

The field, a year out

Randy Stapilus/Ridenbaugh Press

Can it be that this far in advance, the main components of the 2018 governor's race already are coming into view?

Last week gave us some additional clarity, and at least a preliminary picture, enough to hang some thoughts around, is emerging.

So this seems like time to take stock.

Last week, after all, was when three-term Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter confirmed he would not seek another term and would instead support his long-time lieutenant, Brad Little, for the job. That's no surprise, of course. The probability has been against another run by Otter ever since his last one, and especially since Little announced for the office: Little would never challenge Otter in a primary. Little's early announcement mirrored Otter's own early-in approach, soaking up support and building organization that would be denied to other contenders. It's sound strategy.

In some states, and at times in Idaho, all that might seem like nearly the end of the story. But Otter's three terms has kept bottled growing pressures in the Republican party, resulting in several more serious primary prospects.

Two of those already are announced. Developer Tommy Ahlquist, who has been centrally involved in downtown Boise's recent redevelopment but has never run for office before, said last week he will file for candidate status, and will launch a statewide tour. (That followed a complaint, from a source unknown that he had been campaigning at Republican events while not registered as a candidate.) Business leaders without political experience have not tended to do well in top-line Idaho elections; you'll find a string of earlier lower office elections and other political dues-paying on the resumes of nearly all of Idaho's recent top elected officials (Otter being a good example). But every election is its own animal, precedents are made to be broken, and maybe Ahlquist stands out in a crowded field.

There's also a former candidate for governor in the field: Russell Fulcher, the former legislator from Meridian who challenged Otter in the 2014 gubernatorial primary. He fell short then, with 44 percent of the vote, but that was in what amounted to a two-way race. If he could retain his support or even most of it, might that be enough to prevail in a three- or four-way contest? We know this much: He has been pulling together support for a second run for a long time now.

Last but surely not least: Raul Labrador, the four-term member of the U.S. House who has won with strong votes each time out, and has a firm base of support. He has not confirmed a run for governor, and could still decide otherwise, but the indicators keep pointing in that direction. (A recent one: His pushing of a congressional term limits measure, which might start to look embarrassing for a member of Congress much beyond four or five terms.) He does not seem

deterred by the presence of any of the other contenders, or prospects. The probabilities at present favor his entry.

How does Little stack up here? He is broadly well-regarded (though not by everyone in the Republican Party), and will likely pick up much of the support Otter has had. But how does he fare in a strongly-contested four-way race?

Two-candidate races tend to be a lot easier to call than those where a bunch of candidates are jostling; the number of random factors that could throw a race in one direction or another will multiply. You could make a credible case for any of these four contenders to win a Republican primary.

And for all we know, there may be more. After all, we're more than a year away, still, from the candidate filing deadline.

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