

# Ins meet the outs

**Randy Stapilus/Ridenbaugh Press**

Credit Raul Labrador with holding a town hall meeting, and for not hot-footing in and out. The three hours he spent there must have been an endurance challenge; most town halls I have attended over the years have been substantially shorter, usually half as long.

In other respects, compared to other recent town halls around the country, it was not terribly different: Republican representative appears and is jeered by hundreds of people in normally friendly locations. Across the state line in the adjacent eastern Oregon congressional district, Representative Greg Walden encountered much the same in Hood River (his small home town), Bend and elsewhere: A Republican routinely re-elected by supermajorities over two decades faced unusually large and stunningly hostile crowds. It must have been unlike anything he'd seen before.

And in Idaho? Would anyone other than Labrador's loyal chorus show up?

They did; and, true, some Labrador (and Donald Trump) backers did too. But the fact that this event was held in the Republican heartland of Meridian, and lines formed hours in advance, did not discourage the opposition from showing up and getting loud. The crowd was reported as numbering around 800, an unusually big number for this sort of thing. At town halls, organizers usually have to search out prospective questioners; this time, questioners lined up by the dozens at the available mics.

All that was secondary to the electricity in the air (evident even if you watched the video), and the reason was clear: This was one of the relatively few occasions when the inside and the outside of Idaho politics came face to face.

It doesn't happen a lot. Mostly in Idaho (with variations happening as well in other states), there's the Republican infrastructure and its supporters over here, and what's been dubbing itself the Resistance (Democrats and others in opposition) over there, usually in their highly separated bubbles. Theoretically, actual contact could happen more often at the Idaho Legislature, where it should happen, and it does in a limited way on specific issues. The town hall, though, was a chance to raise ideas and frame them independently. The outsiders here were able to face off directly with their opposition, and hear back in kind.

Along the way Labrador may have heard some things from constituents he might not have heard from them before, or at least not in force, things politicians don't hear often - and that many Idahoans don't often hear from each other.

When he said, "I don't think there's anything in the law that requires the president to provide his tax returns," he got boos. Whatever else, this marked a clear expression of different world views bumping against each other.

When he said, “I do not believe that healthcare is a basic right,” much of the crowd roared its disapproval. (Question: What other rights are meaningful without health, or while you’re crushed underneath medical bills?) Labrador did say he thought people should have access to health care. One woman responded, “I have access to buy a Mercedes. The only problem is, I can’t afford a Mercedes. Many people can’t afford decent health care if it is not provided by the government.”

Mostly and traditionally, Idahoans have been polite and gentle-spoken around their elected officials. Contrariness usually isn’t a big part of the picture; the ideas “espoused” by most elected officials (in Idaho, Republicans basically) rarely draw much direct blowback. But on Wednesday in Meridian, they did. Some of it wasn’t polite, as Labrador noted ironically (“I’m super popular tonight”). But he certainly was hearing from more than the hallelujah chorus. And remember: The yelling often comes from pent-up frustration at not being listened to, as it did in the days of Tea.

A side of Idaho that doesn’t usually make itself very visible is doing that now. And ma again Monday, when Labrador has scheduled another hall at Nampa.

In Idaho’s other House district, Representative Mike Simpson has been quoted as saying, “I’ve never been really active in doing town halls. Town hall meetings I have found, generally, disintegrate into yelling efforts.”

Meridian was a demonstration that even if they do, something awfully useful can happen there. Simpson might be well advised to reconsider.

-----  
Randy Stapilus is a former Idaho newspaper reporter and editor and blogs at [www.ridenbaugh.com](http://www.ridenbaugh.com). He can be reached at [stapilus@ridenbaugh.com](mailto:stapilus@ridenbaugh.com). A book of his Idaho columns from the past decade, Crossing the Snake, is available at [www.ridenbaughpress.com/crossing](http://www.ridenbaughpress.com/crossing).