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Guest column: New clout for Idaho U.S. senators?

Steve Taggart

Should Senators Risch and Crapo fend off challengers, they could gain significant clout in Washington in 2019, writes Steve Taggart.

Last week a bit of attention was paid to the fact that Sen. Bob Corker of Tennessee will not run for re-election to the U.S. Senate.

Sen. Jim Risch of Idaho is next in line to chair the Senate Foreign Relations Committee if Republicans hold onto the Senate in 2018.

Both are facing significant primary challenges and both will have a strong Democrat, if re-nominated, to beat in the general election. Trump is not a fan of Flake and will likely try to take him out. Heller is also on shaky ground with the President. But, even if both lose and Democrats prevail for those two seats, that would still leave the Senate with 50 Republicans and 50 Democrats with Vice President Mike Pence breaking the tie in favor of continued GOP control.

That means the chances of Risch taking the chairman's gavel for the Foreign Relations Committee is high. And, that is a big deal for Idaho. That committee deals with foreign policy related legislation, confirmation of U.S. diplomats and plays a key role in the approval of treaties. It is one of the big Senate committees and will make Risch's role much bigger in these areas – but also other unrelated issues.

He already has a fairly high media profile. This will boost it substantially.

More important in my mind is the effect on Idaho's overall impact on the U.S. Senate.

Sen. Mike Crapo this year ascended to the chairmanship of the Senate Banking Committee. That committee oversees the financial industry, housing finance and housing policy and international trade. He was a key driver of the legislation to implement trade sanctions, over White House protests, against Russia.

Thus, in 2019, Idaho's senators may chair two major Senate committees. That is a big deal. In my lifetime I cannot recall Idaho ever having two major full committee chairs in the U.S. Senate at the same time.

Crapo's committee will decide the fate of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the key drivers of housing finance in the U.S. He'll be at the center point of loosening or tightening regulation of banks, financial markets and other parts of our financial system. And, he'll continue be a player in our trade policies, presumably protecting Idaho's agricultural exports.

Risch beginning in 2019, will likely determine which hot spots to highlight through Senate hearings. North Korea, surely. Iran, likely. A key part of that committee's work is also to highlight future, emerging flashpoints. He'll also play a key role in crafting U.S. policy towards our allies and our enemies worldwide, both legislatively and from his perch as committee chair.

Overall, both Crapo and Risch will be part of an elite group of U.S. Senators who can truly drive legislation and policies. With Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch likely to retire next year, a good argument can be made that Idaho will then have the most powerful Senate delegation among the various Rocky Mountain states.

How both Crapo and Risch use that power will determine the future strength of the Idaho National Laboratory and Mountain Home Air Force Base. They will be able to have even greater influence on the future of U.S. agriculture policy and foreign trade. And, they can put a greater Idaho spin on tax policy, spending and defense issues. Their ability to protect Idaho's interests will be (and already is in Crapo's case) massively enhanced – and that is a good thing for Idaho.

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