

Legislative limelights...

Eastern Idaho legislators represent mainstream views

BY BEN J. PLASTINO

Post-Register political editor

Eastern Idaho legislators in recent years generally have been known and often chided as being ultra-conservative and out of step with the mainstream of Idaho politics.

Yet, year after year, it was the conservative views of East Idahoans which have prevailed in the enactment of legislation, generally placing a clamp on new programs and on what many people thought were progressive steps.

The most vocal criticisms came from the more liberal lawmakers from the Boise area and North Idaho, both Republicans and Democrats.

East Idahoans, for the most part, took the kidding in good nature, but it didn't change their voting patterns — not by a long shot.

* * *

The last election showed, however, it was East Idahoans, not their more liberal compatriots, who were more correct in following a rigid conservative line.

The two most liberal legislators in East Idaho — and by state standards they were considered conservative — were swept aside by the dominating far right tide. They were Sen. Richard A. Egbert, D-Teton, dean of the Legislature with nearly 30 years of state service, and Rep. Wendell Miller, D-Idaho Falls.

It's rather ironic that Egbert would be viewed in this light, since most of the Idaho Democratic senators were often irked at Egbert for voting against many bills generally supported by his party colleagues and often voting with the Republican majority.

The same goes for Miller, who as a former union member, was considered somewhat of a moderate, yet compared with the House members as a whole, would certainly be classified as a conservative.

Yet their Democratic label and the suspicion they weren't hard conservatives apparently ousted them from office.

Another legislator considered somewhat a liberal, Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, escaped the Democratic debacle by nearly 1,000 votes, but mostly because he is highly popular personally and his opponent, Dean Jones, was considered a rather controversial Blackfoot businessman. Merrill was the only Democrat to win a

The Post-Register The political pulse

Idaho Falls, Idaho, Wednesday, December 31, 1980

B-9

contested legislative race in East Idaho.

* * *

Other East Idaho liberal legislators also have been ousted in previous years at a time when incumbents were generally re-elected, no matter what their performances. Two years ago, it was State Sen. Dick Smith, R-Rexburg, considered one of the most outstanding lawmakers in the Legislature and who established the state financial educational formula system which functioned for many years. Also sent to the sidelines in 1972 because of her liberalism was Rep. Helen McKinney, R-Salmon.

These two legislators have been the only East Idaho incumbents beaten for re-election in the last dozen years.

In 1971, two of the more knowledgeable legislators, Sen. Fisher Ellsworth and Aden Hyde, Idaho Falls Republicans, were recalled merely because they voted for a pay raise. Yet, they were only two of the 76 in the 105-member body who did this. It's one of the blackest marks in Bonneville County's turbulent political history.

Aside from Merrill, the only surviving Democrat in East Idaho is Rep. Melvin Hammond, Rexburg, who prides himself on following a conservative voting pattern but yet is more moderate than most lawmakers. He was unopposed in the last election.

Perhaps this conservative mania is one reason that Hammond was elected the House Senate minority leader over the liberal Patricia McDermott, D-Pocatello, but Hammond also is personally popular.

Perhaps the pendulum may begin swinging back to the center but as of now, conservatism in its rawest best is the key to political success in Idaho.