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What the 2022 Alaska Elections Can Tell Us About Ranked-Choice Voting

Jim Jones

August 18, 2023

The Dorothy Moon faction of the Republican Party has enlisted Sarah Palin to speak in Idaho Falls on Saturday about the supposed evils of ranked choice voting. Palin's 2022 loss of her statewide race for Congress should provide a ray of hope to the vast number of reasonable, pragmatic Idaho Republicans who feel they have been pushed out of their party by Moon's narrow, super-committed extremist branch of the GOP. Palin did not lose because of ranked choice. Rather, she simply fell out of favor with Alaska voters.

The reliably-conservative CATO Institute points out that, while Palin was losing her election bid, Alaska Republicans were "having one of their best statehouse showings ever." The state's GOP governor and senator were re-elected and Republican candidates did just fine in legislative races. Palin was viewed as having neglected Alaska and its important concerns, while her opponent had a record of working across the aisle to advance Alaska's natural resource interests. Alaska races became more civil, competitive and issue-oriented with ranked choice because candidates had to campaign to a wider audience of voters, instead of just the ones farthest to the right.

In contrast, since the Idaho GOP closed its primary in 2012, right-wing extremists have seized control of most of the party structure. Primaries have become divisive, focusing mainly on made-up culture war issues that do nothing to address serious problems facing the state. With the heavy-handed support of the so-called Idaho Freedom Foundation and out-of-state dark money,

extremist candidates have been able to make elective office almost unattainable for responsible, pragmatic Republicans. I believe that traditional Republicans outnumber the extremists, but the extremist branch is much louder, adept at weaponizing non-issues and continually grasping for more power.

Centralization of party control amongst a small group of party bosses is the hallmark of Moon's agenda. Purging a variety of loyal Republicans is a step toward Moon's self-proclaimed goal of turning the GOP into a "private club" that most Idahoans can only observe from the sidelines.

Now the Latah County party bosses are subjecting Rep. Lori McCann, an exemplary legislator, to a grilling to see if she measures up to their extreme-right view of the world. She will undoubtedly be censured or reprimanded if it turns out that she uses her brain. Nothing like that would happen to Sen. Dan Foreman, who is a disgrace to his legislative office. Incidentally, ranked choice voting could weed out extremists like Foreman. Indeed, a far-right group, Action Idaho, has described how ranked choice "would have sunk conservatives," like extremists Chris Trakel, Elaine Price and Joe Alfieri in the 2022 primary.

The closed GOP primary resulted in Idaho's 2022 loss of responsible Republican legislators like Sens. Jim Patrick, Carl Crabtree, Jim Woodward and Jeff Agenbroad, as well as Reps. Greg Chaney, Paul Amador, Scott Syme and Jim Addis. Other reasonable Republicans could fall to the extremists in future elections unless the Open Primaries Initiative is enacted by the people.

Some have said they would prefer a top-two primary like those in Washington and California or an open primary like Idaho had from 1930 until 2010. However, it does not make sense to hope that someday one of those options will magically materialize. The extremist-controlled Legislature will never enact an election reform measure that will break the grip of the extremists on Idaho elections. Reform can only come by way of a voter initiative.

There are only two ways forward in the foreseeable future. Either we continue with the dysfunctional closed GOP primary that has turned the Idaho political arena into a pointless gladiator spectacle or we opt for real reform via the Open Primaries Initiative. The initiative may not be perfect in everyone's eyes but it will be a major victory for the many thousands of traditional Republicans and independent voters who yearn for a return to reasonable, responsible governmental leadership in the Gem State.