High conservative tide about to ebb

July 7 1985

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Idaho Democrats can take heart from a recent statement by Americans for Democratic Action, which says the group believes the pendulum is swinging away from broad support for President Reagan's policies.

Americans for Democratic Action is a group dedicated to liberal political positions and in recent years has been on the receiving end of a string of defeats.

This columnist has frequently mentioned that such a movement may be taking place after a decade of conservatism, much of it on the extreme right.

In Idaho, the conservative trend has been the dominant feature on the political scene for most of the past quarter of a century. It has resulted in sweeping victories by Republicans who are identified more closely with conservatism.

It has been 1958 since the Democrats last controlled both the House and Senate. This resulted primarily from victories in that election which was tied to defeat of the highly controverial right-to-work law. Since that time, the Republicans have held majorities in both chambers. In fact, they have increased their margins almost every biennium ever since.

At present, the Republicans have increased their stranglehold to 67-17 in the House and 28-14 in the Senate, the widest in history of the Legislature.

The Republicans also hold four of the seven state elective offices, three of the four U.S. congressional seats and nearly double the elective county offices in the 44 counties, or about 250 to 150.

This is a misleading lopsided Republican majority because in most elections, the Democrats on the average poll about 40 percent of the vote.

The fact the Democrats control the governorship helps balance the disparity. Democrats will have held the governor's chair 16 years in 1986.

The governor is the state's chief executive officer and as a result sets the state policies, controls appointments to all of the state's 21 departments and about 150 state boards, commissions, councils and divisions.

In eastern Idaho, the political disparity is even more pronounced.

Of the 21 lawmakers in the legislative delegation embracing 10 eastern Idaho counties, only Sen. Dwight Horsch, Aberdeen, is a Democrat. He resides in Bingham County but actually represents the eastern Idaho counties to the south.

In Bonneville County, for example, Sheriff Richard J. Ackerman is the lone Democrat. The commission chairman, Clyde Burtenshaw, who was elected as a Democrat, recently changed his label to the Republican Party.

Out of some 90 county office holders in the 10 east Idaho counties, only 19 are Democrats.

In so many cases in recent elections, there are contests in the Republican primary and very few on the Democratic ticket in east Idaho.

Seven months after Reagan won a landslide re-election victory, House Budget Committee Chairman William H. Gray, D-Pa., and other ADA members were quoted as saying liberals must seize the opportunity to redefine their position.

"The pendulum already has begun to swing back to sanity," said Gray, speaking at a recent ADA conference on policy alternatives.

Gray, noting that the Democratic-controlled House recently passed a budget that slowed the growth of Pentagon spending, said the most important issue facing Americans is the debt incurred by "Ronald Reagan's loose fiscal policy," meaning primarily the massive defense spending.

While he favors tax reform, Gray said he was worried that Reagan's recent proposal might be a "last desperate blow — to bar a return to the Democratic traditions.

He also said taxes might have to be raised if the United States is going to maintain programs for the poor and needy.

"The tide has turned," said former Rep. Robert Drinan, D-Mass, ADA past president.

ADA president Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., said he is convinced that if liberals "go issue-by-issue, we are generally on the most popular side."

"The rub comes because liberals haven't spotlighted their positions," he said. "Many people are unaware, for instance, that liberals in Congress have been in the forefront of stimulating the economy by pushing high tech industries."

Although this profiles some of the liberal views on the national front, Idaho likely will remain largely conservative in the 1986 elections. However, there could be some shift towards the center. This could halt the steady tide toward the conservative side, and may even start the pendulum swinging slightly towards the left, a situation most Democrats freverently hope happens.