

With Otter's help, Fulcher could just win

Marty Trillhaase, Lewiston Tribune

Idaho state Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian, can not get elected governor on his own. He's going to need some help from the incumbent.

All of which could happen. Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter finds himself in similar - though not identical - circumstances to Bob Smylie in 1966, the last Idaho Republican governor who got booted out of office in a GOP primary.

That year, Smylie was riding high. He was the dean of the nation's governors and before him was a pathway for the second spot on the GOP national ticket or perhaps even the U.S. Supreme Court.

All of that came crashing down in the summer of 1966 when state Sen. Don Samuelson, R-Sandpoint, won the GOP primary with 61 percent of the votes. He went on to narrowly claim the general election against Democrat Cecil Andrus - who would return the favor four years later.

Keep in mind that Fulcher is the first sitting member of the Legislature to challenge his own party's governor since Samuelson pulled it off in 1966. Consult Idaho's veteran political observers and you'll see other parallels begin taking shape:

- Voter fatigue - At what point do people simply become tired of a politician? For Smylie, it was nearly 20 years - more than seven years as attorney general and 12 as governor.

Otter - who wants to be the first governor since Smylie to win a third consecutive term - waged his first statewide campaign 35 years ago. He won four terms as lieutenant governor and three as a congressman.

- Rallying cry - Fulcher is focused on Otter's successful drive to establish a state-based health insurance exchange under Obamacare. Otter's right-wing critics have taken to calling the program Ottercare.

In 1966, Smylie's adversaries were incensed about the state's new 3 percent sales tax - which would survive a referendum challenge later in the year.

The analogy is not entirely on point. Lawmakers such as Charles McDevitt and Perry Swisher pushed for a sales tax; Smylie went along.

Otter, on the other hand, was the driving force behind the health exchange.

- Party schism - Today, it's the Tea Party contingent lining up behind Fulcher; then it was the acolytes of 1964 GOP presidential nominee Barry Goldwater supporting Samuelson.

As political observer Marty Peterson wrote earlier this year, Smylie earned the wrath of Gwen Barnett, Idaho's Republican national committeewoman, when he helped oust Goldwater ally Dean Burch as Republican National Committee chairman.

"Barnett responded by embarking on a personal crusade to purge Smylie from the party by defeating him when he ran for re-election in 1966," Peterson wrote.

The campaign for Smylie's scalp was far more passionate, however.

With Otter, it's a matter of tactics, not philosophy or even personalities.

On the other hand, the Samuelson-Smylie right sucked up all the oxygen in the primary. Next year, Fulcher could be part of an alternative slate of GOP candidates seeking offices such as superintendent of public instruction and secretary of state. How that plays out is anyone's guess. It could dissipate scarce energy and resources from Fulcher - or it could galvanize a contingent of like-minded Republicans to act in unison.

One factor in Fulcher's favor - next spring's GOP primary will be closed to all but registered Republicans. Democrats and independents who were tolerated in the 1966 primary will be shooed away this time.

Fulcher remains the underdog. He's going up against one of the best retail campaigners in Idaho, an incumbent with the confidence of Idaho's business establishment and unlimited resources.

It's Otter's race to lose. But given his penchant for complacency, he's entirely capable of blowing it. Many a financial and political debacle began with this assurance: "This time, it's different." - M.T.