

The election eye . . .

Lack of 1980 election contests disquieting

Wed. Mar. 26. 1980

By BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

The probable dearth of election contests in East Idaho raises a question of whether the political process is gradually deteriorating, not only here but throughout the state and nation.

A Post-Register survey last week showed possible challengers to well entrenched incumbents are scarce as hen teeth, although hopefully the situation will improve April 1-7 which is the time for filing.

After that, the legislative and county central committees can fill vacancies up to April 22. Those appointed as their party nominees must then qualify by April 29 by filing declaration of candidacy, paying the filing fee and filing petitions containing the names of at least 10 qualified voters for county office and at least 50 for state office.

A check into the records showed two years ago that only half of the incumbents for the Legislature and county offices were opposed. In most cases, the challengers, even though many campaigned hard, were soundly thrashed. It's no wonder they are discouraged.

It indicates that incumbents are hard to beat which may be commendable because people obviously think they are doing a good job, or else the challengers were of dubious quality but this was not so in most cases.

It would appear that those who win elections can stay in office as long as they want, even though their performance is shoddy — and this is certainly the case for many serving in the Legislature and in county offices.

This writer can remember less than a half dozen incumbent legislators who have been beaten for re-election of the some 300 contests the last 20 years, for example.

The same trend experienced on the national level is taking place in Idaho — less and less are identified with either of the major parties and more and more consider themselves independents, even though they may lean for one party.

Both the Republican and Democratic parties don't do bad on the state level. Their state conventions are well attended but the interest is lacking except in presidential years when they do select delegates to the national convention. This year, even much of that has been taken from their hands as result of the May 27 primary election.

The Democrats have more fun at their convention but they also are less potent than the Republicans who furnish majority of the winning candidates.

The Democrats are led by Wayne Fuller, an energetic young attorney from Caldwell, while the Republicans are under the leadership of Dennis M. Olsen, an efficient, low key Idaho Falls attorney.

The once Idaho liberal Democrats of the George McGovern presidential era have veered conservative while the Republicans are firmly in the hands of the right wing faction with the moderates almost outcasts.

The Republicans and Democrats will soon be having legislative caucuses to select their delegates to their state conventions in June, the Democrats at Boise and the Republicans at Pocatello.

On the Bonneville County level, the Democrats are almost in shambles with little leadership and few candidates. They are led by Ruth Ambe-

son, who finds it difficult to stir up much interest.

The Republicans are much better organized with their most willing and effective workers on the extreme right. They are led by John Scoresby, a staunch conservative but not necessarily far right.

Most other East Idaho counties also have comparatively weak organizations.

While the Democrats often fail to furnish candidates, the Republicans nearly always fill the ticket.

In Bonneville County, there are only two Democratic office holders, Rep. Wendell Miller, and Prosecuting Attorney Jerry Woolf.

In East Idaho, of the 18 member legislative delegations from 10 counties, the only Democrats are Miller and Rep. Melvin Hammond, Rexburg,

and Sens. Richard A. Egbert, Teton, and Israel Merrill, Blackfoot. All of the Democrats usually have tight races while the Republicans in most cases have easy victories or no opposition.

Standing out like a beacon is Hammond, who hasn't had an opposition for the last two elections and is considered unbeatable for 1980.

A study of election records by University of Idaho political research professors from 1950 to 1976 show that of the 44 counties, only nine, most of them in North Idaho, leaned Democrat while nine others were listed "competitive," or fairly even.

All in East Idaho lean Republican except Butte and Custer which are listed competitive.