

Did luck put governorship in Labrador's reach?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Seven years ago, Raul Labrador had to do nothing less than catch lightning in a bottle.

To become Idaho's next 1st District congressman, he'd have to overcome two longshots:

- Take out the GOP establishment's anointed choice, Iraq War veteran Vaughn Ward, in the Republican primary.
- Then oust incumbent Walt Minnick, a Blue Dog Democrat so conservative he could pass for a Republican - and drew considerable support from moderates and the business community.

Labrador prevailed. But as he now prepares to run for governor, it's worth pondering the question still hanging over the results: Was he better at sizing up opportunities than anyone else?

Or was Labrador's win just a fluke?

Certainly, the breaks came his way in the GOP contest. By the end of the campaign, Labrador found himself facing what the blog Talking Points Memo labeled the "worst candidate ever."

In a few short weeks, Ward had been exposed for:

- Plagiarizing sections of President Barack Obama's epoch-making speech to the 2004 Democratic National Convention.
- Lifting word-for-word position statements from other candidates and members of Congress on his webpage.
- Positioning himself as a federal fiscal hawk while living off his wife's job at Fannie Mae.
- Failing to vote in the 2008 presidential election, even though he served as GOP nominee John McCain's campaign director in Nevada.

Mix in a dismal debate performance against Labrador and the results got baked in: Labrador won the five-way primary with 47.6 percent of the vote. Incredibly, Ward still managed to get 38.9 percent.

But a well-funded Minnick campaign could be forgiven for assuming the GOP primary had nominated a weaker opponent for the fall.

What Minnick didn't count on was a national tidal wave of antipathy toward Obama and the Democratic House. The GOP surge captured 63 Democratic seats - including 53 incumbents.

Even with everything going his way, Labrador managed to squeak out only a 51 percent majority in a four-way race. His 9.7 percent margin over Minnick put him in the middle of the GOP Class of 2010 - respectable but hardly phenomenal.

Since then, Labrador has been allowed to coast.

With Obama in the White House, he could vote time after time to repeal Obamacare without affecting anyone at home.

With the Senate in Democratic hands, he could vote against bills that provided Secure Rural Schools to north central Idaho because a congressional majority was bound to pass those measures anyway.

With the Idaho National Laboratory outside his congressional district, he could afford to vote for Congressman Tom McClintock's measure to gut nuclear energy research and shut down the lab.

And as the Republican incumbent, he was virtually guaranteed re-election against a trio of underfunded Democratic sacrificial lambs - Lewiston's Jimmy Farris in 2012, former Moscow lawmaker Shirley Ringo in 2014 and Boise attorney Jim Piotrowski last year.

In the 2016 campaign, Labrador took 68 percent - a fact he reiterated to the crowd of skeptics he encountered Friday at Lewiston:

"The problem you have is you disagree with me," he said. "Well, 68 percent of the people in Idaho disagree with you."

But if anything, that town hall forum showed how much the sand has shifted beneath Labrador's feet. It's one thing to vote against Obamacare as a protest. It's quite another as a member of the House Freedom Caucus to help engineer and then pass a measure that has - with a GOP Senate and Donald Trump in the White House - a good chance of stripping away people's health insurance.

Such consequential decisions don't often come along in Congress. But in the governor's chair, it's otherwise known as just another day in the office.

"When you're governor, there's no one to stand with you," former Idaho Gov. Dirk Kempthorne recently told the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell. "You either sign the legislation or you veto it and you say why."

And when you say why, you don't - as Labrador famously did last Friday - stumble into a cringe-worthy gaffe that rivals anything Vaughn Ward ever said. Saying that "nobody dies because they don't have access to health care" threw Labrador on his heels in a way nothing has before.

The polls say it won't matter. Labrador comfortably leads the three other candidates - Lt. Gov. Brad Little, former state Sen. Russ Fulcher and Boise developer Tommy Ahlquist.

But it's a new game. The political currents have shifted. It's a different kind of office. And a four-way GOP gubernatorial primary is unlike anything Idaho has seen in two generations.

Here's the one thing for sure: Labrador can't afford too many more days like the one he had in Lewiston.
- M.T.