

The other Idaho wins Capitol Hill clout

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Since 1998, the voters of Idaho's 1st Congressional District have sent five people to the U.S. House.

They had Helen Chenoweth-Hage, who retired in 2000.

That led to C. L. (Butch) Otter, who served six years.

Next up was Republican Bill Sali, who served one term.

Democrat Walt Minnick defeated Sali in 2008.

And now Republican Raul Labrador has ousted Minnick.

In other words, the district has rotated through a string of freshmen and junior members. None of them amassed any real seniority on Capitol Hill.

Meanwhile, the people in the 2nd District have stuck with one representative. Now their investment is paying off.

Just elected to his seventh term, Republican Mike Simpson is about to become a "cardinal" - one of the dozen chairmen who lead the House Appropriation subcommittees. With the Republican takeover of the House, Simpson will run the Interior and Environment panel. That gives Simpson the ability to expand, contract or direct the flow of money into federal agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Environmental Protection Agency.

All of which means you can expect to see Simpson drawing a bead on the Fish and Wildlife Service's wolf management practices or the EPA's proposed cleanup of the Silver Valley. He'll have a voice in how the public lands are managed in Idaho. Many of the barriers blocking passage of Simpson's signature Boulder-White Clouds wilderness bill are melting away.

The question you have to ask is how did this happen? No other Idahoan, at least in recent memory, has been a cardinal. Simpson's trajectory path resembles that of a congressman from a large, urban state, someone who makes the House a career.

In fact, only three Idahoans have served longer in the U.S. House - Republican Burton French, whose tenure included 13 terms beginning in 1903, Republican Addison T. Smith, who entered the House in 1913 and left 20 years later, and Republican George V. Hansen, who served two terms in the 1960s and then five more in the 1970s and 1980s.

Quite simply, Idaho's seats in the House are political stepping stones. It helped put Otter in the governor's office. Republicans Jim McClure, Steve Symms and Mike Crapo jumped from the House to the Senate. Hansen tried to make the move. So did Democrat Richard Stallings.

Simpson probably viewed it the same way when he first ran in 1998. Then speaker of the Idaho House, Simpson was considered a likely bet for Idaho governor at some point. But when that door opened in 2006, Simpson already was bound to the House by a seat on the coveted Appropriations Committee. When Craig toyed with resigning after his arrest in a Minneapolis airport sex sting operation in 2007, Simpson opted not to seek the appointment. Many saw it as a step up. He saw it as exchanging a powerful House slot for a junior role in the Senate. Simpson also had to figure that he'd be trading a safe seat for an uncertain outcome in a statewide campaign.

But not even Simpson goes from backbencher to cardinal in 12 years without a tail wind. Simpson benefited mightily from massive turnover in the House. Three wave elections removed scores of members of Congress, first Republicans, then Democrats.

Survivors, such as Simpson, moved up much faster than they otherwise would.

For that, he has to thank the millions of voters across the country who just went on hiring and firing their local congressmen.

Among them were Simpson's neighbors to the west and north. - M.T.