

Look who now wants to require photo IDs

Jim Fisher

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Legislators introduce proposed laws late in a legislative session usually for one of two reasons: They are responding to something that has just happened or they are hoping the bill will get lost in the last-minute flurry and therefore stand a better chance of passing than it would if subject to greater scrutiny.

Lawrence Denney, speaker of the Idaho House, and Bob Geddes, president pro tem of the Idaho Senate, know that as well as anyone, both being seasoned legislative veterans. The fact that their bill making it harder for Idahoans to register to vote does not immediately respond to a recent event leaves one explanation why it came shooting out of the speaker's own committee at a time when most legislative sessions have adjourned.

Thursday, the committee, Ways and Means, introduced the bill requiring photo identification for Idahoans to become voters on a party-line, 4-3 vote.

The bill does away with Idahoans' ability to register by mail and requires people without driver's licenses, passports or other photo ID to get some before registering, and then travel to the county courthouse or other registration venue. Republican leaders say that is needed to stave off voter fraud.

What voter fraud?

If Denney and Geddes have evidence of fraudulent voting in Idaho, let's see it. It would certainly make big news in Idaho if its elections were being skewed by voters who were not who they said they were, especially since the winners of most elections are members of Denney and Geddes' party.

The odds are, however, that voter fraud is no more prevalent in Idaho than it is elsewhere.

Charges of widespread voting fraud have been circulated, often by Republican activists, in recent years. But the U.S. Justice Department spent five years under President George W. Bush investigating the matter, and concluded in 2007 there was almost no evidence of any organized efforts to tilt federal elections.

What cases the department did find mostly involved individuals who misunderstood their eligibility to vote or who mistakenly filled out registration

forms. A handful of people were found to have voted twice, but most were involved in small vote-buying operations in local races.

One event that might help explain Denney and Geddes' decision to pursue this legislation is last year's U.S. Supreme Court decision permitting similar legislation in Indiana. The decision has led other states to consider similar restrictions as well.

Few of those states share Idaho's vigorous aversion to federal attempts to impose a nationwide system of photo ID cards, though. Only last year, Gov. Butch Otter signed legislation forbidding the Idaho Transportation Department to comply with the federal Real ID Act. Before it got to Otter's desk, the legislation passed overwhelmingly in both Denney's and Geddes' chambers.

At the time, opponents charged the federal law was both an invasion of privacy and a burden on people who are not otherwise required to have photo ID. What has happened between now and then that justifies this attempt by state government to do what it objected to the federal government doing? - J.F.