

The election eye . . .

# Bonneville proved key county in Senate race

BY BEN J. PLASTINO  
Post-Register political editor

As predicted beforehand, Bonneville proved the key county in the narrow senatorial victory of Republican Rep. Steve Symms over Democrat Sen. Frank Church.

Even Church repeatedly said during his campaign talks that Bonneville was the swing county he had to win, just as he has done in four previous elections.

It's not that Bonneville has that many votes, but it's a weathervane political area that has showed repeatedly that if a Democrat can capture Bonneville in a statewide race, and to some extent, in a 2nd District congressional contest, he likely will win the election.

This was graphically illustrated in the U.S. Senate race.

\* \* \*

**Bonneville gave Symms about a 3,000 vote edge over Church, 17,384 to 14,165, in a record-breaking turnout. That isn't much but it was enough to tip the scales. If this vote had been reversed, Church would have won the election. If he had captured Bonneville by 3,000, rather than lost by 3,000, it would have given him a 6,000 vote difference. That would have been just enough to win the election by 2,000. As it was, he lost the race by about 4,000 of some record 433,000 votes cast. Bonneville cast a record 32,488 votes. Libertarian Larry Fullmer attracted 6,645 votes but most political observers believe he drew equally from Church and Symms.**

That is not to assume other sections of the state weren't vital factors. Certainly the balloting in Boise Valley, Bannock County, Magic Valley and the

## The Post-Register The political pulse

Idaho Falls, Idaho, Thursday, Nov. 13, 1980

A-11

Panhandle were important but they follow a pattern, whereas Bonneville does not. In the final analysis, it was East Idaho in general and Bonneville County in particular which decided the issue in the costliest and most bitter election ever waged in Idaho.

The 10 East Idaho counties gave Symms his victory bulge, or 42,139 to 32,463 in his favor. Aside from Bonneville, Symms was expected to win most of the smaller rural counties in East Idaho. Church won only Butte County narrowly 893 to 847 but finished close in Bingham, trailing 7,584 to 7,780. He lost the other East Idaho counties decisively, particularly Custer, Jefferson, Madison and Lemhi by nearly 2-1 margins.

For example, the independence of the Bonneville voters can be best illustrated by the fact they unseated Republican Sheriff Blaine Skinner and favored the proposal to permit retail wine sales, despite a strong Republican and conservative trend.

\* \* \*

It would appear bringing the big Republican names into Idaho Falls helped pad the Symms lead, particularly the appearance of Ronald Reagan but this is difficult to assess. Symms might have won anyhow. It is doubtful if other big Republican political figures had much of an influence such as Sens. Howard Baker, of Tennessee

see; Orrin Hatch, of Utah and Alan K. Simpson of Wyoming.

\* \* \*

East Idaho was the crucial battle ground in the campaign as reflected by the frequent appearances of Church and Symms, along with their top campaign workers.

Church countered with Sen. Henry Jackson, of Washington State, and Rep. Gunn McKay, of Utah, but their appearances also served more as window dressing, rather than translating into terms of votes.

This also can be said for the Anybody but Church Committee, National Conservative Political Action Committee, and other radical organizations. Although they were given much credit for the Symms victory, this is open to question.

\* \* \*

**The bottom line was the fact the Idaho voters preferred the conservative philosophy Symms espoused and were a part of the Reagan-Republican avalanche.**

This was done, even though most knew that the demise of Church will lose Idaho an influential voice in the halls of Congress on many fronts, particularly the senior citizens and other social programs, agriculture, nuclear research and the quality of life.

Symms benefitted from a powerful Republican tide that was even greater than most believed.