

Governor blasts Idaho's closed primary in visit to Lewiston

Otter visits Lewiston gun manufacturer and uses opportunity to take aim at lack of voter turnout in Idaho

William L. Spence/Lewiston

While he's not a fan of the new closed primary system, Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter still wants everyone to vote in the May 20 election.

The two-term governor stopped in Lewiston for a "get-out-the-vote" rally Tuesday. About 30 people attended, most of whom were employees of Seekins Precision, the small manufacturing firm where the event was held.

"During the last election, we didn't get the turnout we'd like to see," he said. "We only had about 23 percent of registered voters come out. For democracy to work, we need greater participation than that."

Despite the dismal turnout numbers, Otter said he doesn't see much likelihood that Idaho will switch to a top two primary system or use mail-in ballots, both of which have helped Washington state maintain voter turnout levels closer to 40 percent in recent primaries.

"I don't see (mail-in ballots) happening," he said. "There's always been a lot of nervousness in Idaho about voting, but we've been pretty successful because of the people we had in the Secretary of State's Office and the confidence they instilled in people."

Otter is seeking a third term in the state's top office. He faces three challengers in the Republican primary - state Sen. Russ Fulcher of Meridian, Walt Bayes of Emmett and Harley D. Brown of Nampa. Except for state treasurer, Republican incumbents in every statewide and congressional race this year also have primary challengers, in what some have billed as a "battle for the heart and soul" of the Idaho Republican Party.

Only registered Republicans will be allowed to vote the Republican ballot during the primary, although unaffiliated voters can sign up as Republicans on Election Day.

That closed system was adopted two years ago, after the Idaho Republican Party successfully sued the state. Party hardliners said the old system - in which people could choose the ballot they wanted to vote - undermined their right of association by allowing Democrats and unaffiliated voters to influence who won the Republican primary.

Otter said he finds it hypocritical that some of the strongest supporters of the closed primary are now encouraging Democrats and independents to "cross over" and vote against him and the other incumbents on May 20.

"We found out how serious they were," he said. "I was against going to a closed primary. I'd like to see us turn around and open it back up."

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