

Idaho Legislative Update - Fall 2014

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Insight — 10/24/2014

With less than two weeks until the November 4 general election, Idaho's campaign season is in full swing and the political community's attention is centered on the elections. At stake this election cycle in Idaho is a U.S. Senate seat, two Congressional offices, and all of Idaho's Constitutional officers, headlined by the Governor's race. Additionally, all 105 legislative seats for the Idaho House of Representatives and State Senate are on the ballot.

Currently, Idaho's political landscape is dominated by Republicans, in which every statewide and federal office is currently held by the GOP. Republicans also have a stronghold in the Idaho Legislature, where they currently hold 85 out of 105 seats. Democrats hope to change this domination in Idaho this election cycle, and it appears that this year they have found quite a few quality candidates who are running well-funded campaigns. Below is a run-down of some of the more high-profile races that are garnering a lot of attention in both the press and in the political community and could prove to be exciting to watch on election night. (Disclaimer: the author of this newsletter was the Executive Director of the Idaho Republican Party the last election cycle that featured all of Idaho's Constitutional Officers on the general election ballot.)

U.S. Senate and Congressional Elections in Idaho: Three races that heavily favor Republicans this election cycle are Idaho's U.S. Senate seat, currently held by Senator Jim Risch, and Idaho's two incumbent Congressmen, Mike Simpson and Raul Labrador. Starting at the top of the ticket, Senator Risch is facing a challenge by Boise attorney Nels Mitchel, and, despite keeping a low profile during his first term in Washington, Senator Risch is expected to win his race handily. He is polling the strongest amongst Idaho's statewide incumbents, and Mitchel's lack of fundraising hasn't allowed him to pose a serious challenge.

The same goes for Idaho's two Congressional seats, in which First District Congressman Raul Labrador is being challenged by longtime state Representative Shirley Ringo, a Democrat from Moscow, and Second District Congressman Mike Simpson is being challenged by former Idaho Congressman Richard Stallings. Despite the Democrats fielding fairly strong candidates to challenge Idaho's incumbent Congressmen, neither Democratic challenger appears to be raising enough money or garnering enough attention and support to mount a serious challenge to either Republican Congressman.

Idaho's Constitutional Officers Elections: All of Idaho's Constitutional

Officers will be on the ballot this year, including the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, Attorney General, State Treasurer, and Superintendent of Public Instruction. However, only three of these races appear to be competitive at this point. Here is a run-down of those three races that could possibly lead to a few election-day surprises:

Governor: In the most closely watched race of the 2014 election cycle, Idaho's current governor, C.L. "Butch" Otter, is seeking to become only the second governor in Idaho history to be elected to a third consecutive term. Governor Otter's superb campaign skills and "cowboy charm" have made him one of Idaho's longest elected politicians throughout the years, serving as a longtime Lieutenant Governor, three-term Congressman and two-term Governor. His formidable and well-funded opponent, A.J. Balukoff, the Democratic nominee and longtime Boise School Board chairman and local businessman, is arguably the toughest opponent Governor Otter has ever faced in a general election. Governor Otter is running for a third term because he says that he wants to finish leading the state out of the recession. A.J. Balukoff counters this claim by arguing that the State's schools, economy and reputation have suffered under Otter's watch. Two things that make this race interesting: To date, Balukoff has already contributed \$1.8 million of his own money into the race; and, The failure of the Students Come First laws in 2014 that Otter championed. Polling data has been mixed in this race with one poll (CBS News) showing Otter leading Balukoff 57 percent to 33 percent. However, a more recent poll done by a North Carolina pollster shows Otter leading by only 39 percent to 35 percent. In a state that hasn't voted for a Democrat Governor in over 20 years, this race definitely leans Republican, but a lot could happen between now and election day.

Secretary of State: After the surprise announcement that Idaho's popular and long-time Secretary of State Ben Ysursa would not seek reelection, the race to replace him has become quite the heated campaign. The two candidates running to become the chief elections officer in the state are Idaho State Representatives Lawrence Denney and Holli Woodings. Denney has been a long-time state legislator, serving as the Idaho House Speaker, Majority Leader, and Assistant Majority Leader; however, he was ousted by his caucus as House Speaker in 2013. Woodings is newer to politics, serving just one term in the Idaho House; however, she has run a well organized and highly funded campaign with television and radio advertising, something that is unusual for a low-budget campaign such as a Secretary of State in Idaho. This is a race that would traditionally go to a Republican by default, but Denney's perceived partisanship combined with Wooding's strong campaign could make this race very close on election night.

Superintendent of Public Instruction: In what is shaping up to be the most interesting race in Idaho, and very likely the best chance for Democrats to pick up a statewide seat in Idaho, two candidates are seeking to replace outgoing and controversial superintendent, Tom

Luna. This race is interesting because the Republican nominee, Sherri Ybarra, is a political newcomer with no statewide experience, and the Democratic nominee is the former chief deputy state superintendent who almost beat the current superintendent (Tom Luna) eight years ago. What makes this race even more interesting is the embarrassing revelations and campaign gaffes by Ybarra, highlighted by the fact that she hadn't voted in a general election since 1996. Polling data on this race has been very close showing Ybarra with a slight lead. I fully expect that this will be a late election night for both candidates.

Federal Elections: Despite it not being a Presidential election year, this year's elections are still garnering a lot of attention mostly due to the possibility of Republicans taking control of the United States Senate, combined with the possibility of the House Republicans holding their largest majority in over 70 years. The United States Senate is currently made up of 55 Democrats and 45 Republicans, which means Republicans just need to pick up six seats to take control of the Upper Chamber. Most political prognosticators give the GOP between a 60% to 90% chance of taking over the Upper Chamber. In the U.S. House of Representatives, the Republicans were planning for modest gains this fall, but the Republican Party has recently been raising its ambitions and jumping into Democrat strongholds long thought to be beyond the GOP's reach. The Republican Party has been buying TV ad time in up to five districts previously thought unwinnable, with the goal of gaining 11 seats in November's election. If Republicans are successful in their effort, they will have 245 seats in the Congress, their largest delegation since 1949.

The next Idaho Legislative Update will focus primarily on the upcoming 2015 Idaho Legislative session and the issues that are shaping up to dominate the Idaho Legislature. Also, please let me know if there is an issue that you have an interest in that I didn't include in my legislative report, and I will be happy to respond to your questions or comments.

Jonathan

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