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Legislative limelights...

Will reapportionment loosen rural control?

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One of the interesting questions often asked in political circles is whether the new legislative reapportionment will affect the rural domination of the Idaho Legislature.

The reapportionment of the 35 legislative districts will be based on the 1980 census which showed a rapid upsurge in urban and suburban population while rural inhabitants did not keep pace, and as in the case of Clearwater county, even lost.

The state's population increased 32.4 percent, or from 713,015 in 1970 to 943,336 in 1980, most of it in Boise, Coeur d'Alene and the larger cities.

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From regional meetings held so far, it appears the Boise area, or Ada County, will get the equivalent of another legislative district of some 27,000, plus part of of another totaling some 8,000. This means some of the rural areas will lose representation. From initial reports, it may be the southeastern counties south of Pocatello and some of the rural counties in the south central area, such as Cassia , Lincoln and Elmore, which will stand to lose.

As mentioned previously the six legislative districts embracing the 10 East Idaho counties reach the statewide district average of 26,969 and need only some shifting of boundaries, mostly within Bonneville County to equalize each other.

North Idaho also is sightly short and may need to dip into Valley or Adams counties, or both.

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When the Idaho Legislature was forced to reapportion following the 1966 U.S. Supreme Court "one vote, one man" rule, there was a thinking that the rural strength would drop abruptly. It has declined somewhat but the legislative voting records still indicate a strong conservative rural trend. The Legislature's membership was reduced from 44 to 35 in the Senate and 79 to 70 in the House.

Voters, whether living in cities or rural areas, have voted for conservative candidates, meaning mostly Republicans. At present, Republicans control the Senate 23-12 and the House 56-14, the widest GOP margin in the Legislature's history. In the early years, the Democrats enjoyed just as lopsided advantage.

In recent years, the Legislature has shown itself to be anti-city, refusing repeatedly, for example, to authorize local option legislation for cities and counties. Yet, records show the cities and counties do a far better job of running their government than does the Legislature. The Legislature has grudgingly granted some municipal concessions, but not many.

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Although cities actually have a majority they do not elect candidates who are sympathetic to city interests. This is especially true in Idaho Falls, and to some extent in Twin Falls, Nampa, Caldwell and Coeur d'Alene. Only in Boise, Pocatello and Lewiston are the cities well represented with urban legislators but in some instances, even they are not entirely urban-oriented.

The Association of Idaho Cities headed by Marty Peterson, for example, didn't rate legislators on how they voted on city oriented legislation. Yet records shows that many legislators from the rural areas were of more help to cities then were those supposedly representing urban interests.

City officials generally view Sen. William Floyd, R-Idaho Falls, and Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot; and Reps. Elaine Kearnes, R-Idaho Falls; Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg; Darwin Young, R-Blackfoot, and John Sessions, R-Driggs; and at times, Rep. Linden B. Bateman, R-Iona, as among their best supporters from East Idaho. It is noticeable only Floyd, Merrill, Mrs. Kearnes, and Hammond live in the larger cities.

The largest urban counties of Ada, Canyon, Bonneville, Bannock, Kootenai, Twin Falls, Bingham, Nez Perce and Latah contain about 600,000 population, or nearly two-thirds of the state's 943,93 inhabitants.

Despite this heavy city favor, the rural philosophy dominates. This is due largely to many city legislators who generally do not support the more liberal urban legislation. They feel, with justification, their own constituents, oppose such laws. Anyway, they are re-elected year after year, usually by decisive margins.

Signs indicate the strong right wing tide may have reached its crest and there could be a gradual reverse movement towards the middle or more moderate thinking on all levels of government starting next year.

Election records show Idaho is one of the most conservative states in the union. The conservative rural philosophy likely will continue to dominate after the 1982 general election but by a reduced margin. As city populations continue to increase at a far more rapid rate than the rural areas the time is coming when city legislators will hold the decisve upper hand, later in this decade and definitely after the 1990 census.