

THE CARLSON CHRONICLE

Cracks in the Risch Armor?

Idaho Senator Jim Risch's cruise to easy re-election just may not be the lock Republicans would like to think.

A poll of 773 Idaho voters (the margin of error is +/- 3.5%) during late February by Public Policy Polling revealed some potential problems for the often acerbic, staunchly conservative senator who is the 15th most wealthy member of Congress.

The numbers have to be heartening for Risch challenger Nels Mitchell, a successful Boise born and raised attorney seeking his first public office.

There are two key numbers that incumbents, pundits and lobbyists give careful scrutiny: the favorability number and the re-elect. Both in the case of Risch signal potential problems.

Risch's favorability number was 47% (22% very favorable, 25% somewhat favorable). An old and venerable political rule of thumb is that anytime an incumbent's number is below 50% there's trouble on the horizon.

Even more troubling for Risch was the so-called re-elect number. The question can be posed several ways: "If the election for the U.S. Senate were held today, would you vote for Senator Risch?" Or, "Given what you know today regarding Senator Risch and his record, would you return him to office or would you consider someone else?"

According to the PPP, only 36% of Idaho voters are solidly committed to Risch while 48% think it is time to consider someone else. Like many Republicans, Risch is especially in trouble with women voters, especially independent women voters, as well as Democratic women voters and pro-choice Republican women.

Almost half the respondents to the poll (45%) said they were less likely to support Risch because of his vote against the Violence Against

Women Act. Some 31% said they were more likely to vote for him because of that vote.

Many Idaho voters also are critical of the Senator's mishandling of Republican House colleague Mike Simpson's proposed Boulder-White Clouds legislation. Some 46% of those responding said they were less likely to vote for the Senator because of his meddling obstructionism, while 25% said they would be more likely.

The poll appears to confirm anecdotal evidence that Risch has laid some seeds that could result in a huge upset come November. The Senator's comments to *Idaho Statesman* political editor Dan Popkey a year ago last December regarding the easy path he was pursuing because nothing was getting done in gridlocked Washington, D.C., and that he could in effect put it on cruise control forever, in contrast to the hard job he found his seven months as governor to be, still rankles many.

His globe-trotting, often with wife Vicki, because he is a member of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, does not appear to relate to or benefit Idaho business interests. His boastful pride in being designated the most conservative member of the U.S. Senate, a veritable abominable "No" man regardless of the merit of various legislation, his insensitivity to the less fortunate in our midst who aren't sheltered from the vicissitudes of life by the millions he has----all of these combined could spell trouble in November.

The key will be whether Nels Mitchell can raise the money to get his message out that it's time for a change and that Idaho needs a senator who will work constructively for the citizenry. Reportedly, Mitchell has been working hard at tapping an extensive network of friends from New York to Los Angeles for the kind of money it will take to exploit the cracks appearing in the Risch armor.

Time will tell, but there's a glimmer of hope in these numbers for Mitchell, and a clear "stormy seas" ahead message for Risch.