

# It's on for 2018 - already

## Randy Stapilus/Ridenbaugh Press

“We narrowly lost that race but our message of empowerment, advancement and citizen-led state control over federal dependency resonated loudly. I'm pleased to communicate that I will be continuing that mission as a candidate for governor in 2018.”

The speaker was former state Senator Russ Fulcher, a Meridian Republican who ran in the Republican primary for governor in 2014 – losing to incumbent C.L. “Butch” Otter – announcing last week, in mid-2016, about his upcoming return to the governor's race in 2018.

The news came on a slickly-produced 1:44 video that almost could have doubled as a campaign ad except that this was just the announcement of a forthcoming campaign.

There really is no break in this anymore, is there?

That's not meant as a slap at Fulcher. As you'll probably recall, he's the second major candidate for governor in 2018, the first being Lieutenant Governor Brad Little, an Otter appointee who has been widely considered the governor-in-waiting for about seven years now. Because much of the support base for Fulcher overlaps with that of Representative Raul Labrador, who has also often been mentioned as a 2018 gubernatorial prospect, this may be an indicator Labrador won't be running for that office. At least, in 2018.

It also sets up a near rerun of the contest from 2014, when Fulcher's run against Otter was prompted in large part because of Otter's support for the state health insurance exchange. Fulcher's 2014 web site said, “Federal policies in the areas of healthcare, education, and the environment are stripping freedoms from Idahoans and placing them in the hands of government bureaucrats. This became glaringly evident in 2013, when the Idaho Legislature, led by Governor Butch Otter, voluntarily embraced Obamacare, thereby placing Idaho as a partner of the federal government in implementing a healthcare law that Idahoans do not want and cannot afford.”

If Otter won't be on the ballot, Little, who has been as loyal a lieutenant as a governor could ask for, will be a good stand in.

But some other things have changed and will change between 2014 and 2018. Here are a couple.

The so-controversial health insurance marketplace is part of the health and financial environment now, and about 100,000 Idahoans receive health insurance coverage in whole or part because of it. Campaigning against federal intrusion is never a loser in Idaho, but campaigning to kick 100,000 people off health insurance almost surely would be. The subjects and approach of a Fulcher campaign would almost have to change somewhat from 2014, or face a revolt. Or a loss to Little.

The other change is harder to estimate: It has to do with the effect of Donald Trump on politics going forward from 2016. Otter has joined Trump's campaign as an honorary chair, but most other major Republican leaders in the state have kept a lower profile. How will Trump and his advocates be viewed a year, or two years, from now? In some parts of the state – substantial parts of southern Idaho, to start with – Trump is not very popular at all, and a touchy subject for many Republicans to address.

But the future of the Republican Party will be very much up for grabs after this year's campaign is over, and that contest will be active in Idaho as it will be elsewhere. Where will Little and Fulcher come down on it?

The campaign is beginning, even now.