

Trump, Oregon GOP relationship is complicated

In blue Oregon, Trump's ties to party confuse things for GOP gubernatorial contenders in primary election

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PORTLAND — Stan Pulliam's recent rally at Portland's Chapman Square didn't last long and the turnout wasn't great.

But in many ways, the event couldn't have gone any better for the Republican gubernatorial candidate for Oregon governor.

Thanks to a small group of black-clad counter protesters who showed up to heckle and throw paint bombs at Pulliam and his 20 or so supporters, the candidate landed a spot on one of cable news' most watched morning shows, Fox & Friends.

"It's unbelievable," Pulliam, the current mayor of Sandy, told the television host in an outraged tone, "You know, the city of Portland, from roses to riots."

The news chyron read, "Antifa mob disrupts GOP rally."

"A statewide candidate for governor. We should be able to go to the largest metropolitan community of our state and have a peaceful campaign rally," Pulliam continued. "Of course, less than 15 minutes in, we're greeted by antifa showing up with firecrackers that they are throwing at us, ink paint, feces all over ... That is the city of Portland circa 2022."

Of all the candidates running for governor this year, Pulliam has mostly closely emulated former President Donald Trump's aggressive style. Pulliam is on what he's dubbed a "war on woke" and frequently talks about how he's a fighter and plans to throw "thugs" in jail. He consistently questions the veracity of the 2020 election, repeating the falsehood that Joe Biden didn't win the presidency.

Across the nation, this has become a common political play for Republicans hoping to attract the former president's endorsement and the support of his fans. It's already shown to work: In Ohio, U.S. Senate candidate J.D. Vance captured a late April nod from the president, and last week won the Republican primary. The former president and his supporters hope other GOP primaries this month and next cement his status as kingmaker, which could set Trump up for another run at the presidency.

But in blue Oregon, Trump remains a more complicated figure for most GOP gubernatorial contenders.

Look no further than the case of the former GOP contender, Knute Buehler. In his run up to the 2018 governor's race, which he lost to Kate Brown, Buehler tried to distance himself from Trump, at one point calling him an "angry self-absorbed" person who had no place as the leader of the Republican party. While running for a Congressional seat in 2020, Buehler's tone softened on

Trump and he went out of his way to say he opposed impeachment in a campaign video. After the Jan. 6 insurrection at the state Capitol and after Buehler lost the Congressional race, he ended up leaving the Republican party.

In a recent debate put on by the Central Oregon Daily News and The Bulletin, some of the GOP frontrunners —

Pulliam, Salem oncologist Bud Pierce, businessman Bob Tiernan and former House Republican Leader Christine Drazan — were asked directly who they thought won the 2020 election.

Pierce quickly pivoted to a less objectionable topic, emphasizing election integrity.

"We had an election, the electors for the president came together and declared Joe Biden the winner. Joe Biden is the president of the United States," Pierce said.

"I think what we're finding is that people don't have trust in our election system, integrity in the system. Oregon, for instance, has vote-by-mail, that's a system you have to



The Associated Press, File

Former President Donald Trump remains a complicated figure for most of Oregon's GOP gubernatorial contenders.

regulate more. You have to oversee more."

Drazan followed a similar tact, dancing around the actual question that had been asked:

"When it comes to this issue, Joe Biden is our president today, and in Oregon he absolutely won Oregon by 15 points," Drazan said. "I have confidence in Oregon, we have got to continue to improve vote-by-mail ... We must do more to protect our elections."

When it was Pulliam's turn to answer the question, he was direct.

"I'm the only conservative candidate, especially on this stage, that is willing to say the truth," he said loudly. "The 2020 election was fraudulent, completely fraudulent."

Later, he gestured to the other candidates on the stage: "Biden, Biden, Biden, all of them said Biden won."

Running right to boost the base

Pulliam started the 2022 campaign strong. He was the candidate who seemingly best encapsulated the mood of many Republican primary voters; angry at the status quo and still inspired by Trump. His campaign took a hit, however, when Willamette Week reported he and his wife had been part of a Portland swinger's group, which he did not deny. He lost a powerful endorsement in a GOP primary from the anti-abortion group Right to Life.

Now, as the rest of the GOP frontrunner field does their best to avoid talking about the former president, Pulliam is trying another strategy: embrace the President, inspire the base and win the primary. In November, he's banking on former state Sen. Betsy

Johnson, who is running as an unaffiliated candidate, splitting the votes with the Democratic candidate. With the Johnson factor and a red wave, Pulliam is betting he doesn't need to moderate his conservative stances for a general audience.

The other strategy — in which GOP candidates try to stake out a more moderate position in order to be more appealing to a general election audience — hasn't worked recently. Oregon hasn't elected a Republican governor since Gov. Victor Atiyeh won a second term in 1982.

So, Pulliam is going all out. He's been arguing against the governor's COVID-10 restrictions, including school closures throughout the pandemic. And he's managed to cram in pretty much every other cultural wedge issue of the moment into his campaign. He's issued plans to "lock up antifa," said he would end "abortion tourism," called for firing a teacher he described as a "woke pervert" and criticized the Salem-Keizer school district for supporting transgender students.

Pulliam's rally in Portland was part of his "war on woke" and focused on increasing funding for police.

When the counter protesters showed up, someone called the police. In a moment made for campaign mes-

saging, it took 20 minutes for 911 to pick up the phone call, according to the Pulliam campaign. Police never showed. The Portland Police Bureau told OPB that officials are looking into the matter.

The rally almost landed Pulliam on the Sean Hannity show, one of the biggest platforms a Republican could land. He ended up being bumped due to Roe v. Wade draft opinion leak.

Pulliam isn't the only candidate leaning hard to the right as a way to appeal to the voters most likely to return their ballots. Writer and consultant Bridget Barton, who credits Trump with "draining the swamp," isn't shying away.

Jessica Gomez, of Medford, the founder and CEO of Rogue Valley Microdevices, is an example of a candidate who is taking the more moderate approach. She was direct in a recent Portland City Club debate that she believes Biden fairly won the election and she's pro-choice.

"These candidates here have all stated they are in favor of medical freedom when it comes to masks, vaccines and it's really inconsistent," Gomez said. "This is about bodily autonomy and I'm supportive of medical freedom and that includes abortion, vaccines and any other procedures that are legally available."

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