

Labrador isn't calling; Simpson isn't picking up

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

With 1.6 million people spread out across the state, Idaho has just two members of the U.S. House of Representatives - Republicans Mike Simpson and Raul Labrador.

For the past six months, the Idaho Statesman's Bill Dentzer reported Monday, these two have not spoken to each other.

That's a new twist on an old conflict.

Simpson is a confidant of outgoing House Speaker John Boehner.

Labrador is a member of the House Freedom Caucus, which has claimed Boehner's scalp.

Simpson has been a man of the House - first in the Idaho Capitol, where he served as speaker, and then in Washington, D.C., where he's become a "cardinal" - one of the appropriation subcommittee chairmen.

Labrador has been an architect of the government shutdowns that mark his five years in office.

But their mutual animosity society boiled over last spring. Labrador was one of just 37 who voted against the so-called "doc fix" measure, which shored up Medicare reimbursements and also extended Secure Rural School payments for timber communities such as

Grangeville.

When Simpson said someone would "have to look long and hard to find a reason to vote no," an infuriated Labrador responded by telling Boise Public Radio:

"Simpson has been part of the establishment in Washington, D.C., for 12 years. He loves to go out drinking and smoking with the speaker (Boehner). He loves to have these relationships where it's all about making false promises to his constituents and then going back there to Washington, D.C., to compromise.

"We're different kinds of politicians. I will not lie to my constituents. I won't say something in my campaign that is totally different than what I do during my time as a member of Congress."

The record bears out Dentzer's reporting. Labrador signed on as a co-sponsor of three of Simpson's 11 bills; Simpson has co-sponsored one of Labrador's six bills - but no new legislative alliances have emerged since April.

All of which takes some effort. Idaho's congressional team is thrown together for such things as a monthly gathering with Idaho leaders and lobbyists who visit Washington, D.C., or at Republican campaign season rallies.

And they have mutual interests: A state where the federal government controls two-thirds of the land. Where the economy depends on maintaining a flow of federal tax dollars. Where federal decisions concerning endangered species or the operation of dams have huge consequences.

A big federal footprint notwithstanding, Idaho remains a flyover state with few political assets.

This bickering would be understandable if Simpson and Labrador were from different political parties and frequently fought each other in campaigns. They're on the same side and have never sought the same office.

What's ironic here is you can find several examples of people within Idaho's congressional delegation who actually opposed each other - and got along better.

- In 1972, Republicans Jim McClure and George Hansen squared off for the GOP nomination to succeed retiring Sen. Len Jordan. McClure won. But Hansen was elected to the U.S. House in 1974 and remained there for a decade. They returned each other's phone calls.
- By 1978, it was no secret that Republican Congressman Steve Symms was going to challenge Democratic Sen. Frank Church in 1980. The relationship was frosty, but they managed to talk to each other.
- In 1982, Democrat Larry LaRocco challenged then-Republican Congressman Larry Craig. He lost that round. But when LaRocco was elected to the House in 1990 and Craig moved up to the Senate, the two maintained a professional if not cordial relationship.
- In 2008, Democrat Walt Minnick captured Idaho's 1st Congressional District seat - and became a virtual partner to Simpson, the Republican in the 2nd Congressional District.

Sure, Labrador didn't have to call his seatmate dishonest, but Simpson's an adult. You expect more of him than the silent treatment.

But let's be frank.

Whether Simpson and Labrador are crooning "Kumbaya" or channeling blues rocker George Thorogood's "I Drink Alone," it doesn't change the fact that Congress is a dysfunctional mess.

Two more spatting members of Congress can't make things any worse, even if they're on the same side of the aisle.