

New political organization aims to explore issues without vitriol

By Gregory Hahn
The Idaho Statesman

There's a new group of Idahoans at the Statehouse, and they want to take political discourse away from the two extremes.

"The Common Interest" will explore divisive and important issues by informing its members about the debates and then polling them on where they stand.

"It's just to try to create an opportunity for citizens to have their voices heard," said former Sen. Laird Noh, a board member of the new group.

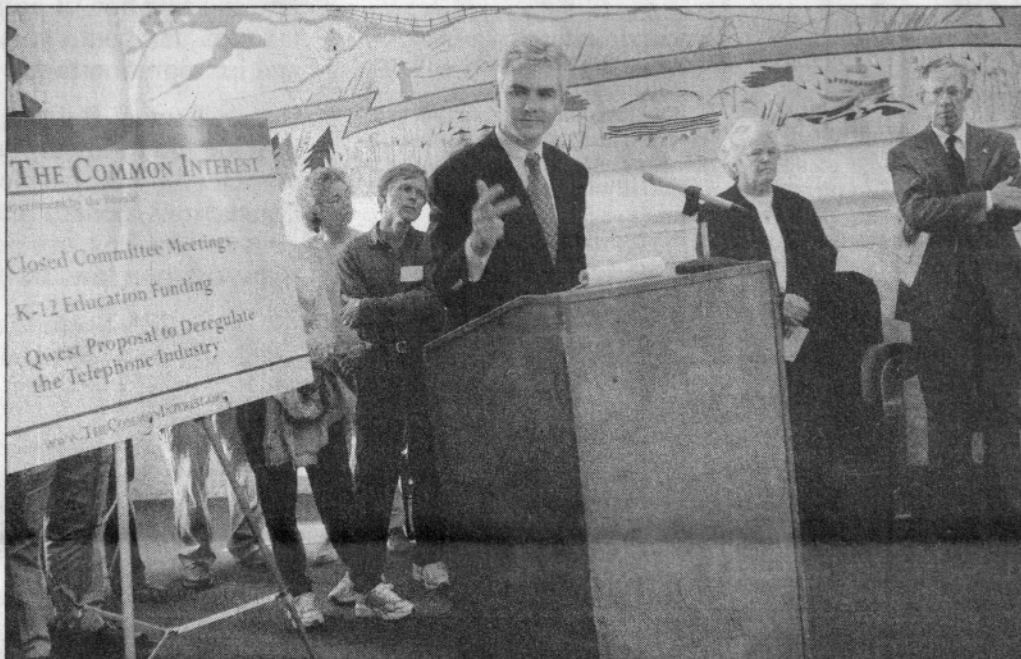
As the "right" and the "left" have fought on TV talk shows, and states have been drawn into distinct "blue" and "red" categories, political science research shows that voters have gotten more moderate and independent than they once were, said Keith Allred, a professor at Boise State University who taught for seven years at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

Allred's idea was to empower these moderate voices on issues dominated by the extremes. He started recruiting members and now has more than 400 people signed up.

All he asks is that they commit to spending one hour a year studying an issue and that they vote in the primary and general elections.

Though the group is run entirely from member donations, even that is voluntary, and Allred won't let individuals give more than \$250 a year.

Meridian husband and wife



Joe Jaszewski / The Idaho Statesman

Keith Allred introduces The Common Interest, a new nonprofit, nonpartisan watchdog organization that aims to enable Idahoans to have their voices heard by state legislators. Allred outlined three major issues the organization will research: closed committee meetings, telecommunication deregulation and K-12 education funding.

Wendell Martin and Anne Hutchinson joined for spirited political discussion and to find more ways to contribute.

When just the two extremes talk in sound bites, citizens don't get to understand the depth of the issues, Martin said.

"If they were that simple, they'd be solved," he said.

Hutchinson said political talk raises hackles so fast, it's hard to find people willing to take the time to understand each others' sides, even if they don't end up agreeing. She hopes The Common Interest will offer a forum

for this.

Already, Allred has polled his members and come up with their three most important issues:

- Closed legislative meetings
- Education funding
- The Qwest proposal to deregulate phone prices.

He doesn't know where the group will come down on these ideas, just that these are the issues the members most want to explore.

Allred will provide information packets and perspectives from interested parties on all

three issues, then poll the members that study them. If 60 percent agree on a stance, it will become official — and hopefully it will reflect an apolitical view of Idahoans.

Former Democrat Sen. Marguerite McLaughlin, also a founding member, said that voice is missing right now.

"Politics just doesn't belong to politicians," she said. "It belongs to all of us."

At IdahoStatesman.com
Link to The Common Interest