

Legislative limelights . . .

Factional fights loom in Legislature House

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The Republicans enjoy perhaps the largest top-heavy majorities in the 1981 Idaho Legislature as result of the Nov. 4 general election but it could bring problems.

The happy Republicans enjoy a 23-12 margin in the Senate — one vote shy of veto proof — but an overwhelming bulge of 56-14 in the House.

It would be assumed from this lopsided victories in their favor, the Republicans should have everthing their own way. This may be true in most cases but recent sessions where Republicans have held wide majorities show factional battles have developed.

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The Republican sweep increased their previous margins, from 19-16 to 23-12 in the Senate and from 50-20 to 56-14 in the House. The Republicans have held control of both chambers for 20 years, but the margins haven't been so pronounced. Democrats last held control in the Senate in 1959-60.

In East Idaho, the legislative delegation from the six districts in the 10 East Idaho counties increased the Republican edge from four to five state senators and from 10 to 11 state representatives. Of the six state senators and 12 state representatives, the only Democrats left are Sen. Israel Merrill, Blackfoot, and Rep. Melvin Hammond, Rexburg. Two outstanding Democrats, Sen. Richard A. Egbert, Tetonia, and Wendell Miller, Idaho Falls, were drowned in the Republican tide.

That graphically illustrates the political story about as well as anything else.

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In the past, House Republicans have engaged in some nasty intra-party squabbles, largely due to their large numbers. The Senate margins have been narrower and this has not been nearly as much of a problem.

This year the pitiful number of only 14 Democrats — possibly the fewest in the Legislature's history — doesn't give them much leverage.

In the past four sessions, some 15-20 moderate Republicans have frequently joined the minority Democrats on some issues. These have been on key appropriation measures, such as the 1 cent state gas tax increase, certificate of need, minimum streamflow, land use, and turning back efforts to emasculate the Office of Energy.

The 14 Democrats aren't enough this year to become as much of a factor but the impending fights for House leadership portend deep House Republican schisms.

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Instead of two House Republican divisions of the past four sessions, "moderates and conservatives," there could be three the coming year on some issues.

One would roughly be grouped as the moderates headed by such legislators as Reps. Mike Gwartney, Boise; Larry Knigge, Filer, and Tom Boyd Genesee. Then there would be the usual far right faction led by Reps. Gene Winchester, Kuna; Rusty Barlow, Pocatello, and Wendy Ungricht, Boise. A third and perhaps the most dominate would be the conservatives headed by House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, Twin Falls, and the present leadership.

The dividing lines on such factions certainly would be blurred on most issues but it might hold fairly solid in some appropriation measures and on such emotional issues as the Right-to-Work.

In nearly all cases the Democrats likely would align themselves with the moderates, although this could be subject to shifts.

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Most of the East Idaho House Republicans can be classified in the large conservative group, such as Reps. Kurt L. Johnson, and Linden B. Bateman, Idaho Falls; John O. Sessions, Driggs, Darwin Young and Raymond Parks, Blackfoot; and a newcomer, Rich Orme, St. Anthony.

Rep. Elaine Kearns, Idaho Falls, whose compassionate role for health and welfare is well known, generally sides with the moderates.

Past voting records indicate Rep. Ray E. Infanger, Salmon; Gary L. Paxman, Idaho Falls, and at times, Wayne E. Tibbitts, Lorenzo, are viewed on the far right. Infanger's tough role as chairman of the House Appropriation Committee, might restrict his partisan activities the coming biennium.

Campaign statements from the new representative-elect, Martin B. Trillhaase, Idaho Falls, would hint his views are on the far right but this remains to be seen.

In any event, the House Republicans are in full control but the leadership will be hard pressed to keep the troops in line. It could pose some interesting tussles.