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The congressional scene . . .

Idaho Democrats see need for retrenching

BY BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

As Congress and the Reagan administration swing fully into the legislative mill, it becomes apparent to a wide segment of voters in Idaho — possibly close to 30 percent — have little voice in Washington.

For the first time in 50 years, all members of the Idaho congressional delegation are Republicans, but even more distressing from the Democratic point of view, the hard right variety.

Sens. James A. McClure and Steve D. Symms and Reps. George V. Hansen and Larry Craig have especially of late followed a rigid conservative line that gives little attention to what their Democratic constituents may feel. The four vote almost as a solid bloc on nearly all key measures.

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When Sen. Frank Church was ousted from his position, Democrats felt they lost their last sympathetic friend on the national scene. It would appear that Idaho voters have been wise in the past in assuring members of both parties a voice in the state's congressional delegation, to acquire a political balance and have someone at the nation's capital with whom they can sympathetically communicate.

Since 1933, the Idaho delegation has included at least one member of the each party. Between 1933 and 1981, two Democratic senators served briefly together and two Republican senators also held office simultaneously for six years.

Church has served during his 24 years with a Republican colleague. His relationship with U.S. Sen. Len B. Jordan was warm. Church and McClure did manage to cooperate for the most part on legislation affecting Idaho but their personal rapport was less than cordial. McClure even discarded tradition of the past to campaign actively against a fellow senator in 1980.

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McClure, as the Republican Conference or Caucus chairman, is in leadership and has apparently moved away from his contacts with Idaho, a situation that Church also was often accused of holding. Of late, it has been difficult if not impossible by the news media and many constituents to communicate with McClure. It's the old pitfall of longtime members of Congress who often forget the people back home and it brings them ultimate disaster. McClure has been accommodating when in Idaho but in Washington he appears to have isolated himself from the rank and file of Idaho voters.

Of the entire delegation, Hansen has been the most approachable in seeking to give service. However, he is accused justifiably of too often hammering on emotional issues that have frequently little bearing on facts. His latest foray of promoting a revised version of a book he has written against the Internal Revenue Service is an excellent example. A story on this appears elsewhere on this page.

Both Symms and Craig have only begun their service and it's too early to tell how effective they will be but so far the have followed a hard party line as can be expected. Both are in a vulnerable position unless they can show accomplishments by the time they face reelection, Craig in 1982 but Symms not until 1986. Hansen also faces the tests of votes next year while McClure's report card of performance will be submitted for ballot approval in 1984.

Two Republicans who did have moderate voices and listened sympathetically to their entire constituents were Sen. William E. Borah, the legendary "Lions of Idaho," so named because of his lengthy locks, back in the 30s; and Rep. Orval Hansen, the brilliant Idaho Falls attorney, in the early 70s.

Both Orval Hansen and Church are now affiliated in a lucrative law practice with influential Washington firms and earn far more money than the $60,000 yearly they would be receiving as members of Congress. Both are comparatively young and it is certain they will be factors in future political activities.

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It behooves the Democratic leaders to take some forthright action if they want a powerful voice in Washington. So far, the Idaho Democratic Party is in shambles with the recent resignation of Bob Jarboe as fulltime party executive director.

Idaho, like most of the nation, is experiencing a period where party loyalty is becoming less pronounced. By far the most powerful segment of voters are the independents. However, the Idaho Republicans are much better organized and financed and these efforts have been refected in their election successes.

Although Republicans congressional members may respond to Democrats, it it obvious that Democrats would prefer to communicate with those in their own party. This is true whether it be on the state level where the Democrats do have the dominant voice; the Legislature where there is some respectable representartion; county, somewhat equal, or federal where it is virtually non-existent.