

The Post-Register

The political pulse

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The election eye

Democrats may gain seats in eastern Idaho

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For the first time in several years, Democrats may be able to pick up seats in the Idaho Legislature which is presently heavily Republican. The Republicans control the House by a lopsided 56-14 majority and the Senate 23-12, only one vote shy of a veto-proof two-thirds majority.

East Idaho might follow the statewide trend but political observers hasten to add there is only a dim chance the Democrats may control the Senate and a virtual zero chance of this happening in the House.

The Republicans were at the zenith of their power in 1980 when the popular Ronald Reagan helped the Republican cause on the national, state and even local level. The situation this year, however, is different with Reagan's name absent from the ballot and much of his former sheen worn thin as the economy continues to splutter.

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The present eastern Idaho delegation of 18 representing the 10 counties contains 16 Republicans and only two Democrats, Sen. Israel Merrill, Blackfoot, and House Majority Leader Melvin Hammond, Rexburg. It is the widest Republican majority that anyone can remember.

Both Democrat incumbents appear safe for re-election with Hammond having the rare distinction of being an unopposed Democrat. Merrill is challenged by a virtual unknown, R. C. "Bob" Welker, Shelley, a diesel instructor at the Eastern Idaho Vocational Technical School in Idaho Falls.

Five Republican incumbents likewise face no Nov. 2 general election challenges, Sen. Vearl Crystal, Rigby; and Reps. Gary L. Paxman, Idaho Falls; John O. Sessions, Driggs; Rich Orme, St. Anthony, and Ray E. Infanger, Salmon.

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The Democrats face the most cheerful prospects in years in possible victories in at least six races. The remaining five contests heavily favor the Republicans who are incumbents, with one exception.

The brightest chance for a switch is in District 29, west Bonneville and Butte, where C. Wendell Miller, a former legislator, must be given an edge to reverse the results of two years ago and oust Rep. Martin Trillhaase. Five other legislative contests could be close

and could result in Democratic victories, although as of now, the Republican nominee should be given an edge.

These candidates include Larry D. Reynolds, Moore farmer-educator, who lost two close races several years ago for state senator in District 29 but is ready for a third try against the eight-term veteran, Sen. J. Marsden Williams.

Both contests in District 30, central Bonneville and west Shelley, also could be tight. John Combo, recently retired Department of Energy attorney, is challenging State Sen. Dane Watkins. Two newcomers, Democrat Ann Voilleque, civic worker, and Republican J. F. "Chad" Chadband, furniture merchant, seek to win the seat to be relinquished by Rep. Elaine Kearnes, R-Idaho Falls.

Primary vote analysis indicates Watkins has lost strength.

In District 27, most of Bingham County, Republican D. Cornell Thomas, Pingree diet firm executive, who was appointed early in the year to replace Rep. Darwin Young, R-Blackfoot, now a State Tax Commission member, faces a stiff challenger in an energetic Democrat, Gloria LaRocque Dillard, Aberdeen.

Also in District 31, east Bonneville and Teton, Sen. William L. Floyd, may find a tough competitor in Democrat Bill Storer, Iona mayor.

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There could be upsets in the other five races but generally Republicans are viewed by observers as favorites, in most cases, by wide margins.

This includes District 20, Jefferson, Lemhi, Clark and Custer counties, where two neophytes are paired. Republican Joan E. Wood, Rigby, is picked over Democrat Joe Bodell, Rigby, to replace the retiring Rep. Wayne E. Tibbitts, R-Lorenzo.

In District 27, Rep. Raymond G. Parks is given the advantage over Democrat Jerry Wellard, both of Blackfoot; in District 28, Madison and Fremont, State Sen. Mark G. Ricks, Rexburg, over Darrell Moss, Sugar City; in District 29, Rep. Kurt L. Johnson over Democrat Rue Stears; and in District 31, Rep. Linden B. Bateman over Democrat Woody Woodbury.

These early predictions are subject to changes because the type and intensiveness of campaigns conducted by the candidates could be decisive factors.