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The far right
'Republican and more Republican': Idaho shifts ever rightward

In a state where legislators can boast of membership in the Oath Keepers, the fringe has become mainstream



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A peregrine falcon swoops over grazing cows. A giant Stars and Stripes is painted on wood with “Bundy for governor” and “No trespassing” attached. Up a gravel drive, past an upturned wheelbarrow, is a red, white and blue Bundy campaign bus and a sign that declares: “Keep Idaho Idaho.”

Ammon Bundy's compound is situated under rolling green hills and a broad Idaho sky. From his five-bedroom farmhouse, the far-right activist gazes out at his 240 apple trees along with cherry, peach and pear trees. He points to the homes of two neighbors, both military men - and both flying the American flag upside down.

"It's a sign of distress," Bundy says. "I'm not influencing them in any way but, if there is going to be some type of civil war, I think it will be the military fracturing. I hope not. I believe more in a separation, if it was needed."

The bearded 46-year-old, notorious for armed standoffs with law enforcement that landed him in prison, has no chance of becoming governor of Idaho. But the mere fact that, during a year in solitary confinement, he wrote in his journal about a plan to run for elected office is indicative of a change in the political wind here.

Idaho has long been one of the most conservative states in America with its fair share of extremism. Now, critics warn, the extremists are being normalised. Once dismissed as backwoods fanatics, the far right have entered the political arena and identified a path to power.

That path leads through a state Republican party that has long exploited tensions between independent-spirited Idahoans and the federal government, which manages two-thirds of the state's land, and more recently embraced former president Donald Trump's culture of grievance.

Trump beat Joe Biden with 64% of the vote here in the 2020 election. Democrats have not held the governor's office since 1995 or statewide elected office since 2007. Most elections for the state legislature do not even feature a Democratic candidate.

Chuck Malloy, a columnist and former communications adviser to the House Republican caucus, said: "Sure, we have a two-party system: it's Republican and more Republican. Idaho is shifting more to the right every day."

In the Republican primary election for governor on 17 May, incumbent Brad Little, a stalwart conservative by national standards, is portrayed as a Republican in Name Only (Rino) by his even more extreme challenger, Lieutenant Governor Janice McGeachin (Bundy dropped out of the Republican race and is running as an independent).

McGeachin has **sought to grab attention** by issuing executive orders banning coronavirus mask and vaccine mandates when Little was out of state only to see them overturned on his return. But the political grandstanding appears to have backfired. Opinion polls suggest that McGeachin is heading for defeat.



📷 Janice McGeachin banned mask and vaccine mandates while the governor was out of town.
 Photograph: Keith Ridler/AP

Little, who can boast of a record \$1.9bn budget surplus, could not be described as much of a liberal saviour, however. He made a pilgrimage to Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida only for the former president to **endorse McGeachin** four days later. As the state party's centre of gravity shifts right, he is shifting with it.

The governor recently signed one of the most extreme abortion laws in the country, banning the procedure after a foetal heartbeat is detected and allowing family members of rapists to sue providers. He also signed a bill banning transgender women from competing in women's sports.

Malloy observed: "Little can't come across as looking pro-abortion in any way, shape or form so he signs this bill and makes the comments, well, I think it's unconstitutional, but I'll sign it anyway. He doesn't want to go into a Republican primary election by being soft on the abortion issue or guns. He's been picking his fights."

He added: "Democrats can't be crazy about Brad Little. But to at least some people it's a matter of do I vote for sane or insane?"

Lauren Necochea, chair of the state Democratic party and a state representative, confirmed that she is unimpressed by the governor. She said: "The difference between

Little and McGeachin is really more style than substance. She personifies the far-right extremism while he panders to it.”

Although Little is likely to retain the governor’s mansion, elections for other offices of state are more competitive between [the hard right and harder right](#). Priscilla Giddings, a McGeachin ally, is running for lieutenant governor, while Dorothy Moon, a member of the far-right John Birch Society, is a contender for secretary of state.

Raúl Labrador, a former member of the influential US House Freedom Caucus who once proclaimed “Nobody dies because they don’t have access to healthcare”, is among the candidates for state attorney general.

The extremist faction has also been expanding its influence in the state house and senate, recently attempting to block government funding for healthcare and television and to [criminalise librarians](#) for “disseminating material harmful to minors”, though the measures were ultimately thwarted.

House member Chad Christensen, for example, proudly declares [on his webpage](#) his membership of the Oath Keepers, a militaristic, anti-government group whose founder, Stewart Rhodes, is facing [charges of seditious conspiracy](#) for his role in the January 6 attack on the US Capitol.

[Scott McIntosh](#), opinion editor of the Idaho Statesman newspaper, said: “When I moved here in 2006, the Republican party was very much dominated by reasonable Republicans. Brad Little would be in that category. All they were worried about was running a good small state government.

“They’re still here but the [Republicans](#) who are getting elected, particularly in the past 10 years, are more interested in coming to the state capitol and pushing transgender rights, abortion, library criminalisation bills that are more culture wars they see going on in other parts of the country that they want to stop from happening here in Idaho.”

Perhaps most insidiously, a new far-right generation is targeting and taking over Republican central committees at county level. It means that the election for governor might be less important than it seems since the winner will find themselves tugged to the right by a radicalised state government.

[Shea Andersen](#), a marketing consultant who has worked on political campaigns, agreed: “They’ve figured out that the real power in Idaho is not to hold the governor’s seat necessarily - though certainly it would send a great message for them - but any sort of fringe political viewpoint is better served by fanning out and getting your

positions represented in more day-to-day operations, whether that is state legislature or county commissioner races or even races for treasurer and secretary of state.”

The trend is especially pronounced in northern Idaho, a region infamous in the late 20th century for Richard Butler’s effort to establish a “white homeland” from his 20-acre Aryan Nations compound. Butler was eventually bankrupted by the Southern Poverty Law Center and the compound was burned in June 2001.



📷 Anti-Biden protesters gather in Boise, Idaho. Photograph: Darin Oswald/AP

Chris Fillios, a moderate Republican seeking re-election as a county commissioner in [Kootenai county](#), has observed extremists on the march there. “They have been told, infiltrate at every level: school board, county, city offices, anywhere and everywhere they can, state level, federal level, infiltrate, infiltrate.”

Fillios sees a connection with “alt-right” figures such as [Steve Bannon](#), a former chief strategist in the Trump White House. “If we start from the national level and we look at Steve Bannon having identified his so-called 40,000 ‘shock troops’, the most fertile ground that they could find would be northern Idaho. If they can get a foothold here, they could use it as sort of a launch pad for the rest of the country.”

A driving force is the [Idaho Freedom Foundation](#), a thinktank that vets legislation and legislators for their conservative and libertarian credentials. Approached for an

interview, the foundation emailed a one-word reply: “Nope.” Approached in person at its office near the state capitol in Boise, the foundation’s staff gave a brusque refusal.

Tellingly, the foundation’s [website asks](#): “Are you a refugee from California, or some other liberal playground? Did you move to Idaho to escape the craziness? Welcome to Idaho. We’re glad to have you here. You are one of the new Idahoans. The people who came to the Gem State seeking a home that reflects their values: small government and a freer life.”

This is a trend that has been called “right flight” as conservatives pour into Idaho from liberal, racially diverse states. It could be seen as part of the grand sorting of American national politics as liberals move to places where they will find like minds and conservatives do likewise, meaning that blue states turn bluer and red states turn redder.

[Stephanie Witt](#), director of the Applied Research Center at Boise State University, said: “The newcomers aren’t liberals. They’re as conservative or more conservative than the people who are here.”

“I remember one woman I met at a county women’s forum. She was a recent transplant from southern California and she’s just like, ‘We can’t let California happen here.’ She felt like she was really holding a line.”

California is the most diverse state in America; Idaho is 93% white. But [Tom Luna](#), the first Hispanic person elected to statewide office in Idaho as superintendent of public instruction, denies that race is a motivating factor. “I don’t see ‘white flight’ as a reason at all for people moving here. I don’t know the numbers but I’ve met a lot of new people that have moved here and I see quite a diversity that identify themselves as Republicans.”

Luna is now chair of the state Republican party. He rejects the notion that it has gone rogue. “This is the same party that has led for the past 20 years resulting in now one of the fastest-growing, if not the fastest-growing, state in the country, and one reason is because of quality of life.”

But among the new arrivals is Bundy, who grew up in Utah and lived in Arizona before moving to Idaho seven years ago. The father of six children settled on farmland outside Emmett - also the home of Governor Little, a third-generation sheep and cattle rancher - about an hour north-west of Boise.

Bundy was infamous for standoffs with federal agents near his family's ranch in Nevada in 2014 and at the **Malheur national wildlife refuge** in Oregon in 2016, which left one man dead. He served prison time but denies that he was leading armed rebellions and claims he won the "PR battle".



📷 Ammon Bundy, center, at Malheur national wildlife refuge in 2016. Photograph: Rick Bowmer/AP

"The federal government has been attacking the land users - ranchers, loggers, miners and other people," he said in an interview, wearing a checked shirt and paint-flecked jeans and sitting near a baby grand piano. "There's been this almost theological battle that's been going on for decades and decades over the land in the west."

He articulates the small government ideology of many far-right Republicans here: "I believe that we should become independent. We've got plenty resources and we should be able to stand on our own and not be dependent on the federal government to pay our medical bills and to build our buildings and all of that. But we're like welfare junkies. We can't seem to get off of it."

Bundy has been arrested multiple times in Idaho. Once such incident occurred in 2020 because he refused to leave a statehouse auditorium while protesting against pandemic legislation after officials ordered the room to be cleared. Earlier this year he was involved in protests that helped **force a hospital** into temporary lockdown.

The rise of such tactics by extremists, which has included harassing and intimidating Republican legislators deemed too moderate, and storming into school or district health board meetings, sometimes with AR-15 rifles, has raised the specter of political violence in the state's future.

McIntosh of the Idaho Statesman said: "I only see it getting worse. I don't see a way out of it."

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