

Republicans compete in crowded primary field for governor

Drazan has edge in recent polls

By HILLARY BORRUD
The Oregonian

With 19 Republicans running for Oregon governor, it's easy to see why many voters don't recognize most of the candidates' names and have yet to decide how they will vote.

Nearly half of likely Republican primary voters in a recent survey told pollsters they don't know who they'll support.

Campaigns will work hard to change that in the final week before the May 17 primary, with a flurry of political ads already hitting televisions and smartphones that will only intensify. Some of the most well-funded Republican campaigns squirreled away money until now and have begun unleashing ads in hopes they'll build name recognition as voters begin filling out their ballots.

Christine Drazan, the former state House Republican leader from Oregon City, has reported raising more than \$2 million since January 2021 and spending nearly \$1.3 million. Bud Pierce, a Salem oncologist, has sunk \$990,000 on his own campaign, out of nearly \$1.6 million in total fundraising.

This year's Republican gubernatorial ballot also stands out for the variety of candidates. Drazan, who still has two children in high school, has pointed out that if elected she would be Oregon's first Republican woman governor. Jessica Gomez, the owner of an electronics manufactur-

ing business in Medford and a mom of two school-aged daughters, would be the first Latina governor in the state. Pierce, 65, or former lawmaker and corporate consultant Bob Tiernan, 66, would be the oldest candidate to become Oregon governor in nearly 90 years.

With Republican voter turnout in the nonpresidential primary potentially under 50% and so many candidates to split the vote, someone could win the Republican nomination for governor with a plurality of roughly 65,000 to 80,000 votes.

That means the victorious Republican only has to win over about 20% of primary voters to clinch the nomination.

At a high level, Oregon Republican voters have indicated they're looking for a gubernatorial candidate who can win the general election, "fight the Democrats" and "aggressively push back on what they feel like is the progressive politics in the state," said John Horvick, the senior vice president at DHM Research. But, Horvick said, "There's so many candidates that the winner doesn't necessarily have to appeal to what the Republicans want this year."

Crime and homelessness

Top Republican concerns of fighting crime and homelessness, with Portland as the poster child for problems, dominate most gubernatorial candidates' ads. Tiernan has zeroed in on a tough-on-crime approach in his sizable advertising campaign. Tiernan played a central role in the effort to pass Measure 11, Oregon's mandatory sen-



Republican candidates for governor include, in top row from left, businesswoman Jessica Gomez; Sandy Mayor Stan Pulliam; former state House Republican Leader Christine Drazan; and Baker City Mayor Kerry McQuisten; and lower row from left, political consultant Bridget Barton; Salem oncologist Bud Pierce; former Rep. Bob Tiernan; and former Alsea Superintendent Mark Thielman.

tencing law, in the 1990s.

Shawn Cleave, a partner at public affairs and lobbying firm Pilot Strategies who served as policy director for Republican Chris Dudley's 2010 gubernatorial campaign, said Sandy mayor and insurance executive Stan Pulliam's messaging is "spot on for a Republican primary in 2022 — even in Oregon," although he noted those messages do not appeal to him personally.

Pulliam, 40, has attacked Oregon schools for adopting protocols to support transgender students, as Republican politicians across the nation go after supporters of transgender children and LGBTQ people generally. Cleave noted there are "a few other known names" in the primary but "I just don't see a large difference between their final vote percentage and random chance — it takes money in a market economy to increase name ID."

Bill Sizemore, 70, the anti-tax activist who got vot-

ers to pass property tax limits in the 1990s and pleaded guilty to three counts of felony tax evasion in 2011, could benefit from a combination of chance and lingering name recognition from his ballot initiative campaigns and 1998 nomination for governor. Sizemore has reported raising \$25,000, mostly through loans to his campaign, and he reported paying himself thousands of dollars for campaign work including fundraising letters and media, according to state records.

Drazan, who served three years in the House before stepping down to run for governor last winter, said she is eager to change Oregon public policy in a way she could not as leader of the minority party in the state House.

"A Republican governor creates that," said Drazan, who is 49. She has hired the East Coast campaign consulting firm that helped reelect Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan, "because they

know how to get Republicans elected in Democratic states."

Drazan proved to be a sharp and effective political leader for House Republicans. Less than a year into her first term, she convinced fellow Republicans to oust then-leader Carl Wilson, of Grants Pass, and elect her to the job. Drazan delivered in her new role, helping Republicans to pick up a net of one House seat in the November 2020 election thanks in particular to a hard-fought and expensive campaign for a northwest coastal district.

At the same time, she took a firm stance that violence was not an acceptable way to oppose COVID-19 mandates, including the closure of the state Capitol to the public. Drazan led the House Republican caucus to vote to expel then-Rep. Mike Nearman for letting armed right-wing demonstrators into the Capitol during a December 2020 special session; Nearman cast the lone "no" vote.

On policy, Drazan sent a clear message to fossil fuel and other natural resources industries that House Republicans would do whatever was necessary to shut down Democrats' greenhouse gas cap-and-trade plan, when she led her caucus in a 2020 Capitol walkout to protest the climate change bill up for a vote in the state Senate. Later that year lawmakers reconvened in special sessions and Republicans worked with Democrats on a series of police reform and accountability bills.

'Broadening the base'

Pierce has been campaigning since late 2020,

traveling around the state while continuing to work at least five days a week as a cancer doctor.

His second campaign for governor was immediately marked by tragedy: Pierce's wife, Selma, was killed hours after he announced his candidacy when a driver struck her while she was out for a walk on a December evening.

Pierce said that if elected governor, he would push for an overhaul of Oregon's property tax system so that nonprofits like hospital systems would have to begin paying taxes and everyone else could pay less. "I'm very interested in broadening the base and lowering the rates," Pierce said.

Tiernan, who has been out of public office in Oregon since 1997, came roaring back onto viewers' TV screens this spring thanks in large part to two big cash infusions to his campaign: \$500,000 from the California owners of bargain chain Grocery Outlet and a \$500,000 personal loan he gave to his campaign. Tiernan served as chief operating officer of Grocery Outlet from 2003 to 2007.

"I have a track record of running and turning around large multimillion dollar businesses with thousands of employees — fixing problems and getting results," Tiernan said in response to a question from The Oregonian. "The homeless problem will be resolved. Our streets and parks will be clean. Riots, lawlessness or out-of-control crime will have been stopped. Our schools will be teaching, not preaching political correctness."

Primary: Kotek and Read are both focusing heavily on leadership

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Top issues

Gov. Kate Brown, a Democrat, also angered certain Oregonians by issuing some of the nation's most expansive and longest COVID-19 mandates. She also disappointed some voters by ordering or allowing schools to be closed for longer than in most other states and frustrated others when she put teachers in line to receive vaccines before older Oregonians.

It's an open question how much Brown's high disapproval rating — a recent poll found she was the least popular governor in the nation — could hurt the chances of the Democratic nominee for governor.

Kotek and Read are both focusing heavily on leadership and how they'd improve government operations that are failing Oregonians.

"I think what we need in our next governor is someone who's willing to say what most of us already know right now, what we're doing isn't working," Read said during an Oregonian editorial board interview.

Kotek said she wants to be governor so that she can ensure better delivery of government services in the future, including programs passed while she was speaker, such as paid family and medical leave. That program is expected to launch nine months late, costing Oregonians approximately \$453 million in missed benefits. "Right now, the status quo isn't good enough," Kotek said. "I'm running for governor because we have to get the job done."

In all, 15 Democrats are running in the May 17 primary. Aside from Kotek and Read, who have raised \$1.9 million and \$1.5 million since January 2021, the next largest campaign spending is by George Carrillo, a program manager at the Oregon Health Authority. Carrillo has reported raising \$173,000 and spending \$122,000, according to state records.

Both of the leading candidates are spending a lot of time talking about the two issues that likely primary voters rated as top concerns: homelessness, which voters rated as their No. 1 concern, and crime.

Kotek said she would focus on getting the most vulnerable Oregonians experiencing homelessness, who she said are veterans, families, unaccompanied youth and people 65 and older, into housing within her first two years in office. "Our streets should look better," Kotek said. She has made increasing Oregon's supply of housing a top priority for years and pushed for tens of millions in spending on shelters in early 2020, before the state received federal stimulus and tax revenue windfalls that ultimately helped boost housing budgets.

Read said in a recent City Club of Portland and KGW debate that Portland-area leaders have not tackled homelessness with "urgency and seriousness." His plan would prioritize increasing shelter and transitional housing and proposes "cleaning up our public spaces" by prohibiting camping next to highways and helping local governments pay for increased garbage pickup and other sanitation services.

Read and Kotek both said it's important to adequately fund police, although that's not something they directly

control. Read said he would launch a statewide gun buy-back program, while Kotek said she believes a more effective solution is a law passed earlier this year to direct some Medicaid spending to violence intervention when people injured in shootings or other violence crimes wind up in the hospital. Kotek said she also supports a push from Portland's Black community for more after school programs as one approach to stem the city's record gun violence.

One way Read's campaign stands out is his focus on education, an issue that voters usually rate as among their highest concerns. "I want us to measure ourselves as a state based on the well-being of kids," Read said in an interview. "I think that's the ultimate mechanism to measure what the state's going to look like in the future." He wants Oregon to provide universal pre-kindergarten and raise literacy by third grade, in part by

ensuring every student has a teacher trained in the science of reading.

In any other year, that might appeal to a broad swath of Oregonians. The \$9.3 billion State School Fund, which accounts for 30% of the state general fund and lottery budget, is an area of state government where the governor has significant control. John Horvick, senior vice president at DHM Research, said in the recent past when pollsters asked Oregon voters to list the top issues of concern, they almost always named "jobs, the economy and education," Horvick said. "Then with COVID-19, education just isn't showing up as the dominant issue."

Horvick said he does not know why voters aren't listing education as a top concern this year, but one possibility is that other pressing issues crowded it out. "If you look at the leadership questions, a lot of (voters who were surveyed) are just mad

at Kate Brown," Horvick said.

Another way Kotek and Read are differentiating themselves is on how they would approach turning around state government. Read has said he would ask

for the resignation of all agency directors; Kotek said that based on input from a human resources expert, she would meet with each agency director and ask them to prove to her why they should have those jobs.

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