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The political pulse

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The election eye

Democrats may gain seats in eastern Idaho

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Democrats may gain legislative seats in eastern Idaho for the simple reason they have no place to go but up.

The Democrats have fielded the largest and most formidable field in several years against incumbent Republicans and this is a healthy political development.

Of the 18 east Idaho legislators representing the 10 east Idaho counties—six senators and 12 representatives—only two are Democrats, the lowest number for as long as can be remembered.

The only two Democrats are State Sen. Israel Merrill, Blackfoot, and Rep. Melvin Hammond, Rexburg, House minority leader, and both appear safe for re-election.

Hammond is unopposed while Merrill, a veteran six-termer, is challenged by a neophyte, R.C. "Bob" Welker of Shelley, diesel instructor at the Eastern Idaho Vocational Technical School. Welker also faces another disadvantage because the east half of Shelley was only this year shifted from District 30, central Bonneville and Shelley, to District 27, made up mostly of Bingham County where he is comparatively unknown while Merrill is well entrenched.

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The Democrats face the most cheerful prospects in years in possible victories in six races, besides Hammond and Merrill. The remaining five contests heavily favor the Republicans, four of them incumbents. Five incumbents, four of them Republicans, are unopposed.

The brightest chances for a switch is in District 29, west Bonneville and Butte, where C. Wendell Miller, a former four-term legislator, must be given the edge to reverse the results of two years ago against Rep. Martin Trillhaase, who benefited from a strong Reagan Republican tide.

One of the featured races is in District 30 where Democrat Anne Voilleque and Republican J. F. Chadband seek to replace Rep. Elaine Kernes, R-Idaho Falls, who did not seek re-election. This is becoming the most heated east Idaho legislative contest in the region as Mrs. Voilleque becomes a prime target for her alleged liberal feminist views. The attacks are coming mostly from members of the ultra conservative Bonneville Republican Women Federation. This contest could go down to the wire and appears a tossup.

Chadband also has come under attack for his political views but so far the two main contenders have not exchanged attacks directly.

One of the surprises may come in District 31 where a personally popular Bill Storer, Iona mayor, a Democrat, is certain to give Republican State Sen. William L. Floyd a scorching contest. Floyd must be favored but a Storer victory would not be unexpected.

Republicans incumbents also must be given the edge but Democrats will furnish tough competition and could win in District 29, west Bonneville and Butte, where Larry D. Reynolds, Moore farmer-educator, has launched a third try after losing two close ones several years ago to Sen. J. Marsden Williams; in District 30, central Bonneville and west Shelley, where John Combo, recently retired Department of Energy attorney and executive, is challenging Sen. Dane Watkins; and District 27 where Rep. D. Cornell Thomas, Pingree, is opposed by Gloria LaRocque, Aberdeen.

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There could be some upsets in other races but generally Republican incumbents must be viewed as favorites, in most cases, by decisive margins.

They include District 20, Jefferson, Lemhi, Clark and Lemhi Counties, where two newcomers are paired, Republican Joan E. Wood, Grant, over Democrat Joe Bodell, Rigby, to replace the retiring Rep. Wayne E. Tibbitts, R-Lorenzo; District 27, Reps. Raymond G. Parks over Democrat Jerry Wellard, Blackfoot; in District 28, Madison and Fremont, Sen. Mark G. Ricks, Rexburg, over Sugar City educator, Democrat Darrell H. Moss; District 29, Rep. Kurt L. Johnson, over Democrat Rue Stears; and District 31, Rep. Linden Bateman over Democrat Woody Woodbury.

Unopposed are Republicans Sen. Vearl Crystal, Rigby; and Reps. Gary L. Paxman, Idaho Falls; John O. Sessions, Driggs; Rich Orme, St. Anthony, and Ray E. Infanger, Salmon.

From all appearances, Mrs. Voilleque, Watkins, and Chadband are spending the largest amounts. They or their campaign workers acknowledge the costs would run between \$10,000 to \$15,000 each, and it could go more. Several other contested races could reach \$5,000 or more, including that of Combo.

The legislators pay and expenses amount to about \$7,500 yearly.

Republicans lack the Reagan landslide advantage of the 1980 election but past records show it is rare for incumbent legislators to be beaten. As far as can be remembered only six have been ousted who sought re-election in the last quarter of a century in the 10 east Idaho counties.