

Kicking Idahoans is the smarter political play

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

In Idaho, a politician who takes the right - even popular - step for his state and constituents flirts with disaster.

The politically safe play is to kick the very people who elected you.

Shutting down the federal government and threatening default on the national debt hurt Idaho.

Because it is a poor state, Idaho gets \$1.28 back from the federal government for every \$1 in taxes it sends back to Washington, D.C.

The Gem State has a disproportionately large number of people who work for federal contractors - such as the Idaho National Laboratory at Idaho Falls and Mountain Home Air Force Base.

Tourism, agriculture, forestry and construction depend on the battalion of federal employees working at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service and the Small Business Administration.

When 2nd District Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, joined with 86 House Republicans and 198 Democrats to end the shutdown last week, he was reflecting what most of his constituents needed and wanted.

Conversely, when 1st District Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, voted with 144 of his fellow Republicans to continue the shutdown and default on the national debt, he was acting contrary to Idaho's best interests.

Yet it's Simpson who is fighting for his political skin.

In a one-party state such as Idaho, the GOP primary election in May is everything; the November general election often is a formality. Hence the campaign to oust Simpson in next year's GOP primary. The Club for Growth, an ultra-right-wing political action committee, recruited and financed Simpson's challenger, Bryan Smith of Idaho Falls. Joining the Club for Growth in the quest for Simpson's political scalp are other right-wing groups such as FreedomWorks, the Madison Project and Citizens United.

Hardly more than 73,000 people bothered to vote in Simpson's primary contest last year. Simpson won 50,799 votes. His challenger, Chick Heilesen, got 22,240.

In other words, all Smith needs to do is take 14,280 voters away from Simpson's tally.

Not a bad bet if you're Club for Growth President Chris Chocola and you have a million or so bucks to lavish on Smith's campaign - especially under the Idaho GOP's new rules that restrict primary voting to registered Republicans.

But think about how quickly that game changes if Idaho followed Washington state's lead and took away the Republican Party's power to dominate your choices in November.

Washington's Top Two primary winnows out all but the candidates who emerge in first and second place. It doesn't matter if it's a Republican and Democrat, two Republicans, two Democrats or a pair of independents. Whoever gets the two highest number of votes advances to the general election.

Were Idaho a Top Two state, all Simpson would need do is come in second to wind up on the November ballot.

Then, the final decision would go to the 318,500 people who vote the 2nd Congressional District's general election. That larger, more balanced group would lean toward the middle. Someone who voted to end the government shutdown would be rewarded, not castigated.

Want to bet Chocola would find another place to invest his money?

And what about Labrador? You hear a bunch of grumbling from business groups and traditional Republicans looking to oust Tea Party members of Congress just like him.

In Labrador's district, it's virtually impossible. Only 71,920 people voted in the 1st district GOP primary last year and Labrador won four of every five.

But consider how Top Two alters the equation. Again, getting on the November ballot doesn't require a centrist to beat Labrador. Second place is good enough.

Then general election math takes over. Labrador bested then-Congressman Walt Minnick, D-Idaho, in 2010 by 24,046 votes out of 247,427 cast. Starting with Minnick's base, a centrist Republican challenger would work to persuade 12,050 people to change their minds about Labrador.

To the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, backing a Labrador challenger under those circumstances might look awfully tempting.

All it takes is a campaign to put an initiative creating a top two primary on the 2014 election ballot and then have 53,751 registered Idaho voters willing to sign a petition.

That's too late for the 2014 primary and it's no miracle cure for what ails Idaho's politics.

But it's a start. - M.T.

