

Fill ‘er up

Randy Stapilus/Ridenbaugh Press

There’s a logic some political people embrace through the years that goes like this: When it comes to offices you’re highly unlikely to win, you’re better off if no one from your party files as a challenger for it. That way, you’ll be putting in fewer resources on loser races, and you can focus on the better prospects.

I’ve never bought it.

For one thing, a “placeholder” candidacy really doesn’t cost a lot more than the filing fee, and usually you can avoid that by collecting petition signatures – a good organizing tool in itself. For another, it demonstrates that members of that party really are around, a psychological lever. Even placeholders usually participate in debates and are profiled in news reports, good free media for the minority party. And placeholders tend to bring their own small group of supporters into the arena.

But among the various other reasons filling those slots is a good idea, there’s pre-eminently this: You never know what might happen to the majority party or its candidates in the months ahead.

What if, for example, the Larry Craig 2007 airport scandal, which surfaced in August that year, had surfaced instead in August (or later in) 2008? Before those reports, Craig would have been nearly unbeatable for re-election; afterward, with the right set of responses to the headlines, lightning might actually have struck for the Democrat. Or maybe not, but the possibility would have been real.

Idaho Democrats in recent years have had a tougher time filling major office ballot positions, and only days before the the filing deadline did party organizers produce candidates for the top three this year: Jerry Sturgill for the Senate (incumbent: Republican Mike Crapo), James Piotrowski for the first district House seat (incumbent: Republican Raul Labrador) and Jennifer Martinez for the second district (incumbent: Republican Mike Simpson). They seem to be good candidates, though by starting so late, they’re at a big disadvantage, and that only piles on top of other disadvantages facing all Democrats in recent years. Last cycle, Democrats produced candidates for major offices much earlier, and still generally lost in landslides.

They have to know, going in, that their odds are not good.

But Democrats were right to make the recruiting effort for these congressional level seats, and for many others at the legislative and other levels. The old caution that you never know what the months ahead might bring seems especially valid this year.

At this is written, businessman Donald Trump (who came in second place in the Idaho primary) looks most likely to become the Republican nominee for president. But will he? If he does, how do the more establishment or philosophically-oriented Republicans react – do they support him

or, as some openly discuss, will they bolt and support an independent candidacy, or sit the race out? If Trump is denied the nomination, how do his supporters react?

Trump has built strong support within Republican-supporting ranks, but how will he be received in the general election voting population? (Probably a good deal differently.)

How will Idaho's elected and party officials respond to a Trump candidacy, or the fallout from a battle over it? Almost none of Idaho's elected officials have come out in public support of Trump, which may reflect what their constituents think. What will happen to Republican unity under those conditions?

Six months from now, how will people look at the two major parties – the same way they do today, or differently?

There are no easy answers. That's why you're wise to cover as many of the contingencies as you can.