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The political pulse

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The election eye

Poor election turnout raises many questions

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The extremely poor turnout in Tuesday's primary election raises many questions in the entire political spectrum.

This situation is not peculiar to Idaho. The same problems are encountered in most parts of the nation. In fact, Idaho over the years has one of the best voting records percentage-wise of any state in the nation.

Penny Ysursa, deputy election clerk at the secretary of state office, said she wouldn't have the official figures until the office receives abstract of election results within 10 days but she said the best estimate now is only 27 percent of the approximate 530,000 eligible cast ballots.

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The Bonneville County turnout was the worst that can be remembered for many years. Only 8,764 cast ballots, or 26 percent of the 33,597 registered. It was generally about the same in neighboring counties.

The figures contrasts with the 1980 primary election when 12,545, or 40 percent of the 31,291 registered, voted.

Two years ago, nearly 40 percent cast ballots in the state, or 199,895 of the 517,135 registered. This year, the registration is figured at close to 530,000 but she must await completion of the official state election canvass to get the exact figure, said Mrs. Ysursa.

Two years ago, the interest was heightened by the presidential primary but both Republican Ronald Reagan and Democrat President Jimmy Carter had virtually no opposition in their own parties.

There were about the same number of legislative races but two years ago there were no state races and only the sheriff, prosecuting attorney and coroner were voted on for county offices.

Mrs. Ysursa said additional interest was generated by the senatorial race, although

Democrat Frank Church and Republican Steve Symms were unopposed in their own senatorial primary.

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This light voting will now revive the perennial talk in the Legislature of changing date of the primary election. The heavy turnout two years ago cooled talk for primary changes in the 1982 Legislature. There were a number of bills and proposals providing for primary date changes but none even got out of committee.

Most legislators are unhappy about a primary in May and prefer going back to early August or perhaps even September.

Legislators complain they don't have enough time to campaign after the Legislature adjournment in late March if they have primary opposition.

County clerks and statewide candidates protest the September date doesn't give them enough time to prepare for the November general election.

The county clerk protests can be discounted because elections should be geared for the people, not the convenience of county clerks, unless it is impractical.

Congressional and statewide candidates do have a strong point. Idaho is a large state geographically and those seeking state and congressional offices say with some justification they would find it almost impossible to cover it in the two months between the primary and general elections if the primary is in August, or worse yet, in September.

Yet, no matter what date is selected there are advantages and disadvantages. It is impossible to satisfy everyone. In the past there have been primaries in June, runoffs for those who didn't get majorities, and party convention endorsements for congressional and gubernatorial nominees. These all have made the rounds and now it's back to the present system.