

Tommy veers to the right; Raul takes the bait

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Judging from the forum among Idaho's GOP gubernatorial candidates July 21 in Coeur d'Alene, Boise developer Tommy Ahlquist is altering his public image and running hard to the right.

Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, is taking the bait.

And if you look closely, you just might see a slight grin emerging across Lt. Gov. Brad Little's face.

That's not how things were shaping up just a few months ago.

With former state Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian, opting to run for the 1st District House seat instead of governor, the path was clear for Labrador to claim the lion's share of the GOP's conservative base.

The polls created that impression. Last April, the Idaho Freedom Foundation put Labrador's support at 39 percent vs. 7 percent for Fulcher. Against that was Little's 27 percent and Ahlquist at 2 percent.

The following month, pollster Dan Jones and Associates gave Labrador 22 percent of the GOP vote, Little 18 percent and Ahlquist 8 percent. The poll did not mention Fulcher.

In spite of never having sought elective office before, Ahlquist's background would seem to define him as a moderate. He's a Boise developer. He gave \$5,000 to A.J. Balukoff's 2014 Democratic campaign against Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter. He's had nice things to say about Boise Mayor David Bieter, who is a former Democratic legislator. Until recently, Ahlquist has not been particularly active in GOP primary politics.

So there was the expectation that he'd be competing for Little's center-right establishment base.

Nothing doing.

Between taking a hard stance against same-sex marriage and pledging to find \$100 million worth of bloat in Idaho's budget, Ahlquist is mining votes from Labrador's wing of the party.

In Coeur d'Alene last weekend, Labrador fired back: "I'd like to welcome Tommy to the Republican Party."

They debated:

- President Donald Trump. Ahlquist said he was more like Trump because he was running as a political outsider.

Labrador pointed out he knew Trump, that he campaigned for Trump and that Trump was a friend of his.

- Tax cuts. Between Ahlquist and Labrador, the only question was how deep and how fast. Taxes needed to be "sliced and diced," Ahlquist said. A former state lawmaker, Labrador said he was for tax cuts before tax cuts were cool, and that he would cut income taxes to a 5 percent uniform rate.

Only Little was restrained, saying this issue is more complicated than comparing one state's tax rate with another's.

- Education. Ahlquist and Labrador bemoaned the current state of public schools; Little argued many times teachers are expected to compensate for "the condition of the kids when they show up."

What's going on here?

Theory No. 1 - There's a batch of conservative Mormon voters in eastern Idaho who are up for grabs between Ahlquist and Labrador. Both are members of the Mormon church.

Theory No. 2 - There's not much opportunity to convert members of Little's establishment wing. He has deep roots with agriculture and the state's business lobby. He's been Otter's loyal second in command. And Little's slice of the GOP electorate may be more robust than the polls suggest.

Theory No. 3 - After a career that includes service in the Senate and as lieutenant governor, Little knows the nooks and crannies of state government; Labrador and Ahlquist prefer to argue philosophy among themselves rather than debate details with him.

Theory No. 4 - Ahlquist's political consultants are handing him this simple advice: It's a Republican primary, dummy. If you want to win, pivot as far to the right as you can get.

Either way, you can't deny Ahlquist's strategy - or the fact Labrador is taking it seriously. - M.T.