

May's election reveals clues to criminal justice reform

BY DAVID ROGERS
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

The politics of fear have been a consistent and dominant force in our political landscape. Some politicians resort to scaring the electorate into voting for them through tough-on-crime rhetoric. This tactic often manipulates facts and uses serious hyperbole as a candidate accuses his or her opponent of being soft on criminals.

The most well-known examples of this tactic were the Willie Horton television ads produced by George H.W. Bush in his 1988 presidential campaign against Michael Dukakis. The Bush campaign advertisement accused Dukakis of being responsible for the release of a prisoner named Willie Horton, who was convicted of murder. While on release, Willie Horton committed armed robbery, assault and rape. Willie Horton's crimes were tragic and scary, which made him a perfect political tool. He was also African American and the Bush campaign played to the latent racial prejudice in the electorate. The ads racialized perceptions of crime and reinforced the problematic stereotypes of black men as criminals to be feared. The Willie Horton ad campaign did exactly what it was intended to do and was incredibly successful at weakening support for Dukakis.

What makes tough-on-crime rhetoric such a useful political tool?

Ultimately everyone wants to be safe. We want to be able to move about the world without looking over our shoulders. We want to send our kids outside to play without worrying that they will be harmed by someone. Tough-on-crime rhetoric taps the natural desire for safety while also tapping another powerful emotion: fear. The politics of fear have largely been effective because voters often have limited facts about what the most effective approaches to crime prevention are. The tough-on-crime rhetoric feeds an intuitive but false perception that a primary focus on prisons and long criminal sentences are the best approach to creating safe communities and reducing crime.

PARTNERSHIP FOR SAFETY and JUSTICE

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Unfortunately, in a time when voting decisions are significantly influenced by sound bites and TV ads, our political process has little room for informed policy debates.

Despite this cynical view of the influence of the politics of fear, Oregon's May election suggests that voters are no longer so vulnerable to old-school, tough-on-crime approaches. Two races demonstrate a real shift in voters' attitudes.

The Attorney General's race came down to two people: Dwight Holton and Ellen Rosenbaum. Holton who was an interim U.S. Attorney and had an air of inevitability about him. He was often framed as the presumed front-runner. Rosenbaum was a former prosecutor and judge.

Other than their genders, the distinctions that emerged between the candidates debates and interviews really came down to different beliefs around criminal justice and drug policy. Dwight Holton received the overwhelming majority of endorsements from district attorneys, sheriffs, and law enforcement. He positioned himself as an old-school law and order guy that didn't appear interested in supporting serious conversations about the need for sentencing reform or changes to our outdated, mandatory minimum laws.

Ellen Rosenbaum, on the other hand, recognized that Oregon's corrections spending has skyrocketed, putting severe strain on the budget. The state's prison

population has more than doubled since the passage of harsh mandatory minimums in 1994, and Ellen expressed interest in finding ways to reduce prison spending, support safe and sensible sentencing reform, and update Oregon's approach to public safety that wasn't dumping all our limited resources into prisons.

On top of these distinctions, Dwight Holton positioned himself in opposition to Oregon's medical marijuana law and was targeted as a threat to this drug policy. Ellen acknowledged that medical marijuana was state law and she saw it as the Attorney General's job to enforce it.

Despite Dwight Holton's presumed front-runner status, Rosenbaum crushed him in May's primary by almost a hundred thousand votes. Yes, this was a Democratic primary, and so only a portion of the electorate voted. Nevertheless, this represents a clear sign that voters are beginning to support a smart-on-crime approach.

This shift was also highlighted by the Democratic primary race in State House District 36. Jennifer Williamson was in a very tight race with Sharon Meieran. This race was for an open seat left vacant when Rep. Mary Nolan chose to run for Portland City Commission.

Jennifer Williamson ran a campaign highlighting a number of critical issues, and among them was the need for a different approach to public safety. Her campaign wasn't afraid of smart-on-crime frames rather than tough-on-crime rhetoric. She actually embraced the promotion of sensible criminal justice reform, so much so that she

ran a TV ad talking about shifting Oregon's priorities:

"In Oregon, we spent \$1.4 billion on prisons, but we're closing schools in Portland. It just doesn't make sense...We need more books, not more prison bunks."

Many elected leaders offer quiet support to smart-on-crime public safety reform, but

few are willing to lead with it. Well, in this instance, Williamson prevailed providing another indication that Oregon's voters want to see something different than the status quo.

This May's election results offer a glimpse into changing attitudes toward crime policy. But this shift has been happening for several years now. In 2008, the state saw

two competing crime-related ballot measures go head to head. Measure 61, sponsored by Kevin Mannix, would have created new mandatory minimums for a range of addiction-driven crimes. The state estimated the measure would have cost over a billion dollars for new prison construction and operation, yet it didn't provide any investment in addiction treatment. Measure 57, offered as an alternative by the legislature, provided some sentencing enhancements for drug and property crime but rejected traditional mandatory minimum schemes and, perhaps most importantly, strengthened access to addiction treatment and drug courts. Measure 57 won, demonstrating when voters are given a choice, the tough-on-crime rhetoric is no longer a slam dunk.

As the 2012 election season ramps up, let's hope fewer candidates try and manipulate us using the politics of fear.

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PUZZLES

By Cole Merkel

Answers on page 6

Crossword

Across

1. Edison's incandescent
5. Sir, in India
10. Boutique
14. Gelatin substitute
15. NW Portland district
16. Spoils
17. "The Sun ___ Rises"
18. Ice house
19. Choir part
20. "How I Met Your Mother," e.g.
23. Window, e.g.
24. Praise
25. Alaskan tundra town
28. Tail
30. Between ports
31. Couple's dance
33. Crew tool
36. Soviet symbols
40. British ram
41. Baby kangaroos
42. Kind of race
43. Cry like a baby
44. Feast
46. Poison plant
49. Fowl place
51. Passports, for one
57. Caribbean tuber
58. Equestrian
59. Curved molding
60. Swerve
61. Pond buildup
62. Russian river
63. Historic periods
64. Incessantly
65. Lord's worker

Down

1. Pastoral sounds
2. Wrinkly fruit

3. Bringing up the rear
4. Enclosed carriage
5. Medieval hospital for contagious patients
6. Patronage
7. Angelic headbands
8. Wrinkle remover
9. Coalition
10. Irish cops
11. Freed from illness
12. One-up
13. Calculated actions to outdo
21. Hopworks Crosstown Pale
22. Cousin of a giraffe

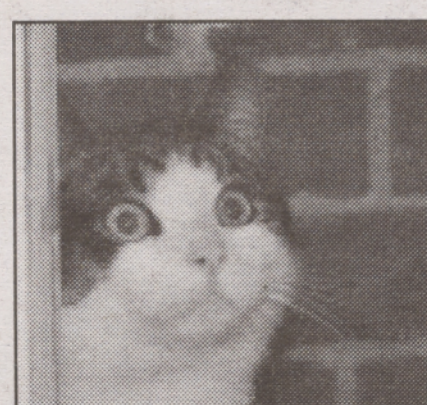
25. Thai currency
26. Brother of Jacob
27. Office fill-in
28. GM brand abbr. (until 2004)
29. Trigonometry abbr.
31. Scottish highlander
32. In the least
33. Gumbo thickener
34. "___ for the poor"
35. Sabbath activity
37. DVD button
38. Propel a boat
39. Confusing argument
43. Estates

44. Ocean's noise, last week
45. N.Y.C. zone
46. Strainer
47. Milk source
48. Euripides drama
49. Chain of hills
50. Neptune's realm
52. It's south of Georgia
53. Greek pastry sheet
54. Shrek, e.g.
55. Within view
56. Narcissist's love

Sudoku

	5	9					8	
			8					
3		1				6		2
8	2			7				1
	4				1	5		8
			4					
				3		2		
1			5		4		6	
		4		2		3		

The objective of Sudoku is to fill all the blank squares with the correct numbers, from 1 to 9. Every row, column and square must include all digits, 1 through 9, in any order.



Office Cat Rooty says thank you to all our volunteers who work so hard to keep us moving forward. You're the best! Thank you!