

Who says Crapo isn't conservative enough?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

U.S. Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, is a conservative's conservative.

When the National Journal combed through a series of votes, it ranked Crapo the 10th most conservative member of the U.S. Senate. That puts him behind fellow Idahoan Jim Risch, who heads the list, as well as Tim Scott, R-S.C. (third), Mike Lee, R-Utah (seventh) and Ron Johnson, R-Wis. (ninth) but well ahead of Rand Paul, R-Ky., Marco Rubio, R-Fla., and Pat Toomey, R-Penn. - who didn't even make the top 15.

But you wouldn't know it from the Club for Growth.

The conservative group famous for going into GOP primaries and targeting Republicans it deems not pure enough - including Idaho Congressman Mike Simpson - just issued its endorsements.

Johnson's on the list.

Same goes for Lee and Scott.

As are Paul, Rubio and Toomey.

Crapo?

The 10th most conservative member of the U.S. Senate?

The one who joined 15 others in backing a measure that would have devastated funding for the Idaho National Laboratory in his hometown of Idaho Falls?

The fellow who joined 13 Republicans in a last-ditch effort to stymie a budget deal and keep the government open for business? The guy who then joined a bloc of 25 who opposed the compromise that avoided a default on the national debt?

He's not on it.

It doesn't necessarily mean Club for Growth would challenge Crapo from the right in the 2016 primary.

But it is curious.

At his core, Crapo is a political grownup. He learned his craft running the Idaho Senate at a time when Democrats held half the seats and the governor's office. Governance took precedence over ideology.

At the federal level, he's been courageous about trying to forge a deficit reduction agreement - which means some taxpayer somewhere is going to pay more and someone who relies on government programs is going to have to accept less.

He was instrumental in reauthorizing the federal response to domestic violence and creating wilderness protection for the Owyhee Canyonlands.

You're likely to see more of that side of Crapo as the Republicans take control of the U.S. Senate next year. Some fringe players such as Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, will vote no. Crapo won't have the luxury.

If Congress is going to pass a budget bill, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell is going to need Crapo on board.

When a key appropriation bill or amendment is up for vote, Crapo may have to swallow hard and support it.

The next time Congress has to raise the debt ceiling, congressional Republicans will own it. Crapo will be expected to have the GOP leadership's back.

If by some miracle, compromises emerge on immigration, deficits or tax reform, the margins will be tight. Crapo's support will be crucial.

In light of that, the Club for Growth seems to be keeping its options open - if not telegraphing Crapo he's being watched.

If anyone is in a position to withstand such a challenge, it's Crapo. Arguably, he remains Idaho's most popular politician. He's got \$3.2 million socked away in his campaign treasury.

Meanwhile, Club for Growth has lost two straight in Idaho: It invested heavily in challenger Bryan Smith's campaign, only to have Simpson win by nearly 62 percent in last May's primary.

In 2008, Congressman Bill Sali, R-Idaho, lost the seat the Club for Growth helped him claim just two years earlier.

Whatever game Club for Growth is up to here, let's hope Crapo declines to play. - M.T.