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Legislative limelights...

Olmstead seems GOP governor frontrunner

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Even though the 1982 May primary election is a year away, the field already is shaping up for the gubernatorial election.

It may be a smaller field than usual, although there are many who may be nursing hopes who haven't announced their intentions. Most must make their interest known before fall because they only have five or six months for tough campaigning.

The Democrats, of course, have no problems. Gov. John V. Evans has made it clear he intends to seek re-election and there is no indication anyone from his party will challenge him. The only possibility is former governor and U. S. secretary of interior, Cecil D. Andrus, but Andrus said he will never oppose Evans. Andrus, however, is a bright prospects, say, in 1986, or even later.

At the present time, unless conditions change dramatically, the Democrats with Evans and Andrus could have a political grasp on the governor's chair for at least the next 10 years. Already, despite a strong Republican tide, the Democrats have held the governor's chair at Boise 10 years.

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At present, there are three probable Republican contenders, House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, Twin Falls; Lt. Gov. Philip E. Batt, Wilder; and Attorney General David H. Leroy, Boise.

There are two others who are possibles — former House Speaker Allan F.Larsen, Blackfoot farmer; and Vernon F.Ravenscroft, former legislator and now a Boise consultant.

Larsen said he is leaning against running but will make up his mind within a month. Ravenscroft said he is angling for some position that would be most lucrative. If this materializes, he would take it; if not, then he could be considered a possible candidate.

There are others who might decide to leap in the race if there are only two or three entries, such as Jim Crowe, the Coeur d' Alene building developer and 1978 gubernatorial entrant, or possibly some legislator or former legislsator.

If only Olmstead, Batt and Leroy are the contenders, or just Olmstead and Batt, past election records would indicate that Olmstead must be considered the frontrunner. That's mainly due to the fact that Olmstead is considered a staunch conservative as compared with Batt or Leroy. Records show that since the heydays of Gov.Robert E. Smylie in the 1960s, a Republican moderate for top office has never won the primary. Smylie was deposed by Don Samuelson in 1967 in the primary and won one term. His performance lacked such leadership that Andrus ousted him in 1971.

Batt, who said he will formally announce April 29, is considered a moderate. He is the best liked, best known, and most knowledgeable Republican in the Statehouse. He has been shunted largely to the sidelines by the legislative leadership, meaning primarily Olmstead and Senate President Pro Tem Reed Budge, Soda Springs. As a result, his role as lieutenant governor has been low key in contrast with previous Republican lieutenant governors, such as Jack Murphy, who was the top party leader. Yet, if the present right wing swing begins to ebb — and it will eventually — then Batt stands an excellent chance.

Leroy holds the ideal philosophical position between Olmstead and Batt but he is only 34 and has been on the public scene just three years. He has done an excellent job in keeping high profile in his office. He knows his present post is a deadend but wants to remain in the public eye so he can at least consider a high office later.

Leroy is far from a certain candidate. In his latest appearance here last week, he said he will wait until conducting a poll in May to determine his chances. He also said that besides giving a long look at the governorship, he is giving a sidelong glance at lieutenant governor. In a crowded field, he could be one of the favorites.

Olmstead has indicated he will announce within a month. That gives him and Batt a year's time to prepare for the 1982 primary. Olmstead has said if Larsen should enter, he may decide to forego the race in belief Larsen would cut deeply in his conservative following, particularly in east Idaho. This is open to question.