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The political pulse

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The election eye...

Idaho Democrats need to revitalize party

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Idaho Democrats are taking the right step toward seeking to revitalize their party after the Nov. 4 general election which left them in shambles.

From the ruins of their ashes, they can take stock of themselves and be encouraged by the fact they have only one place to go — up. They can't get much lower than they are at present.

They lost their last member on the state's congressional delegation with the defeat of the once powerful Sen. Frank Church, lost four seats in the State Senate and six in the House so that they are in the abject minority of 23-12 in the Senate and 56-14 in the House, and also lost county races.

Their decision to hire a fulltime executive director is a step in the right direction. It's something the Republicans have had for several years.

Idaho Democratic Chairman Wayne Fuller, Caldwell, the soft-speaking Idaho Democratic chairman, proposed this significant step in a recent meeting. He feels the party base can be expanded enough by concerned citizens to finance the extra expense. At present the Boise office is staffed only by a secretary, Marilyn Heath, and some typists.

To blame Fuller for the party's stinging defeats is hardly fair. He and most of the Democrat candidates tried hard but they were fighting a tremendous conservative tide.

The suggestion by Robert Kinghorn, Boise, AFL-CIO chieftain, that Fuller be replaced is uncalled for. The labor unions don't control the Democratic Party, although admittedly they are among the strongest supporters.

Fuller himself said he is undecided if he will seek re-election, but if he doesn't it will be because of his increasing attorney practice not because of party setbacks. The party executive committee will meet Feb. 21 during the Jefferson-Jackson Day event to elect a new chairman, vice chairman and treasurer. Other officers hold over for another year under the party's staggered party election practice.

An election study by the University of Idaho's Bureau of Public Affairs Research, which appeared in this newspaper a week ago, shows the lopsided advantages held by the Republicans. Of the 44 counties, only seven lean Democratic, eight are listed as competitive, in which neither party is considered dominant, and the other 29 are rated Republican.

The study did not include the 1980 election results, which would indicate the Republican edge may be even greater.

In a story appearing elsewhere on this page, Fuller, in an interview, expresses some optimistic views, many of which are justified.

The Democrats have bounced back from sweeping losses in the past, just as have the Republicans following their 1932 "depression era" setbacks and the more recent Nixon Watergate scandals.

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The Democrats have done well in keeping a stranglehold on the governor's chair the past eight years. Despite what the optimistic Republicans claim, they will find Gov. John V. Evans formidable in 1982, and unless he falters badly, a favorite to continue four more years. Then after that, there is the popular former governor, Cecil D. Andrus, to consider.

Nobody knows for certain what will be the political climate in two, four and six years, but if history repeats itself, much of the extreme conservative trend may recede and swing back to a more moderate and even liberal leaning. This happened in 1932 and the Democratic Party has been generally the majority party ever since on the national level, except for a few temporary setbacks, such as the one in 1980.

On the Idaho scene, the loyal Democrats are in despair, wondering if they can bounce back enough to become competitive. They have reasons to believe this, but even in the 1980 balloting, they generally drew an average 40 percent vote. By dint of hard work, capable candidates and some luck, they can rise from disaster and become formidable, and maybe later, hold the majority. This seems fanciful now but the political picture is often changing.