

SURVEY

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Republican voters believed illegal voting occurred in Oregon and throughout the country.

Secretary of State Shemia Fagan told the Capital Chronicle the results of both surveys showed that she has a lot of work to do to rebuild trust with Oregonians.

“Oregon’s elections are safe, secure and accessible,” she said. “It’s not for any actual failing of the election system that trust has been eroded. It’s unfortunate that it’s really false information about our elections that eroded people’s trust in the way that we do elections and in our democracy.”



Fagan

As Fagan and other election officials throughout Oregon and the U.S. seek to restore trust in the election system during the 2022 elections, they face a political reality that some candidates believe they’ll benefit from sowing doubt.

One leading Republican candidate for governor, Sandy Mayor Stan Pulliam, insists the 2020 election was fraudulent. He previously told the Capital Chronicle he also had doubts about Oregon’s 20-year history of running elections by mail, as only one Republican candidate has won statewide since Oregon began running elections by mail in 2000.



Pulliam

A month ahead of the primary election, Pulliam has added just one policy proposal to his website: a plan to end automatic voter registration, ban anyone other than a voter from returning a ballot and require post-election audits, which are already required by state law.

“Nobody’s doing Oregonians a service by destroying trust in our election system, particularly the candidates who are trying to be elected in that very system,” Fagan said.

More faith in elections than other states

While a significant percentage of Oregon voters,



Win McNamee/Getty Images, File

On Jan. 6, 2021, as Congress convened to certify Joe Biden’s electoral victory, hundreds of protesters who were in D.C. for the “Save America” rally violently breached the U.S. Capitol building, making it as far as the Senate chamber, killing one Capitol police officer, and injuring more than 140 others. The insurrectionists, composed largely of pro-Trump supporters, caused roughly \$1.5 million in damages.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

A Union County ballot drop box stands outside Elgin City Hall on Thursday, April 29, 2021. About one in five Oregon voters, and nearly half of Republicans, believe fraud changed the 2020 election results, a 2022 survey found.

and particularly Oregon Republicans, doubt the integrity of the election system, Oregonians still have more faith in the state’s election than voters nationally or in states that have been the epicenter of post-2020 election fraud claims.

Monmouth University has conducted national polls about election fraud beliefs six times since November 2020, finding each time that 32% of respondents believed Biden won because of fraud. But those polls consistently found that a

majority of Republicans believed Biden’s election was fraudulent — 61% of Republicans in a January 2022 survey and 73% in a November 2021 survey told Monmouth pollsters that Biden’s election was due to fraud.

In Arizona, where a lengthy “audit” of the 2020 presidential and Senate races conducted by outside firms found no evidence of fraud, one of the state’s leading polling firms found that about 42% of voters — and more than 78% of Republicans — believed

significant voter fraud compromised the integrity of the election. Republican pollsters and consultants there have warned that championing false claims of voter fraud might help in a GOP primary but doom candidates in statewide races.

Regular surveys of Wisconsin voters from the Marquette Law School similarly found that nearly one-third of all voters weren’t confident in the 2020 election results. Republicans gained a little more confidence in Wisconsin elections between August 2021 and the most recent survey in February, but more than 60% of them still don’t trust their state election results.

Fagan attributed Oregon’s higher confidence in elections to the state’s history of holding mail elections supervised by both Democratic and Republican officials. She noted that her immediate predecessors, Bev Clarno and Dennis Richardson, were both Republicans who promoted the state’s vote-by-mail system.

“While some Oregonians lost trust in our elections in 2020, it wasn’t like Arizona or Michigan where there was really a concerted effort to erode trust in our democracy,” she said. “It’s

really because of a national conversation about vote-by-mail and the false things the former president was saying about vote-by-mail that really caused that erosion of trust.”

Prebunking

However, Fagan said, 2022 could be a more difficult election in Oregon. This year is the first under a new law that requires ballots be counted as long as they’re postmarked by Election Day and arrive within the next week. That means Oregonians may not have a clear idea of who’s winning an election, or even how many votes are left to count, as they traditionally have on election night.

And pundits expect closer elections, at least in some races, than Oregon has seen in past years. The state will likely have a three-way race for governor in the general election, and crowded primaries in multiple races could mean a very small number of votes decide elections.

“Nobody should have been surprised when Joe Biden won Oregon,” Fagan said. “But in 2022, there could be a lot closer races. We could see more sophisticated attacks.”

To that end, Fagan and

election officials around the state are focused on what they call prebunking, as opposed to reacting to fraud claims and trying to debunk them after they spread. The office has \$370,000 recently appropriated by the Legislature for statewide public service announcements and responses to election misinformation, and it’s using \$135,000 for two animated videos, radio spots and ads about the postmark law and closed primaries.

The first video, featuring an excited cartoon blob and googly eyes on Oregon landmarks, explains where to register to vote and that primaries are closed. Fagan said that idea came from a conversation with county clerks, who said they commonly field questions from voters who don’t understand why their spouse has a different ballot or why they can’t vote for a candidate whose ads they watched.

Every Oregon voter will receive a ballot in May, but only Republicans or Democrats get to vote for candidates running in partisan primaries for offices including the governor, Congress and the Legislature. More than 1.2 million voters, about 41% of the electorate, will only get to vote in nonpartisan races such as the commissioner of the state Bureau of Labor and Industries and judges.

Voters have until April 26 to register to vote or switch parties to vote in the primary election. It takes less than three minutes to register online, a point the Secretary of State’s Office keeps making in TikTok videos with guest appearances from Fagan’s dog, the Secreterrier of State.

The office also plans to release public service announcements about the postmark law before the May election. The animated videos will direct people to the secretary of state’s website through OregonVotes.gov, but they don’t include references to the office or Fagan, which she described as a conscious choice. For some voters, a Democratic secretary of state isn’t a trusted source.

“I have enough humility to recognize I’m not the best messenger for all of this, and so I need to step back when appropriate and let other people take what we know is an accurate message,” she said.

HIRING

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terms of retirements and things like that in the last five to eight years, but it’s just really challenging to recruit and make sure that we work really hard to keep those standards where we need them to be so that we can provide the service that the community deserves,” Bell told the council during the Wednesday, April 6, meeting.

The La Grande Fire Department may have help on the way soon, following roughly seven months of lacking a firefighter/paramedic position.

A firefighter/EMT role also recently opened after a retirement, and the department is in the process of testing eight individuals to potentially fill the void.

“The challenge has been the paramedic piece,” Cornford said. “Paramedics are in short supply, so we haven’t had a lot of people apply.”

The department has faced difficulties in hiring firefighters who are qualified as paramedics, which Cornford said is a statewide trend. To help alleviate the burden, the city of La Grande passed a memorandum of understanding with the Local 924 Chapter of the International Association of Firefighters that would allow for new hires to undertake paramedic training while working for the department as a condition of employment.

One current staff member of the department previously completed the training, receiving high marks in the program. Cornford noted that the process takes roughly two years, so the department



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

La Grande Police Chief Gary Bell on Wednesday, April 6, 2022, told the city council the department still has three open officer positions. Bell said the department has made one conditional offer and is evaluating a few other candidates.

would look to stagger the training in order to still have staff on hand. Even so, a sizable portion of the training is online, allowing for the employee to continue working regular shifts.

“It’s a good way to do it, but we also don’t want to do that until they’re a good portion of the way through their first year learning the ins and outs of the department and firefighting in general,” he said.

While recent hiring trends resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted nearly

every job market, Cornford stated that the overall need for paramedics in the state and La Grande’s location in rural Oregon have been two key challenges in hiring paramedics.

“That puts us in the market for paramedics alongside bigger entities that are more likely to pay better,” he said. “There’s also the challenges of being in rural Oregon. Some people see that as a benefit, which I myself would say, but a lot of people sometimes see that as not an ideal place to live.”



Bell



Cornford



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

Recreational vehicles sit behind The Historic Union Hotel on Nov. 17, 2021. The city in March 2022 approved a 5% lodging tax that will affect the hotel and the adjacent RV park.

LODGING

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The remaining revenue could go to the city’s general fund or toward tourism. Wiggins said he anticipates the city council will opt to spend the money on tourism.

At least two cities in Union County — La Grande and Elgin — have transient lodging taxes. In addition, everyone providing overnight lodging in Union County must pay a 3% county transient room tax and a state transient room tax. The state tax is 1.5%, according to the Oregon Department of Revenue’s website.

Morden said people who are traveling as part of their work are finding it difficult to stay in hotels and motels because their per diem has not been raised even though there is rampant inflation.

He said the tax could ultimately result in him converting the Union Hotel into an apartment-only complex.

“It puts me on the path to making it all apartments,” he said.

For a number of months he has been converting the Union Hotel’s third floor, which had been closed for years, into apartments.

Morden said he would make less money with an apartment-only complex but it would be less work to operate than a hotel.