

# Washington offers Idaho's frustrated center hope

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

The distance separating Washington 4th District Congressman Dan Newhouse and Idaho 1st District Congressman Raul Labrador is about as wide as the schism now pulling the U.S. House Republican majority apart.

Labrador, of course, is a ringleader within the House Freedom Caucus. Estimated at between 35 and 40 members, the group of hard-line conservatives has already claimed the political scalps of House Speaker John Boehner and his would-be successor, Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy. Although the GOP has a 247-seat majority, no speaker can be elected without 218 Republicans - and that's a mathematical impossibility as long as Labrador's bloc holds out.

By contrast, Newhouse is among about 40 House Republicans - including Idaho 2nd District Congressman Mike Simpson - who have joined with House Democrats to force a vote to reauthorize the Export-Import Bank.

To do that, they've signed a discharge petition, bypassing House Financial Services Committee Chairman Jeb Hensarling, R-Texas, and McCarthy - both of whom have refused to bring the Ex-Im bank bill to the floor. Although a bipartisan coalition of Republicans and Democrats would surely pass it, the measure has drawn fire from GOP's ideological right wing.

It's a big play. The last time individual members repudiated their leadership through a discharge petition was 2002.

Then there's last month's vote to keep the government open through Dec. 11. Newhouse joined Simpson and 5th District Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers in voting yes.

Labrador voted no.

In July, Newhouse, McMorris Rodgers and Simpson voted in favor of the new highway funding and veterans health care act. Labrador was among 34 no votes.

And last March, Newhouse, McMorris Rodgers and Simpson were among 392 Republicans and Democrats who voted to spare Medicare recipients from a disruption in health care. The bill also included two years worth of funding in the Secure Rural School program on which timber communities depend.

Of the 37 people voting no, seven - including Labrador - were among the first to sign up with the Freedom Caucus.

So ask yourself: How is Washington's 4th Congressional District so different from Idaho's 1st?

Both are rural, conservative and overwhelmingly Republican. Washington's 4th Congressional District backed Mitt Romney by 59.6 percent. Idaho's 1st Congressional District gave Romney 64.9 percent.

When veteran Rep. Doc Hastings retired in 2014, why didn't Washington's 4th District replace him with someone more like Labrador?

In fact, it almost did.

The winner of Washington's Aug. 5, 2014, primary was not Newhouse, but former NFL tight end Clint Didier.

Didier was a Tea Party acolyte.

Former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin and libertarian presidential candidate Ron Paul liked him.

Conservative groups including the Club for Growth, Young Americans for Liberty, Freedom Defense Fund and the House Liberty Fund gave him money.

He vowed to oppose both new taxes and Boehner as speaker.

When the votes were counted, Didier claimed nearly 32 percent, or 33,965 votes.

Newhouse came in second with nearly 26 percent, or 27,326 votes.

That's roughly the same margin by which Labrador defeated Vaughn Ward in the 2010 GOP primary - 38,711 to 31,582.

In a typical system, Didier would have gone on to face the leading Democrat, Estakio Beltran - who claimed 12 percent, or 13,062 votes.

And Didier would have been elected easily in November.

That's how Idaho's closed Republican primary system works. Win the Republican nomination and you're almost guaranteed to win office in the general election. Turnout in the primary is smaller and more partisan, so it gives ideologues such as Labrador an advantage.

But Washington operates a Top Two primary. Instead of nominating a party's candidates, Washington elevates the candidates who come in first and second.

So the system allowed an all-Republican district a choice between two kinds of Republicans.

In November, turnout was larger and broader than it had been during the primary - and it gave Newhouse a narrow edge. He won 77,772 votes, compared to 75,307 for Didier.

For all those establishment Idaho Republicans who don't like the job Labrador is doing in Washington, D.C., there's a message in that: If you want to send a problem-solver, not a bomb-thrower, to Congress, having a Top Two primary helps.