

# Labrador rebuilds his bona fides with unruly base

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Don't blame Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, for playing brinkmanship with national security just to score political points against President Obama's immigration policy.

Blame his constituents.

Juan Williams does.

Writing in The Hill, the Fox News political analyst this week checked in on Labrador's attempt to derail the Department of Homeland Security's appropriation as leverage to rescind Obama's executive order sparing about 5 million undocumented workers from deportation.

"He's putting the safety and security of our nation at risk so he can grant 5 million undocumented people benefits in the United States," Labrador told Williams. "I think if we sell that case to the American people, the American people will revolt."

The GOP leadership doesn't agree. In fact, it sees another debacle such as the 2013 government shutdown standoff Labrador supported as a way to force Obama to abandon his health care reform package.

But Williams offered this insight: Labrador, a former immigration attorney who helped some people who were in the country illegally remain here and who himself came to the mainland from Puerto Rico, does not have "a hard heart set against the immigrant experience. ... But he now represents a 90 percent white, heavily Republican district. And his constituents, he says, want him to end Obamacare and stop the president's immigration plan."

Where would Williams get the idea that Idahoans - heavily dependent upon federal funding and immigrant labor - are pressuring their congressman toward holding the economy hostage for any reason?

If Williams had parachuted into Idaho, he would have found evidence to the contrary.

Pushed by the state's centrist business class, Idaho's GOP leadership actually implemented a huge part of Obamacare - a state-based health insurance exchange.

The same business interests openly support immigration reform - and you've not heard even a hiccup from Idaho's overwhelmingly Republican Legislature.

Perhaps Labrador intimated that.

At the very least, the Idaho Republican did not disabuse Williams of that notion.

Besides, Labrador can be congressman for life if he wants. Democrats can't touch him in the general election. The only exposure is from the right in the closed GOP primary in which only 72,000 people vote in the 1st Congressional District.

Labrador is about as conservative as they come. But many of those voters are purists - as Labrador found out when he backed House Speaker John Boehner's re-election bid.

Erstwhile supporters, such as St. Maries Republican Ken De Vries, accused Labrador of throwing "his most ardent conservative supporters under the bus and he is laughing about it."

The problem for Labrador isn't necessarily losing a primary challenge. The problem is whether he wants to be "Simpsoned." In other words, does he want to be dragged into an expensive, time-consuming primary campaign, as was the case last year for 2nd District Congressman Mike Simpson.

Simpson ended up winning nearly 62 percent of the vote against right-winger Bryan Smith, but it compelled the congressman to raise more than \$2 million and spend almost an entire year fending off the challenge.

In that light, going to the mat over immigration reform and abandoning the conservative Republican Study Committee to set up the House Freedom Caucus along with Reps. Justin Amash of Michigan, Mark Meadows of North Carolina and Matt Salmon of Arizona allows Labrador to re-establish his bona fides with the base.

Labrador is not being pushed into positions he doesn't support. But given the internal dynamics of Idaho's GOP at the moment, it is the safe move. - M.T.