

It's not just about the White House, Oregon seats up for vote

BY DENISE WELCH
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Regular readers of our column will know that Partnership for Safety and Justice often writes about voting and why we think it's so important. During presidential election years, voter interest is usually high and so is voter turnout. But in mid-term election years, like this year, there is no presidential race to get excited about. Lots

of folks think "Who cares? This year doesn't matter." Voter turnout is traditionally very low. Even lower, however, is voter turnout in primary elections. Voting just isn't on most folks' radars this time of year.

We want readers to know that primary elections are very important. We'd like to share with you why we think so and ask you to make sure you are registered (or that your registration is up to date) and that you vote in May.

The upcoming May primary election will have a significant direct impact on Oregonians. Voters will choose who will run in the general election in November for 15 seats in the Senate and all 60 House district seats. More than 120 individuals have filed to run for those 75 seats! In addition to the Oregon legislative races, voters will decide who will face off against John Kitzhaber (running for his fourth term) for governor, and two Republican challengers are running

for the right to face Sen. Jeff Merkley in the fall.

Many voters sit out the primary election season because they think it is not as important as a general election in the fall. In many Oregon Legislative races, however, voters in the primary elections will make the ultimate decision about who will represent their district. Because of the way most legislative districts in Oregon are drawn, one party has a clear registration advantage that result in the winner of the primary facing little or no opposition in the fall. In the Oregon House, more than half of the 60 seats will be decided in elections in which the victor is clear before ballots are even mailed. Of the remaining seats, about a dozen will be decided in a Republican primary and about a half dozen will be decided in a Democratic primary. That leaves only about 10 seats that will be decided by a vote in the fall. Just looking at the numbers, it is clear that the primary elections have a significant impact on the ultimate policy decisions made in Salem.

Election outcomes are determined by those who participate. Elected officials make important (sometimes life or death) decisions about how taxpayer dollars will be spent and the restraints the state will place on individual behavior. The drinking age, how old you must be to get a driver's license, and how much money teachers receive to educate our children are all decisions made by elected officials. Oregon's legislators decide how much money will be spent on corrections, services for crime

survivors, drug and mental health treatment and whether changes to public safety policy will be made. These are just a small sampling of the kinds of things our legislators decide – issues PSJ and our members care deeply about.

Your vote is your voice

Oregon is a leader! We are one of only 13 states that automatically restore voting rights to those leaving prison. We are one of only two states that conduct all of our elections by mail, making voting easy. If you've been following the national news, you'll know that many states are trying to make it harder for people to vote. Oregon makes it easier! It feels to us like we owe it to those who can't use their voices to use ours!

When we vote, we are actually telling elected officials and lawmakers how we feel about education, public safety, social security, health care and other important issues. There is power in numbers. When we vote and get our family members to vote, we can truly make a difference. If you don't vote for what you believe in, others will – and you may not like the outcome. Voting is our chance to make a difference in our own lives.

PSJ knows the importance of every single vote and how close some elections have been. In 2004, now-Secretary of State Kate Brown won her state senate seat by only 40 votes! We at PSJ encourage you to vote in Oregon's election on May 20. Your vote counts – it is your voice!

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