Republicans in Idaho enjoy election edge

The election eye .

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The political pulse

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Idaho Republicans enjoy a tremendous election advantage as the 1980 campaign swings into full gear after Labor Day Monday.

It has by no means been a dull political summer as the two main contenders, Democrat Sen. Frank Church and Republican Steve Symms, lost no time in their titanic quest for the Senate seat. However, they have been about the only two who have been intensely active.

Actually the summer political activity has been lower than usual on an election year because the primary election was moved from August to May. In past years, primary campaigning was brisk in June and July leading to the early August primary. Most 1980 nominees are content to wait until early September before joining Church and Symms on the intensive campaign trail.

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Except possibly for the all important Senate race, the Republicans appear to hold commanding positions on most other fronts — president, legislative and county contests.

There isn't a single responsibile Democrat who will say that President Carter has any chance of winning Idaho, only some who hope the margin can be narrowed to 55-45 percent or in that neighborhood. That's extremely optimistic because most political observers, including this one, believes the Reagan majority could soar to as high as 2-1, and at least 3-2.

The issue appears so well settled that neither Reagan nor Carter plan to come to Idaho to vie for its skimpy four electoral votes.

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The senatorial and congressional races offer more interest, particularly that between Church and Symms which looks close and may go down to the wire unless there should be some unexpected turn.

The two could spend close to $3 million on this Senate seat which pays about $60,000 a year. It likely will go down into Idaho political history as one of the most costly and most viciously fought in any election. Already there have been harsh words exchanged and the hard campaign is still ahead.

The congressional contests also provide fireworks but the Republicans hold the upper hand.

In the 2nd District, Republican Rep. George V. Hansen is viewed as a heavy favorite over Democrat Diane Bilyeu while in the 1st District Republican Larry Craig, Midvale, a state senator, generally is considered holding the advantage over Democrat Glen Nichols, former Department of Employment director

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Idaho Gov. John V. Evans and other Democratic leaders express optimism the Democrats can control the Senate and narrow the wide gap in the House. It's possible but not probable.

At present, the Republicans hold a narrow 19-16 lead in the Senate but a wide 50-20 bulge in the House. A turnover of two Senate seats could give the Democrats control.

If the Democrats win all or nearly all of what looks like a number of close races, this may be possible. With a strong conservative tide favoring the Republicans, the chances for this appear dim.

In East Idano, for example, both Democrat senators, Israel Merrill, Blackfoot, and Richard A. Egbert, face tight contests. Of the four Republicans, Mark Ricks, Rexburg, and Vearl Crystal, Rigby, are not even opposed while Sens. J. Marsden Williams and Dane Watkins, Idaho Falls, must be given strong favorite positions in their races.

The state representative lineup likely won't change much and still keep the Republicans in firm control.

In East Idaho, there are chances for Democrats to pick up a three seats but most of the Republicans are either unopposed or face comparatively weak opposition.

The best Democrat hopes are for Don Aupperle to unseat Rep. Gary Paxman, R-Idaho Falls, in Idaho Falls District 30; Doug Holm, young Roberts farmer, to oust Rep. Ray Infanger, R-Salmon, in District 20, Jefferson, Clark, Lemhi and Custer counties; and former Ricks College president, John Clarke, Rexburg, to pick up the seat held by Republican Doyle Minor, St. Anthony, in District 28, Madison and Fremont counties.

The county races offer slim pickings with only county commissioners, sheriff, prosecuting attorney, clerk and coroner on the ballot. A cursory survey would indicate Republicans hold the edge but in most cases incumbents, whether Republicans or Democrats, are unopposed.