

The election eye . . .

Idaho GOPers enjoy wide 1980 vote edge

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With the rash of candidates announcing and forming committees, it would appear the political campaign is getting off to an early start, a year ahead of the 1980 general elections.

U.S. Rep. Steve Symms, of the First District, was in Idaho Falls Thursday and Friday in appearances which virtually signal his formal entry in the U.S. Senate race.

Sen. Frank Church also was in the city two weeks ago in what is interpreted as his opening move to seek re-election.

Elsewhere in the state, other potential candidates are taking preliminary moves for their expected entry. Some have announced. All these signs indicate an unusually long campaign that may weary the electors as well as the candidates.

Any analysis in Idaho indicates that the Republicans hold a commanding edge on virtually every level — national, state and local.

Republican presidential contenders have captured the state consistently since the days of Democrat Harry S Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson and there is no indication that this trend will change for 1980.

President Jimmy Carter was beaten almost 2-1 by Republican Gerald Ford in 1976 and it is doubtful that if he is the Democratic nominee that he would do much better against the Republican standard bearer, particularly if it is the present front runner, Ronald Reagan. Even the other Republican candidates likely would hold a decided edge — John Connally, George Bush, Sen. Howard Baker, Reps. John Anderson and Philip Crane or any others.

If Sen. Edward M. Kennedy should happen to win the Democratic nomination, he likely would fare even worse than Carter because of his much more liberal image which is anathema to staunchly conservative Idahoans.

The Democrats feel confident Church will turn back the formidable challenge of Symms, but Republicans don't concede this. At this point it looks like a bruising battle. But the election is still nearly a year away and much can change.

In the congressional contests, disaster appears to face the Democrats, while the Republicans seem in a commanding position to retain both seats.

In the Second District, Rep. George V. Hansen, as result of his decisive victory in 1978, seemingly holds a strong position for re-election.

At the Democratic gathering at Boise two weeks ago for the Church rally, Democratic leaders privately have about written off chances for winning the two seats. They feel at this time that their prospective candidates must be considered lowly underdogs against the Republican adversaries.

Diane Bilyeu, Pocatello, a former state senator and wife of present State Sen. Chick Bilyeu, appears the lone challenger to Hansen.

Such stalwarts as Rep. Melvin Hammond, Rexburg; William Wittom, Rupert mayor and Idaho Farm Bureau public information director, and Kelly Pearce, state law enforcement director, emphatically state they are not interested now, but maybe in the future.

Mrs. Bilyeu, although an attractive and personable contender, would face a tough uphill battle against the well-known Hansen.

Actually, Hansen's most dangerous challenge might come from a primary rematch with Jim Jones, Jerome attorney, who made a credible showing on a short campaign. Jones appears to lean strongly

toward entering the contest but will withhold a formal announcement until mid-January.

In the First District, with Symms apparently moving towards the Senate contest, it would appear a wide open race.

The two leading Republican contenders, State Sen. Larry Craig, Midvale, or former Attorney General Wayne Kidwell, looks highly formidable against the two apparent Democrat competitors, Glenn Nichols, director of the State Department of Employment, or Jan Hammer, a former governor's staff assistant.

On the legislative level, Republicans also hold the advantage of 48-22 in the house and 19-16 in the Senate.

Democrats acknowledge they have little chance for winning House control but hope to narrow the gap.

They feel they have chances for winning Senate control but from all indications they don't look all that good.

In East Idaho, for example, both Democratic Sens. Richard A. Egbert, D-Tetonia, and Israel Merrill, face tough fights while Republican incumbents look safe.