

Rather than run on his record, Otter invents one

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

If Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter were happy with his record - or thought you were - here's the television spot he'd be running:

"When the Great Recession struck, I held the line on taxes and spending.

"It was a tough call, but it was the right one for Idaho's hard-working families and their future.

"And when the economy began to recover, I reinvested the dividend in Idaho's economy by cutting taxes every chance I got."

Butch Otter.

Building a better Idaho.

But that's not how Otter's campaign is selling you on the idea of keeping him in the governor's office for a third consecutive term.

Instead, he's running this spot:

"We've made Idaho one of America's best places to start a business. And we're also making it a great state to get a good education. We've got \$35 million back in the classroom. And we put broadband into every high school. And now I have a 20-point education plan that will fund additional technology and reinvest in our teachers so they're amongst the best in the nation.

"Great jobs, great schools. I'm working to build a brighter future."

Who does he think he's kidding? Otter is taking a beating from Democratic opponent A.J. Balukoff's relentless focus on education. So rather than run on his record, the incumbent is running away from the following:

- Otter partnered with outgoing state schools Superintendent Tom Luna to produce a flawed school overhaul package that voters repealed by margins of up to two-thirds in the 2012 election. Only then did Otter switch gears and invite all sides in Idaho's education wars to sit at the table, a process that produced his 20-point education plan.
- Even at that, the governor can't tell you how he'll pay for it. He's pledged to provide \$350 million toward implementing the package during a five-year period, but Idaho's economy won't produce the tax revenues to sustain state government and provide such a dramatic boost in education funding. Rather than talk about tax increases, Otter has embraced continued cuts in business taxes.
- Before Otter was in favor of school funding, he was against it. As FiveThirtyEight.com writer Ben Casselman reported, the amount of money devoted to each of Idaho's public school students dropped 12.3 percent in 2011-2012 - the steepest decline in the United

States. That puts Otter in a category by himself. When faced with recessions, previous Idaho governors such as Republican Dirk Kempthorne or Democrat John Evans opted to raise taxes rather than cut public education spending.

- At seemingly every opportunity, Otter has diverted funding from schools. In 2010, he arbitrarily deemed his professional economist's revenue projections too optimistic and cut spending by \$145 million. He followed it up in 2011 by low balling the revenue estimate by about another \$80 million. When the economy performed as projected, Otter took his artificial budget surplus and spent it on tax cuts.
- Had the Legislature followed Otter's lead this year, teacher pay would have been frozen while the state lavished another \$30 million on tax breaks and increased its savings accounts by 50 percent by the end of the current budget cycle.
- At the close of his second term, Otter has presided over a slide that has seen the state ranked dead last in the amount of financial commitment it devotes to each student and next to last in per-pupil expenditures - a contradiction explained only by the fact that Idaho schools are draining savings to pay the bills.

Otter is reinventing himself because the challenge to "gettin' me re-elected" is coming from a pro-education Democrat rather than the right wing of his own party. But come next January if Otter is re-elected, don't be surprised if this version of Otter is replaced with yet

another. - M.T.