

If Trump makes the call, Idaho's in for a wild ride

Idaho Congressman Raul Labrador will not become President-elect Donald Trump's Interior secretary.

That honor went to Rep. Ryan Zinke, R-Mont., who apparently bested not only Labrador but Washington Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers as well.

But as long as Labrador is waiting for the phone to ring - possibly to fill a Trump administration post involving immigration or criminal justice reform - there's still a chance Idaho will have a one-of-a-kind election to replace him.

Unlike virtually any other political position, a member of the U.S. House achieves office only through the ballot box. Should Labrador take a promotion, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter cannot appoint his replacement; he can only schedule a special election.

As Betsy Russell of the Spokesman-Review reported, Idaho has no experience to draw upon. Vacancies in Idaho's 2nd Congressional District office in 1934 and 1946 came late enough in the year that no replacement was elected.

Labrador's expected to run for the governor's office two years from now, creating an open congressional seat. Among the names mentioned as potential candidates are former Idaho Attorney General David Leroy, state Rep. Luke Malek, R-Coeur d'Alene, Assistant House Majority Leader Brent Crane, R-Nampa, and Sen. Jim Rice, R-Caldwell.

So you could expect them to jump into a special election next year. But here's where it starts getting chaotic: Staging a special election early in an odd-numbered year offers entry into congressional politics for a generation of people who have bided their time in legislative and junior executive slots while the state's political geritocracy grinds on.

Otter has been governor for 10 years.

Sen. Mike Crapo is about to begin his fourth six-year term.

Congressman Mike Simpson has been in office since 1999. Sen. Jim Risch has eight years under his belt - holding a seat that Sen. Larry Craig occupied for 18 years.

If you're looking to make the leap, you will not get a better chance. Plus it's pain-free.

No other federal or state office is up in 2017. Any legislator, statewide official or county commissioner could run for Labrador's vacancy in 2017, fall short, and still retain the option of running for re-election in 2018.

What have they got to lose?

So don't be surprised to see the list expand.

For the sake of argument, maybe Sens. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint, or Bob Nonini, R-Coeur d'Alene, see a member of Congress in the mirror.

Who's to say the list of congressional hopefuls does not expand to include Rep. Heather Scott, R-Blanchard, Idaho County Commissioner Skip Brandt or Attorney General Lawrence Wasden?

Jumping into a special election campaign offers an ambitious politician the chance to gain exposure with voters and to build alliances for a future run.

Former Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian, for instance, may decide the circumstances warrant taking a run at Congress in 2017 - even though he's an announced candidate for governor in 2018. (If he succeeds, nothing would stop him from running for governor while serving a brief stint as a 1st District congressman.)

In such a short, wild and unpredictable election, defeat can be explained away without any permanent loss in prestige.

It gets even better. Unlike other states, Idaho does not run a primary and then a general election to fill congressional vacancies. If you get a dozen candidates running, the one winning the most votes - whether its 50 percent or 15 percent - is off to Washington, D.C.

Imagine how tempting such a scenario might appear to Idaho's perennial minority party. If a gaggle of Republican candidates split their party's congressional votes into thin slices, the door would be opened to a Democrat capable of retaining his party's traditional 30 percent.

Inevitably, the process might build into a virtuous cycle: more candidates breed more uncertainty attracting even more hopefuls who see a path to victory by claiming the narrowest base of support.

It wouldn't be so much an election as a political lottery. All it takes to get it rolling is one phone call from the president-elect.- M.T.