

Getting two Idaho senators in one election

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho's two Republican senators, Mike Crapo and Jim Risch, voted the same way 93 percent of the time last year.

Out of 15 all-Republican Senate delegations, that's second only to Wyoming's John Barrasso and Michael Enzi, who matched 95 percent of their votes.

Which would be fine if Risch voted like Crapo.

Center-right, but rational, Crapo has pursued wilderness protection for the Owyhee Canyonlands. He worked on reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act. He served as a member of the Senate Gang of Eight that was willing to admit deficit reduction required more taxes.

But ever since he arrived in the Senate in 2009, Risch made a beeline for the right. Poring over 116 Senate votes, the National Journal rated Risch far and away the chamber's most conservative member. Risch is more extreme than former Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., who's now running the Heritage Foundation. He's outflanked Rand Paul, R-Ky., and Pat Toomey, R-Pa. And he's certainly more ideological in his voting than his predecessor, former Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho.

Unfortunately, Crapo has chosen to follow Risch. For instance:

- In 2012, he was among just 16 senators who supported Paul's radical budget to undermine everything from Social Security and Medicare to the Department of Energy.
- Earlier this year, Crapo was part of a 14-member fringe that refused to keep government open for business just long enough to pass a budget. Then he joined the 26 members who voted against that budget.
- Last year - and the year before that - he voted against the farm bill. That's a dramatic reversal for a politician who, in 2008, not only voted for the farm bill, but twice voted to override President George W. Bush's veto. He also supported the 2002 version.
- In 2012, Crapo voted against a transportation package - a break in his pattern of support for highway bills that stretched back to the 2005 bill and the 1998 measure.
- In opposing the budget bill, Crapo lined up against the extra \$154 million Congressman Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, had provided to the Idaho National Laboratory - which fuels the economy of Crapo's hometown of Idaho Falls. At one time, Crapo eagerly trumpeted his efforts to secure earmarks for the lab.

This is more than just a handful of votes and anecdotes.

Conservative interest groups have been rating Crapo ever since he went to Washington as a young House member in 1993.

The Club for Growth gave Crapo a 70 percent in 2007. He's now up to 86 percent.

The John Birch Society liked half of Crapo's votes in 2006. Last year, they scored him at 90 percent.

And the National Journal's conservative index moved Crapo from 76 percent in 2005 to 87 percent seven years later.

What could explain this rightward tilt?

An Idaho GOP that has careened toward the fringe?

Maybe.

A Congress that has become polarized over time?

Sure.

But if you had any doubts Risch is the common denominator, consider what Crapo told Boise State Public Radio this week. Before he takes sides on the upcoming farm bill vote - a measure both Simpson and Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, supported in the House - Crapo wants to talk to Risch.

"This bill has very strong reasons to vote for it," Crapo said. "And there are very strong objections."

Crapo is not up for re-election this year. Risch is.

So here's the question: If Idaho voters decide to oust Risch this fall in favor of Democratic long-shot Nels Mitchell, will they be getting two more thoughtful senators for the price of one? - M.T.