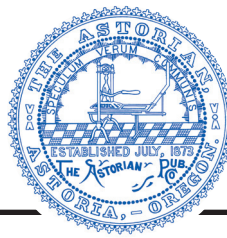


OPINION

editor@dailyastorian.com



the Astorian

Founded in 1873

KARI BORGEN
Publisher

DERRICK DePLEGDE
Editor

SHANNON ARLINT
Circulation Manager

JOHN D. BRUIJN
Production Manager

CARL EARL
Systems Manager

BEHIND THE NEWS

'It's sort of a wide open landscape'

Open seats in state Senate District 16 and state House District 32 will put the North Coast in the political spotlight next year.

The potentially competitive campaigns, which will likely attract money and interest from across Oregon, come at a fraught moment for political parties.

After President Joe Biden was inaugurated last January, Gallup's national tracking on party affiliation found that 50% considered themselves independents. The number was 41% in November. In Clatsop County, nonaffiliated voters outnumber Democrats and Republicans.

"When people see the national government, and it seems very disconnected, they don't feel that linkage to the parties that I think used to exist," said Andy Davis, the chairman of Clatsop County Democrats and a research analyst for the Oregon Health Authority. "So we've got to create that again and figure out ways to connect to people."

Davis, who ran unsuccessfully for the county Board of Commissioners in 2018, has chaired the Countywide Citizens Advisory Committee and served on the county's budget committee.



DERRICK DePLEGDE

In an interview, Davis talked about finding candidates for the state Senate and state House, the challenges political parties are facing and what he sees as the dominant policy issues for next year's campaigns.

Q: Betsy Johnson resigned from the state Senate to run for governor as an independent. State Rep. Suzanne Weber is giving up her state House seat to run for the Senate. That leaves two open seats on the North Coast next year. How does the Democratic Party intend to compete?

A: Betsy stepping down amplified the timelines for a lot of these things.

Obviously, we knew that she was running for governor. We had heard that Suzanne was going to try and step into the Senate seat. So we had already started the process of sounding out candidates, trying to talk to people who we thought were likely. There's also the dynamic of Brad Witt stepping down from his seat (for reelection to the state House as a Democrat from Clatskanie).

So it's a really wide open race in the broader Senate District 16 area.

And I think one of the challenges right now is that at most levels of county and city government — we've looked for candidates out of those pools — and a lot of those folks are either spoken for or retiring or something like that.

So while we've got a lot of people who might be interested, I would say there's not easily anointed candidates who are going to step into those roles.

Suzanne is probably the most natural in a lot of ways in that she worked her way up from (Tillamook) mayor to House Rep. and now wants to be the Senate representative for the area. That's a pretty normal progression.



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

Andy Davis is the chairman of Clatsop County Democrats.

But a lot of the candidates that we've talked to, they're either happy in their roles or they're looking to retire anyway. So I think that's a challenge. It's sort of a wide open landscape.

Q: Democrats have held the political advantage in Clatsop County. But the party seems to be losing some momentum. Johnson is running for governor as an independent, not a Democrat. Weber was the first Republican to win House District 32 for nearly two decades. President Donald Trump did better in the county in 2020 than he did in 2016. What do you see as the party's challenge?

A: I think our biggest challenge, and I think it plays out here on the coast, is connecting with groups like labor, which have traditionally been a strong point for Democrats.

In the recent ups and downs of the economy — and, frankly, over the last 30 years or so since sort of Clinton Third Way Democrat theory took over — it's been more difficult for Democrats to connect with labor, with working people.

And I think there's a lot of people within the party who still believe in supporting those groups. But how that translates to — especially visible national policy — has changed.

I think in our district that comes out strongly. I think we've had, say, disagreements. When Tiffany Mitchell was the representative for the district — she's a modern Democrat in a lot of ways, progressive Democrat, anyway. And the steelworkers' union out at Wauna (Mill) had some disagreements with her and her policy.

And I think that's indicative of some of the struggles and divisions within the party.

One thing that's been instructive to me since I became more involved has been just a sort of reality check about the divisions within the U.S. electorate and how sustained they are. I read John Adams talking about thirds of the electorate, in essence, or loyalists versus folks who wanted independence and then a third of the people who didn't

know, right?

We're still in a situation that's not that different.

Media landscape has changed. The way conversations happen has changed. Community linkages have changed. But there's still camps in opposition, and then a lot of people in the middle who are trying to make up their mind about what the best situation is for them. And it varies over time about how they can connect to parties.

We're sort of in a space where that's true. It's changing a little bit, and the party has to respond to that, frankly.

Q: In Oregon, the share of non-affiliated voters has grown. Part of that is due to the Oregon Motor Voter Act, which made it easier for people to register to vote. But there appears to be some disillusionment with the two major political parties. As of this fall, there were more nonaffiliated voters in the county than Democrats or Republicans. How does the party combat this trend?

A: There's traditional mechanisms, where you're trying to go out and get people registered to vote and registered for the party.

When we had a booth at the county fair, we're trying to get people registered, too. So those sort of outlets will likely always exist, where we're trying to sort of actively recruit people.

I do think there's an issue — and this is not unique to the Democrats — but we need to figure out how to connect to younger voters as they're coming on the rolls as voters and make clear to them that they have a home in either party, assuming that they do align with us in some way.

One of the advantages that both parties had as far as numbers in the past, even when the registration laws came into effect, was you had a lot of middle-aged and older voters who were previously registered or previously affiliated or at least thought of themselves as part of one party, right? It's easy for them to register and say, 'OK, I'm a Dem' or 'I'm a Republican.'

I think there's enough disillusionment, especially with younger people, and disconnection from what the parties do, what the government does.

I've had conversations with (Warrenton Mayor) Henry Balensifer, who occasionally does some school events and things like that. Just talking to students about how we get electricity, who pays for our roads — basic infrastructure things that are fundamental to how we live, and ultimately a lot of that service comes through government, and there's a connected part of government that is related to partisan politics.

On the local level, often we are nominally nonpartisan, but I think there's also a portion of it that people have ideologies that they carry with them even if they're nonpartisan. And so these things affect us on a day-to-day level.

When people see the national government, and it seems very disconnected, they don't feel that linkage to the parties that I think used to exist. So we've got to create that again and figure out ways to connect to people.

Q: What do you see as the dominant policy issues heading into the 2022 elections?

A: Well I think, nearly always, economy is a huge one.

How we recover and the characteristics of recovery coming out of COVID are going to be important.

Obviously, things like inflation are an issue for a lot of people now.

Housing prices, certainly on the North Coast, have escalated almost continuously since our last big downturn.

So those create challenges for people — they're real, felt, real things.

And, often, if they're not good — if those challenges are presenting in a way that makes people's lives harder, they're going to vote against the people in power no matter who that is.

And that's completely understandable, too.

I think that there are issues in the U.S. right now that have a lot to do with distrust of government, broadly. I think that a lot of the conversations we have around school boards, around what's happening with COVID, boil down for a lot of people to whether they trust the people that are making statements at any given point.

And that changes sometimes, based on partisanship. But for people in the middle, there's some track record of the government not always being upfront with people.

So I think there's justifiable reason for people to say, 'Do I want to go along with these regulations?' 'Do I trust these people to teach my kids the right way?' And all that's valid — valid in the sense of there may be a track record where I should not take things at face value, and I should do my own homework, and things like that.

So there's a big challenge for anyone in government right now to get across to people that they're trying to do the right thing.

Derrick DePledge is editor of *The Astorian*.

GUEST COLUMN

Child care a boost our economy needs

Child care is one of the biggest expenses many families face — in much of the country, it can run higher than college tuition. Could a national child care program ease that burden?

We've come close before. During World War II, the federal government provided child care around the clock to enable more women to work in the war industries. In 1971, we nearly got a national child care program until President Richard Nixon vetoed legislation that had strong bipartisan support.

Now, with U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin stalling President Joe Biden's Build Back Better Act, we could be on the brink of another disappointment. Or, if the bill can be rescued, our country may get another opportunity to make a historic investment in our future.

Among many other things, the Build Back Better Act would cap child care payments for working families at no more than 7% of their income — while raising wages for child care workers.

The U.S. is far behind other affluent — and even less affluent — nations, in the support it provides families with children. In 2017, the U.S. was 37th of the 38 Organisation for Economic Co-operation

and Development countries in its spending on family benefits including child care, at less than two-thirds of one percent of gross domestic product.

Only Turkey trailed us. The United Kingdom, a lot like us in many ways, spends more than five times as much as the United States.

Yet the economic case for investing in early childhood education and care is strong. Universal preschool is a two-generation anti-poverty strategy that also benefits the middle class. Decades of research find that it reduces inequality by gender, race, ethnicity and income. Children from families with lower incomes gain the most, but all children make gains.

As it is now, young children have the highest poverty rates of any age group in this country — and the cost of child care helps explain why.

Child care is simply so expensive that many parents, especially mothers, cannot afford to work, which permanently lowers their lifetime incomes. Single mothers, who are raising almost a quarter of U.S. children, are particularly vulnerable.

Women's ability to work in the U.S. is falling behind other countries — including Germany, Canada and Japan — due to our weak family policies. But we don't

have to look far to find successful examples of public investments in child care. Washington, D.C.'s universal preschool program has increased the labor force participation of mothers by 10 percentage points, raising family incomes.

Care like this isn't just good for parents. High quality preschool eases the transition to kindergarten and raises high school graduation rates, college attendance and incomes. Down the line, it also reduces unemployment, crime, incarceration and other social ills.

Even families without kids benefit. The higher the education rate in a locality, the higher the wages are for everyone, regardless of their education, because companies can be more productive with a skilled labor force.

Finally, part of ensuring quality child care means paying child care workers salaries comparable to elementary school teachers. Without decent wages to support their families, these jobs see very high turnover — which limits the experience and relationships that are critical to quality care.

Federal investment in early childhood and care is long overdue. It's the best economic development project we could undertake, with significant gains to the community as a whole, as well as to children, their families and preschool



Elaine Thompson/AP Photo

Young children have the highest poverty rates of any age group in this country — and the cost of child care helps explain why.

workers.

The rest of the wealthy world has far lower rates of child poverty, a critical predictor of future marginalization, than we do — largely because they invest much more in their children. Let's not waste another 50 years before investing in our children, our families and our future.

Mary C. King is a professor of economics emerita at Portland State University.