Bundy, an independent candidate who originally announced he would [run for governor as a Republican](#) before going independent.

"You saw that play out in its natural course," Luna said. "He was not a Republican, he had never voted as a Republican and he realized he didn't have a place in the Republican Party and became the poster child of a RINO."

Luna said Republicans get criticized for their beliefs and infighting and but don't get enough credit for their accomplishments.

"When I talk to the national press, I remind them we are the least regulated state and have one of the best economies in the country with two years in a row of massive tax cuts and rebates," Luna said. "It's not an accident. It's the result of a robust and engaged Republican Party. When you write 'what's wrong with the Republican Party?' or 'what's the future of the Republican Party?' remind people it is that same Republican Party that created one of the fastest growing states, a state that is so attractive to others because of low regulations, reduced taxes and what I believe is a good education system for the money we spend."

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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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