

ELECTION: 'We could see more sophisticated attacks'

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elections that eroded people's trust in the way that we do elections and in our democracy."

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.

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.

While a significant percentage of Oregon voters, 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."

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.

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By Charles Preston

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