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Labrador admirers say his four years in the Legislature show he stands against the wind but doesn't tilt at windmills

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The moment that made Republican Rep. **Raul Labrador** a credible candidate for Congress came March 19, 2009, when he opposed the first of GOP Gov. Butch Otter's fuel-tax bills, a 7-cent-per-gallon increase.

Owing to his sophomore status, Labrador spoke from the cramped balcony in the House's temporary quarters. Singling out the construction industry -- paving contractors, concrete companies, engineering firms -- he said only those with a direct financial stake in road-building had asked him to back the No. 1 initiative of Otter's first term.

Labrador then spoke emotionally of "the rest of our constituents," people struggling to make ends meet and opposed to tax increases. "They don't know what the future will bring," he said.

Labrador won that fight and other tax votes, making a name for himself. After four years in the Legislature, Labrador is well liked by House colleagues and respected for guts and smarts even by those who disagree with his politics.

But his 2009 triumph over Otter cut both ways. He earned the loyalty of the nascent tea party movement, which helped him beat Vaughn Ward in the May 2010 primary. The price: He offended traditional business interests that usually support Republicans.

Among those abandoning Labrador, 42, are the Associated General Contractors, who backed Republican Bill Sali for western Idaho's 1st District U.S. House seat, both when Sali won in 2006 and lost in 2008.

Now, AGC is with freshman Democratic Rep. Walt Minnick, "because we think he's a very talented, good congressman who has done a number of very positive things for us and for industry," said Mark Dunham, executive director of the Idaho AGC.

But the memory of Labrador's debate still stings, Dunham said. "He made it viscerally personal. He stood up on the floor and singled out my members."

Labrador's reaction to AGC's Minnick endorsement in August was sharper still: "It's a group of individuals that wanted corporate welfare."

"I've always thought Raul was a very nice, incredibly smart, ethical man," Dunham said. "But I've often been surprised at how mean-spirited he can be in his opposition."

GROWING UP

House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, represents the same northwest Ada County district as Labrador and is a key supporter. He still winces at Labrador's role in

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the fuel tax debate. "He stood up after the bill was already dead and said stuff he shouldn't have said," Moyle said.

But Moyle said Labrador has matured. "I think you see him now playing with the boys in the sandbox. I mean, you see him doing a better job communicating and working with the governor. I think if Raul had it to do again, he never would have done what he did."

Asked about Moyle's comment, Labrador said, "It's always nice when someone compliments your growth as an individual, and Mike raises the point that all of us could or would do or say some things differently if we got to do them again. But the fact is, even if I changed the way I said things, I would still have led the fight against that tax increase."

Labrador, who also challenged and bested Otter to get Norm Semanko elected GOP chairman in 2008, says he has since mended fences. When Otter signed Labrador's bill to make Idaho one of 20 states fighting to overturn the new federal health care law, Labrador was at Otter's elbow.

Labrador puts that measure among his three top accomplishments in his four years, along with killing Otter's fuel taxes and a bill streamlining the restoration of gun rights for those once deemed mentally defective by the courts or committed to a mental institution.

THE ICE MELTS?

Labrador also used a procedural move -- objecting to an unanimous consent request on the final day of the 2010 session -- to kill a bill making texting while driving a \$50 infraction, with a misdemeanor penalty if the driver caused an accident. Labrador said the bill was unenforceable.

The bill's co-author, Senate Transportation Committee Chairman John McGee, R-Caldwell, was angry. He backed Ward in the primary but now is with Labrador: "We're going to have our differences, but at the end of the day we circle the wagons and try to get Republicans elected," McGee said.

As further evidence of a thaw, Labrador cited Otter's hosting of a \$100-per-person fundraiser at his home last month. Otter gave \$2,000 and his wife, Lori, a prominent Ward supporter, covered expenses.

"The media has really highlighted the two or three times the governor and I have disagreed, but he and I have stood side by side 97 percent of the time," Labrador said.

Otter, however, took a pass on the question of whether all is forgiven. "He doesn't have a comment at this time," said Otter's campaign spokesman, Ryan Panitz.

Some lawmakers and lobbyists who've worked with Labrador also declined comment. "I rarely do this and I apologize," said GOP Sen. Shawn Keough of Sandpoint. "I have no comment today."

Labrador was, however, the clear choice of GOP lawmakers, winning endorsement from three dozen colleagues. Ward had Keough, and five others.

CRYING FOR CHANGE

Some speak reverently of his talent, heart and drive to change things in Washington.

Rep. Marv Hagedorn, R-Meridian, is part of the class of lawmakers elected with Labrador in 2006. After Labrador offered a history lesson on the British Parliament, they adopted the nickname "The Backbenchers" and hung a banner in their corner of the House.

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"He's very charismatic and he knows when to speak and when not to speak," Hagedorn said. "He's always been critically honest, and he can tactfully tell you when you're incorrect."

Hagedorn has seen Labrador tear up when he discusses the need to limit the reach of the federal government, restore state sovereignty and enforce fiscal responsibility. "When he says service to his country is important, he really, really means that."

At a GOP lunch last month, Labrador's wife, Rebecca, had the candidate wet-eyed with her introduction. "He loves his country and I know he worries about it and his family a lot," she said.

At that, Labrador went to the sandwich table for a napkin and dabbed his eyes. The Labradors had just taken the oldest of their five children, Michael, to college, the candidate explained. "I looked at him and I thought about the future of my children and I wondered: Are they going to have the same country that I have today?"

MIXED SUCCESS

Labrador's legislative record reflects his training as a lawyer, practice of immigration law and resistance to higher taxes.

In 2007, he passionately opposed a bill denying state benefits to illegal immigrants, saying it would cost, not save, money. During debate, he said of supporters, "They think this bill is going to solve immigration policy. It will not."

Labrador was among only three Republicans on the short side of a 47-21 vote.

Later, his bill stripping businesses of licenses for repeatedly hiring illegal workers died in committee.

He also failed to pass bills with new limits on local improvement districts. And his alternative to higher fuel taxes -- allowing highway districts to raise registration fees for specific projects if approved by two-thirds of voters -- died 39-31 after he declined to lower the supermajority.

But he overcame the objection of Idaho State Police this year to pass the NRA-backed bill that allows restoration of gun rights for the formerly mentally defective who can show they are unlikely to threaten public safety.

NO BILL SALI

Labrador is respected for work in committee, offering expertise to Republicans and Democrats alike. "I have often seen him lawyer up to make a piece of legislation better," said Skip Smyser, a top lobbyist, former senator and 1990 GOP nominee for 1st District Congress.

Smyser is married to Sen. Melinda Smyser, R-Parma, and the couple backed Ward in the primary. Their son, Lincoln, was Ward's Canyon County coordinator. Skip Smyser said his fear that Labrador might punish his clients was unwarranted. "I was a little uneasy, but Raul broke the ice by coming up to me and saying complimentary things about my son."

Sali endorsed Labrador over Ward. And while Sali and Labrador are similarly conservative, their temperaments are not alike, Smyser said.

"Raul won't back down from a fight, but I've never seen him provoke one. Whereas, I think it's fair to say Bill Sali would walk across the street to get in the middle of one."

Minnick beat Sali because the Republican had spent years "ticking people off," said Rep. Brent Crane, R-Nampa, one of Labrador's best friends. Sali also embarrassed Idaho with not-so-funny antics.

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"I'm confident Raul's not going to introduce a bill to eliminate gravity," Crane said. "He hasn't done stupid stuff like that in the Idaho Legislature, and you're not going to see him do it in Congress."

A FRESH WIND IN CONGRESS

Rep. Branden Durst, D-Boise, said he and Labrador have bucked one another up when they vote against their party caucuses. He admires Labrador's courage in taking on Ward and Minnick despite a steep financial disadvantage. "I respect that he had the fortitude to say, 'This is what I want.'"

But Durst wonders how well Labrador can adapt to Congress, citing his balking at compromise on his highway district fees bill.

Rep. Hagedorn shares that concern, saying, "I think it's going to be pretty tough for him because he's going to find -- if he wants to get things changed -- he's going to have to agree to some compromise."

Labrador says Durst and Hagedorn don't give him enough credit. Allowing voters to approve highway fees was a concession in itself, Labrador said, offered as an alternative to higher fuel taxes. "This was the perfect example of how I was willing to compromise," he said. "It would be new revenue to build roads."

But Rep. Eric Anderson says Labrador sometimes dons blinders. A moderate Republican from Priest Lake who endorsed Ward but now supports Labrador, Anderson said he worries about Labrador's effectiveness. Anderson often differed with his party's nominee, including on Otter's failed bill to reform licensing of liquor by the drink.

"Raul stood up and talked about how this is going to put more drunks on the road, when it was an important economic development tool," Anderson said. "I think the man is probably very honorable, but a little stubborn. If you ask me what Raul's done in the Legislature, I wouldn't be able to answer."

But a Labrador ally and colleague on both the Judiciary and State Affairs committees, Rep. Lynn Luker, R-Boise, said Labrador's legal mind would help him soberly weigh risk and reward. "I think he can be a leader in identifying those folks willing to stand in the wind," said Luker, also a lawyer.

Democrat Wendy Jaquet, D-Ketchum, said she valued Labrador's work on the Judiciary Committee and predicted he would find like-minded conservative allies. "I don't think he'd be marginalized. He is a good listener, and I don't see him as a tilt-at-windmills kind of person."

A DIFFERENT WORLD

The longest-serving U.S. House speaker ever, Democrat Sam Rayburn of Texas, advised freshmen, "If you want to get along -- go along," meaning be patient, learn quietly and vote as leadership asks.

Idaho House GOP Leader Moyle acknowledges that the clout Labrador wielded in just four years in the Idaho House will be impossible to duplicate in Congress. "It's a different world, but Raul's no dummy. He'll figure it out."

Moyle said the times make Rayburn's rule dated. "One of the biggest problems we've got with Congress is you've got all these guys 'going along' instead of doing what's right. There are times when going along's fine, but there are other situations where you better push back. And Raul will do that."

Labrador said he has no intention of going along, should he win. "The American people are going to give the Republican Party another chance. But they're frustrated with both parties and if we let them down one more time, I'm not sure what the future of the Republican Party will be."

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