

When the People Showed Up — And America Delivered



I knew it was wrong.

One day in August 2020, I sat in my living room processing what I'd just heard on a Zoom call. COVID was dragging on — despite promises that restrictions would last only long enough to flatten the curve. Families were being shut out from hospital bedsides. Schools faced lawsuits if they opened. The debate over vaccines was heating up. And now, Idaho's House and Senate Judiciary and Rules Committees were being asked to vet legislation granting sweeping immunity from liability — to every government entity and major corporation — for any action related to COVID.

Of course, everyone was scared. So were ordinary Idahoans who felt powerless in the face of shutdowns, mandates, cancellations, and isolation. I could sense the volatility. Many would see this legislation — the very legislation we were being called into special session to pass — as yet another government overreach. I asked pointed questions and made proposals. But it was too difficult to have hard conversations through a computer screen.

I kept searching. Through a friend, I learned that Utah had addressed the same problem more precisely. Their approach granted immunity from COVID transmission lawsuits except in cases of willful or reckless negligence but did not grant immunity for other actions related to COVID. I drafted an Idaho version — and removed government entities from the immunity clause entirely.

On August 24, 2020, as the extraordinary session got underway my bill was on the agenda alongside competing drafts. The pressure to finish quickly and go home was palpable. Every additional day we took would cost more taxpayer dollars. The Lincoln Auditorium was packed — Chambers of Commerce, the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry, and powerful lobbying groups pushing for a resolution on one side, and a room full of citizens who weren't having it on the other.

I was at the podium presenting my draft when chaos erupted behind me. Police began removing people. The chairman adjourned the meeting and committee members hurried toward the back door. I turned and saw a mother with crying children. Instead of slipping out with my colleagues, I walked into the crowd — comforting children, shaking hands, and listening.

I told them the committee had heard their concerns. That we were working for them. That they could trust the People's House with their business.

As the three-day session unfolded, it became clear the original proposal was going nowhere. Yet the underlying concerns were real — schools and businesses genuinely needed protection from liability for transmitting a disease no one could see or control.

The draft I had prepared answered those concerns. It kept schools and businesses open while protecting citizens from a government power grab. Over the next two days I found myself in the middle of intense negotiations. Some of the big special interest groups wanted to expand the immunity my bill offered. Others struggled to support any liability immunity at all. But I held my ground on the basic principles I believed everyone could ultimately support. Almost everyone could agree that it wasn't fair to hold people liable for something they had no control over. And almost everyone could see the danger of doing nothing. No one wanted to see unjustified legal action adding insult to the pain and uncertainty we were already experiencing.

With the help of some remarkable colleagues, the Coronavirus Limited Immunity Act passed both the House and Senate with near-unanimous Republican support. Most remarkable of all — the same citizens who had come to the Capitol expecting only to protest ended up testifying in committee hearings alongside representatives of the very corporations they had opposed, united in support of the final bill.

Not every legislative experience is this dramatic. But this experience left a permanent impression on my heart and mind — a vivid testament of the wisdom and capacity inherent in our representative process when citizens show up to voice their concerns and when lawmakers are willing to listen, to find common ground, to hold that ground, and to conscientiously work for principled solutions.

It has truly been an honor to work for and with you as a part of the brave American experiment — the Republic for which Old Glory stands!