

Stories that shaped state politics in 2021

By **HILLARY BORRUD**
The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregon politics saw another intense year in 2021, as leaders' handling of the ongoing pandemic continued to shape voters' opinions and politicians started to go public with their electoral aspirations for 2022.

It was an unprecedented year given the huge state budget lawmakers approved thanks to federal stimulus money, but also because legislators for the first time ever expelled one of their colleagues. New congressional and legislative districts mean many voters will get new representatives in 2022, and the governor's race is open for the first time in more than a decade.

Here's a look back at the biggest Oregon political stories of 2021 and how they could continue to have an impact in the new year.

Lawmakers punt on political donation limits

Oregon voters registered strong support for setting limits on political donations in 2020, when they overwhelmingly approved an amendment to the state Constitution explicitly allowing such caps.

Yet after giving a big voice to donors in closed-door negotiations this year, lawmakers dropped the issue. Advocates for limits and more transparency on political spending then spent months negotiating with labor unions and left-leaning interest groups, before deciding in early December to file proposed initiatives to try to get on the ballot in 2022 without the unions and other groups' support.

Lawmakers' decision not to rein in Oregon's no-limits political money system means the state is headed for yet another free-spending and potentially record-breaking governor's race next year as well as high-priced legislative races. In the 2018 governor's race, spending topped \$37 mil-

lion. Sen. Betsy Johnson's decision to run for governor without a party means there will be three serious candidates running in the general election, only adding to the fundraising pressure.

Redistricting

Oregon became the first state in the nation to adopt new congressional districts on Sept. 27, and under the new map, independent analyses suggest it's likely Democrats will win five of the six seats at some point in the next decade, if not next year. That would give Democrats 83% of the seats, while President Joe Biden collected just 56% of Oregonians' votes in his winning 2020 race. Still, the majority Democratic Legislature successfully defended the plan in court, in large part because experts testified that the state's small number of congressional seats makes it difficult to identify partisan gerrymandering using statistical analysis.

Both the congressional map and the 90 new state House and Senate districts that lawmakers drew are already prompting a shakeup in many parts of the state.

Meanwhile, a coalition of good government and business groups is trying once again to get an initiative before voters in 2022 to create a new independent commission to handle redistricting.

Portland's plight

Oregon's largest city has seen its national profile descend during the pandemic from a renowned culinary hotspot that often drew attention for hipster curiosities worthy of a "Portlandia" sketch, to the site of nightly protests that provided fodder for former President Donald Trump and other Republicans.

The demonstrations have died down, but problems remain including garbage pileups around the city and large numbers of homeless camps. Those concerns were top-of-mind for many Oregonians in 2021 and could

play a role in 2022 elections.

In an October survey by the firm DHM Research that was paid for by Oregon Business & Industry, 70% of respondents said Portland is having a negative impact on the rest of the state. This viewpoint was shared by a majority of people in the Portland area. A poll commissioned by The Oregonian earlier this year similarly found that people in the metro area believed the city's downtown core had become dirty, unsafe and uninviting.

Oregon lawmaker expelled

Oregon lawmakers in June ejected a sitting legislator for the first time in the state's history. Republican Mike Nearman, who lives outside Independence, was expelled for plotting to let violent demonstrators into the state Capitol during a December 2020 special session. He cast the lone vote against his own expulsion from the state House. All other members of the Republican caucus voted with Democrats to remove him.

Details of Nearman's role in the incursion trickled out over months, including videos showing him opening a door to demonstrators, including some with firearms, and coaching people who wanted to breach the Capitol to text him when they needed him to open the door. Demonstrators clashed with state troopers and Salem police, and lawmakers later recounted how they could hear demonstrators calling them "traitors" and "enemies of the state" and shouting "we're coming for you." The willingness of conservative demonstrators to engage in violence in order to disrupt government business seemed to presage the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol by Trump supporters who wanted to disrupt Congress' certification of Biden's 2020 presidential win.

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