

Political center rates Oregon gubernatorial race a 'toss-up'

The rating change coincides with new polling showing that abortion is galvanizing some Democrats toward Tina Kotek

By **LYNNE TERRY**
Oregon Capital Chronicle

SALEM — A nonpartisan political center has changed its prediction for Oregon's three-way gubernatorial race from "leans Democrat" to "toss-up." The University of Virginia's Center for Politics made the announcement Thursday, saying that "despite the state's blue lean and the fact that Republicans have not won a gubernatorial race there since 1982" when the late Gov. Vic Atiyeh won reelection, it considers the race to be open. It said the competition among progressive Democrat Tina Kotek, Republican Christine Drazan and non-affiliated candidate Betsy Johnson, who all served in the state Legislature, had created an unusual dynamic. The center noted that Johnson, though a former Democrat, is "more conservative than most of the members of her former party" and had garnered the support of Nike co-founder Phil Knight, who typically backs Republicans. "The race sets up an unusual situation where the winner may not need to crack even 40%," the center said, noting that outgoing Gov. Kate Brown, a Democrat, "is deeply unpopular, and there may be some desire for change in the Beaver State." The center said Johnson "would still be the most surprising winner, and Kotek and Drazan both will be working to try to prevent their voters from flocking to her banner. There's just enough uncertainty here that we're looking at the race as a toss-up now." The other states that the

center considers a toss-up in the governor's race are Arizona, Nevada, Kansas and Wisconsin. Democratic governors are running for re-election in Kansas, Nevada and Wisconsin, while Arizona has an open race in a state where Republicans have held the governorship since 2009. The Cook Report, which also keeps a close eye on key races nationwide, changed its rating for Oregon's gubernatorial race on July 22 from "likely Democrat" to "lean Democrat." Political forecasting site FiveThirtyEight, meanwhile, still gives Kotek better than seven in 10 odds of winning the governorship. Political analyst John Horvick, senior vice president at DHM Research, a nonpartisan opinion research firm, said little has changed in the race recently to prompt a change of rating. "I think they're just catching up with the fact that Betsy Johnson is a real credible candidate that's got money behind her and that's going to have an influence on the race," Horvick said. In terms of fundraising, Johnson is ahead, according to the Portland Record. She has drawn \$10.2 million, including \$466,000 to date from Tim Boyle, CEO of Columbia Sportswear, and \$1.75 million from Knight. Kotek has raised nearly \$6.8 million, followed by \$6 million for Drazan. Voters are also responding to issues, Horvick said. Polling by DHM Research last week which has not yet been released showed that the U.S. Supreme Court decision overturning Roe v. Wade, rescinding the constitu-



Republican nominee Christine Drazan, left, and unaffiliated candidate Betsy Johnson, right, listen to Democratic nominee Tina Kotek speak during a governor candidates' debate hosted by Oregon Newspaper Publishers Association at Mount Hood Oregon Resort on Friday, July 29, 2022, in Welches.

tional guarantee of abortion rights, is galvanizing some Democrats. "There is a big change with Democrats and abortion," Horvick said. "In January, just 1% of Democrats said abortion is the most important issue in the gubernatorial election. Now

16% of Democrats say it's the most important issue," Horvick said. Kotek has long supported abortion rights, including the decision by the Legislature this February to allocate \$15 million to help women access abortion care. Drazan opposes abor-

tion but she has said she would follow Oregon's laws placing no restrictions on abortions. Johnson has also consistently supported abortion rights, though she disapproved of the Legislature giving money to help women from out of state access care.

Nevertheless, Democrats concerned about abortion access seem to think Kotek is a safer choice, Horvick said. "I really think among those wavering Democrats that they have responded to the issue of abortion and are coming back home," Horvick said. He said two-thirds of Oregon voters support abortion rights when asked about abortion in general. But nearly 60% say they would support a ban on abortions in the third trimester except to protect the life of the mother. "There is more nuance in public opinion than perhaps we'll see in the next two and half months," Horvick said. His recent polling also showed that a majority of Oregon voters place themselves on just to the left of center, which he said is favorable for Johnson. "Betsy Johnson seems to be getting that message across where she fits ideologically," Horvick said. "That's a success and an opportunity for her."

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