

On health care, candidate Labrador goes mum

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Formally launching his campaign to become Idaho's 33rd governor, Congressman Raul Labrador has been willing to talk freely about anything.

His favorable polling numbers.

The challenge in balancing his duties in Washington, D.C., with campaigning statewide.

His efforts as a member of the House Freedom Caucus to swing Congress to the right.

A commitment to freedom, Idaho's way of life and its values.

Cutting taxes.

Expanding school choice.

Slicing through government bureaucracy and regulations.

Everything, that is, except the one issue hanging over his state and just about everyone who lives in it: health care.

As Kimberlee Kruesi of the Associated Press noted, the four-term congressman omitted any mention of that topic when he spoke in Boise.

Cutting taxes is not heavy lifting; Idaho's Legislature is constantly clamoring to do just that.

There's a consensus on education; Idahoans found it once they dispatched former state schools Superintendent Tom Luna's reform package.

This is a Republican state; if there's a bureaucracy or regulation left to cut, let's see it.

But health care?

Now there's a political headache.

When Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter persuaded lawmakers to create a state-based exchange to process subsidized private health insurance coverage for more than 87,000 people under Obamacare, it set off the Republican Civil War of 2014.

Meanwhile, the largest piece of unfinished business on the next governor's plate may be the fate of some 78,000 low-income adults who make too little to qualify for those subsidies. State lawmakers have refused to extend Medicaid to them - in spite of the fact that doing so would save lives and tax dollars.

Both programs were popular in Idaho even before Republican efforts to repeal Obamacare enhanced the public's appreciation for the health care package.

The last time Idaho lawmakers tried - and failed - to address Medicaid expansion in 2016, they disappointed 64 percent of Idahoans, according to pollster Dan Jones.

Earlier this year, Boise State University's public policy survey found 70 percent favored closing the so-called Medicaid gap. A narrow 51 percent supported maintaining the health insurance exchange but 70.3 percent wanted to keep Obamacare's protections for people with pre-existing conditions.

Not only did Labrador vote for a bill to weaken some of those provisions, but his House Freedom Caucus pushed the Republican bill even further in that direction.

Meanwhile, he's been uncharacteristically flat-footed in explaining himself.

At a Meridian town hall meeting, he declared: "I do not believe that health care is a basic right." But when he said he believed "people should have access to health care," a constituent one-upped Labrador by pointing out she also had "access" to buy a Mercedes: "The only problem is, I can't afford a Mercedes."

The national attention that drew to Labrador was eclipsed only by what followed at his Lewiston town hall meeting.

That's where he got into a back-and-forth with an emergency room registered nurse who said some of the people who came to the hospital for help died because they had waited too long.

"That line is so indefensible," Labrador said. "Nobody dies because they don't have access to health care."

So you can understand why he avoided the topic. But if he wants to serve as Idaho's next governor, Labrador better have answers to these questions:

- Does he believe bad health is due to bad choices - such as too many cigarettes or too much sugar - or just bad luck, bad genetics or a bad environment?
- Do Idahoans deserve health care? If so, how do you deliver it? If not, what does he tell people who will suffer and die prematurely - as well as the taxpayers and health care consumers who will pay for their treatments?
- If the Republican plan is passed, more people will lose insurance -which is going to put pressure on the state and local programs that cover the costs of treating the medically indigent. Where would Gov. Labrador find the money? Raising taxes? Cutting school budgets?
- If Obamacare survives, would Gov. Labrador then decide to extend Medicaid coverage to the gap population?
- How should the state address women's health if Congress strips organizations such as Planned Parenthood of federal support?

As long as the name on the door says Congressman Labrador, he can dodge those questions.

Gov. Labrador cannot. - M.T.