

Russ Fulcher switches gears toward a race he can win

Chuck Malloy/Idaho Politics Weekly Former state Sen. Russ Fulcher's decision to drop out of the governor's race is a blow to supporters and friends who have worked years to help their man get elected to the state's highest office.

But here's the consolation prize: He's leaving a governor's race that he had practically no chance of winning, and running for the 1st Congressional District seat, where he has a fighting chance. The 1st District seat usually goes to the most conservative candidate in the field. Fulcher may not be the firebrand conservative that Congressman Raul Labrador is, and he doesn't regularly put his foot in his mouth as former Congressman Bill Sali did.

But Fulcher is as conservative as they get.

Fulcher's supporters shouldn't place too much stock in his 44 percent showing against Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter in the 2014 gubernatorial primary because there were a lot of anti-Otter votes out there. But Fulcher did manage to out-poll Otter in the 1st District, which is no small accomplishment against a sitting governor and former 1st District representative. So, Fulcher has at least some base to draw from in that district.

Fulcher's path to governor was not so clear - in fact, next to impossible with Labrador in the fray. Labrador probably had more "free" press within a week of his announcement than Fulcher had during his entire run for governor three years ago. "Free" media is not as crucial in a run for the 1st District, because the media pays little attention to congressional races. During the winter months, the media's focus is on the state Legislature and not analyzing what 25 percent of voters might show up to cast ballots in a primary.

Labrador - and lack of media attention - were not Fulcher's only problems in his run for governor. Lt. Gov. Brad Little has the lofty title and Boise developer Tommy Ahlquist has been pouring money into an aggressive television advertising campaign.

Fulcher has raised somewhere over \$50,000, which is well short of what some candidates spend in legislative races.

In terms of finances, Fulcher was only a little better off than low-budget campaigners such as Harley Brown or Marvin "Pro-Life" Richardson. But in a congressional campaign, a few hundred thousand goes a long way.

Fulcher has Labrador's full support, which helps in his congressional bid. But it's noteworthy that Fulcher falls short of endorsing Labrador for governor, calling the latest arrangement as part of a "spirit of cooperation."

Fair enough.

The "spirit of cooperation" was all about Fulcher stepping aside and giving Labrador a clear shot at consolidating conservative support.

"If I didn't take the high road on this, then a less favorable candidate than I'd like to see could be elected as governor and a less favorable candidate could win in the 1st District," Fulcher said. "I'm excited about the congressional race. ... I'm all in."

Fulcher should be excited, and not just for his improved prospects of winning. His kids are grown, so there would be no problem with him and his wife moving to the Washington, D.C., area. And at 55, he's young enough to give the demanding job the energy that's needed.

If Fulcher wins - and that's far from being a foregone conclusion with former Attorney General and Lt. Gov. David Leroy in the race and a potentially crowded field - don't expect him to be a clone of Labrador. They have similar political views, but distinctly different styles.

Labrador, a founding member of the conservative-based House Freedom Caucus, is not afraid to throw bombs.

Fulcher, who spent six of his 10 years in the state Senate in a leadership position with the party, tends to be more pragmatic in the political arena. He's not likely to lead the charge for shutting down the government over spending bills he doesn't like. And Fulcher would have no problem working with 2nd District Congressman Mike Simpson.

"You won't see a rift within the Idaho delegation," he says.

Fulcher acknowledges that his switch opens himself to criticism.

"A percentage of people might disagree, or think I'm being wishy-washy. All I can do is communicate what's in my head and heart. If you're involved with public service, then you go where there is the greatest need. Right now, the biggest void is in the 1st District."

He's making the right move for himself, and it could pay off for him politically as well.

Malloy writes for Idaho Politics Weekly. His email address is ctmalloy@outlook.com