

## A Fracture in Idaho's G.O.P. as the Far Right Seeks Control

Ahead of a primary vote, traditional Republicans are raising alarm about the future of the party, warning about the growing strength of militia members, racists and the John Birch Society.



By Mike Baker

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BONNERS FERRY, Idaho — At a school gymnasium in northern Idaho, Lt. Gov. Janice McGeachin regaled a crowd with stories of her feuds with the current governor, a fellow Republican, including the time when he briefly left the state and she issued a mutinous but short-lived ban on coronavirus mask mandates.

Gov. Brad Little had worked in recent years to slash taxes and ban abortion, but for Ms. McGeachin and the hundreds gathered at a candidates' forum sponsored by the John Birch Society in late March, the governor was at cross purposes with their view of just how conservative Idaho could and should be.

They clapped as one candidate advocated “machine guns for everyone” and another called for the state to take control of federal lands. A militia activist, who was once prosecuted for his role in an infamous 2014 standoff with federal agents in Nevada, promised to be a true representative of the people. A local pastor began the meeting with an invocation, asking for God to bless the American Redoubt — a movement to create a refuge anchored in northern Idaho for conservative Christians who are ready to abandon the rest of the country.

“We’re losing our state,” said Ms. McGeachin, who is now seeking to take over the governor’s job permanently. “We’re losing our freedoms.”

The bitter intraparty contest between Ms. McGeachin and Mr. Little, set to be settled in the state’s primary election on Tuesday, reflects the intensifying split that is pitting Idaho’s conventional pro-gun, anti-abortion, tax-cut conservatives against a growing group of far-right radicals who are agitating to seize control of what is already one of the most conservative corners of the Republican Party in the country.

The state has long been a draw for ultraconservatives disillusioned with the liberal drift in other parts of the nation, many of them settling off the grid in the mountains of northern Idaho or among like-minded people in towns like Bonners Ferry. Over the years, the Idaho panhandle has been home to white supremacist groups and people ready to take up arms against the U.S. government. Such groups and their allies have been particularly wary of the changing nature of Idaho’s cities, including the legions of other newcomers responding to a booming job market in Boise.

Fearing the growth of the party’s extremist wing, some Republicans are waging a “Take Back Idaho” campaign. In northern Idaho’s Kootenai County, the disputes have led to a formal rift, with two Republican Party factions separately battling to convince voters that they represent the true nature of the party.



Todd Engel, second from left, who is running to be a state representative, joined other Republican candidates at a recent forum. Grant Hindsley for The New York Times





Boundary County Middle School in Bonners Ferry, Idaho, where a candidates forum was held for Republicans running in the primary. Grant Hindsley for The New York Times

Similar debates are playing out across the country, as more moderate Republicans confront challenges from an increasingly powerful segment energized by the continuing influence of former President Donald J. Trump. In Idaho, where Mr. Trump won 64 percent of the vote in 2020, carrying 41 of the state's 44 counties, many longtime Republicans fear the party's name, identity and deep conservative values are being commandeered by the state's fringe elements.

"If traditional Republican principles in Idaho want to survive, then the traditional Republicans are going to have to work harder," said Jack Riggs, a former lieutenant governor who recently joined with other former elected officials to form a separate association, the North Idaho Republicans, to challenge what he sees as a dangerous shift within the existing party leadership in Kootenai County.

Mr. Riggs said the local party has been increasingly taken over by zealots motivated by a desire to limit the influence of government, sometimes at the expense of the traditional Republican goals of promoting business and growth. Many of the new activists, he said, express a willingness to fight the U.S. government, with arms if necessary.

One of the growing powers in the region is the John Birch Society, which dominated the far right in the 1960s and 1970s by opposing the civil rights movement and equal rights for women while embracing conspiratorial notions about communist infiltration of the federal government. The group was purged from the conservative movement decades ago but has found a renewed foothold in places like the Idaho panhandle.



Ms. McGeachin, the lieutenant governor, has angled to seize the support of that wing of the party. A few weeks before she traveled to the gymnasium event in northern Idaho, she made a video address to the America First Political Action Conference, an event organized by a prominent white nationalist, Nick Fuentes. In an interview, Ms. McGeachin said she had no regrets about doing so.

“It’s my job to listen to a broad perspective,” she said.

With Mr. Trump’s endorsement, Ms. McGeachin has tried to portray Mr. Little, a third-generation sheep and cattle rancher who has worked to position Idaho as a low-regulation state friendly to businesses and small-government conservatives alike, as unwilling to uphold Idaho’s true values. She cites the governor’s actions during the pandemic as an example.

Idaho endured some particularly challenging waves during the coronavirus pandemic that led hospitals to a state of crisis. Overwhelmed facilities in northern Idaho were forced to redirect some patients to neighboring Washington State.



Engaged in a bitter intraparty contest, Gov. Brad Little has been trying to tout his conservative credentials. Otto Kitsinger/Associated Press



Outside of Coeur d'Alene, on a quiet Friday morning in April. Grant Hindsley for The New York Times

Mr. Little angered many in the medical community by refusing to issue a statewide mask mandate and by fighting President Biden's vaccine mandates in court. But he allowed cities and school districts to issue mask mandates of their own, and that became a point of contention between him and the lieutenant governor. When Mr. Little left the state to participate in a meeting of Republican governors in Tennessee last year, Ms. McGeachin issued an executive order banning mask mandates from government entities in the state, including school districts. Mr. Little reversed the order upon his return.

Mr. Little signed some of the nation's most restrictive abortion laws, including a provision that prohibits abortion after about six weeks of pregnancy and allows people, including the family members of rapists, to sue the abortion provider. Ms. McGeachin has pushed to go further, calling for a special session to remove exemptions offered in a state law limiting abortions and saying Idaho's law should be the strictest in the country. The only exemptions in the law are for rape, incest and the life of the woman.

And while Mr. Little has won an endorsement from the National Rifle Association, Ms. McGeachin said she wants to offer incentives to increase production of firearms and ammunition in the state.

Mr. Little has sought to tout his other conservative credentials, reminding voters that since he took office in 2019, he has slashed taxes, pursued deregulation and sent National Guard members to the U.S.-Mexico border.

"In Idaho, we cherish our liberty, and we fight for our jobs," Mr. Little says in a new campaign ad.

Idaho is in the midst of dramatic change, recording some of the nation's fastest population growth in recent years, especially during the pandemic. What the newcomers mean to Idaho politics remains unclear. Depending on whom you ask, they are either importing some of their home state's liberal values — Californians face particular scorn — or they are bringing new money and energetic grievances that could help drive Idaho further to the right.

Republicans already hold supermajorities in the State House and State Senate, and a Democrat has not won a statewide race since 2002. For many of the races on the ballot, the winner of Tuesday's primary will coast to victory in November.

Many of the issues up for debate are highly local, ranging from the fees imposed by local water districts to books kept in libraries. Yet Mr. Trump, whose name appears on oversize signs across the state, carries substantial influence. In November, Mr. Little tweeted a photo of himself at an event at Mr. Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida, saying that he and the former president "were able to accomplish many great things" together. But just a few days later, Mr. Trump endorsed Ms. McGeachin, who has portrayed herself standing next to Mr. Trump in many of her campaign advertisements.

Despite that endorsement, Ms. McGeachin has struggled to keep pace with the fund-raising of Mr. Little, who has accumulated more than \$2 million, compared with her \$700,000.

Ms. McGeachin has become a standard-bearer for the party's right wing, using her office to create a task force to "examine indoctrination in Idaho education" and touting her support for militias in the state. At the Birch Society event, she crossed the gymnasium to give a hug to Todd Engel, an activist with the Three Percenters militia who is running for the State House. He was previously sentenced to 14 years in prison for his role in the 2014 armed standoff in Nevada, but his conviction was later tossed. Ms. McGeachin was among those who advocated for his release.





Ms. McGeachin visiting with voters following a candidate forum. Grant Hindsley for The New York Times



Several hundred people showed up to listen to Republican candidates campaign earlier this year in Bonners Ferry, Idaho. Grant Hindsley for The New York Times

Eric Parker, who was also involved in the 2014 standoff and has founded a Three Percenters group in Idaho, is running for a State Senate seat. Meanwhile, Ammon Bundy, who led an armed takeover of an Oregon wildlife refuge in 2016, is also running for governor, but doing so as an independent after calling the current Republican Party “corrupt and wicked.”

At the event in Bonners Ferry, speakers decried the work of Republicans at the State Capitol.

Spencer Hutchings, a candidate for the State House, was the one who advocated making machine guns generally available. Scott Trotter, a candidate for U.S. Senate, promised to sing a Christian worship song on the floor of the chamber on his first day in office. Dorothy Moon, a candidate for secretary of state, called for Idaho, which has one of the nation’s highest concentrations of public lands, to reclaim control of them from the federal government.

State Representative Priscilla Giddings, who was censured by her colleagues after she publicly identified a state Capitol intern who reported being raped by a state lawmaker, is running for lieutenant governor against the State House Speaker, Scott Bedke, an anti-abortion, pro-gun constitutional conservative. Ms. Giddings ended her campaign speech at the Bonners Ferry forum with an ominous message, saying that if she did not win, people should “plant your gardens and keep buying ammo.”

Around northern Idaho, it is not hard to find people who worry about the future of the country and are prepared for the possibility of civil conflict.



Earl Borer, 72, who attended the Birch Society event, said he saw this year's election as a make-or-break moment and added that people would need to pick up arms if the right conservatives did not get elected. In the governor's race, he said he preferred Ms. McGeachin or Mr. Bundy and was leaning toward the latter.

The most important thing, as Mr. Borer saw it, was that Republican voters needed to oust Gov. Little.

"If we don't get rid of him, then Idaho is no longer a paradise," he said.

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