

GOVERNOR: Race coming down to Clackamas County

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Brown will win Washington County,” said Kevin Looper, an advisor to Brown’s campaign. “I think Clackamas County is up for grabs. The margin by which Kate Brown wins Washington, and wins or loses Clackamas, will resemble the margin in which she wins the state.”

The Oregon Republican Party won’t yet concede Washington County.

The county — teeming with independent and non-affiliated voters — could be swayed by a competent candidate like Buehler, who recently snagged the endorsement of Oregon’s largest newspaper, *The Oregonian*.

“Kate Brown is an incumbent almost four years in office, and there is a raft of problems — crises that could devour the state budget and is already doing so in the case of the PERS crisis,” said Kevn Hoar, communications director for the Oregon GOP. “She has shown no urgency to fix things and ... that message is starting to reach people.”

Jordan Conger, Buehler’s policy director, declined to comment on the campaign’s internal strategy or specifically on Clackamas County but would say that Buehler has been spending the majority of his time in Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties, where the majority of voters reside.

“There are a lot of voters who are not traditional and a lot of voters who maybe in the past voted Democratic that are very interested in new leadership and our message is resonating with them on issues he’s campaigning on like homelessness and education,” Conger said.

So what are voters in those areas concerned about?

John Horvick of independent political research firm DHM Research said they are directly afflicted by traffic, homelessness and the lack of affordable housing. Republicans in those areas are interested in the same issues as in Marion or Jackson counties: taxes and government spending, he said.

But Horvick pointed out that Buehler has sidestepped the national pattern of riling the Republican base. He’s not talking about abortion, immigration or gun rights to the degree that he’s talking about Brown and her perceived failures on public pensions and education. He’s going after Democratic voters who could be open to change.

“His campaign is more organized around persuading persuadable voters,” Horvick said.

The strategy appeared to work through late September, as polls showed the race tied. However, a poll released Monday by Riley Research Associates for KGW showed Brown with a 49 percent to 45 percent edge with a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percent.

Looper, a strategist for Brown’s campaign, said he thinks in the end voters would conclude Buehler’s shifts on policy are disingenuous.

“As that information continues to get out showing where candidate Buehler and legislator Buehler continue to be at odds, it becomes more clear that his

National political analyst calls governor’s race ‘toss-up’

By AUBREY WIEBER
AND PARIS ACHEN
Capital Bureau

Oregon’s close gubernatorial race between Democratic Gov. Kate Brown and GOP candidate Oregon Rep. Knute Buehler has captured the attention of national political pundits.

On Tuesday, the race made the front page of the Cook Political Report’s website, with analyst Jennifer E. Duffy upgrading the race to a “toss-up” — rare territory for an Oregon Democrat holding a governor’s seat in the 2018 midterms.

Duffy’s analysis appears to be based on polling showing Brown with a 4- to 5-point lead over Buehler.

Jim Moore, a political scientist and director of the Tom McCall Center for Policy Innovation at Pacific University, said Duffy’s report amounts to an outsider looking at polls without local context.

“I look at the same polls they do,” Moore said. “Most of the national polls looking at Oregon are awful. They overestimate unaffiliated voters.”

Moore has studied every governor’s race in the state’s history. Usually when Republicans win, they win big. Democrats win more often, but with tighter margins, he said. This race, he said, fits right in with the historical narrative.

But Duffy didn’t just cite polls. She also looked at the candidates’ histories, but spent more time digging into why Brown isn’t connecting with voters than why Buehler is.

“Brown can and has been attacked on a host of issues from signing \$13 billion in new taxes to ignoring the state’s troubled foster care system even after a report found that the system is in crisis,” Duffy wrote. “She hasn’t addressed more pervasive issues like the state’s failing schools or the pension crisis, and she has broken her promise to make government more transparent.”

Buehler’s campaign indicated that the analysis validated his work on the campaign trail and his claim that statewide, voters have an appetite for change.

“After roughly a year of campaigning and listening to voters, Knute has found that Oregonians are hungry for change — someone who will take on the failing status



Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian via AP

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown, right, shakes hands with Rep. Knute Buehler at their final debate at KGW-TV studios in southwest Portland. Distinctions emerged between Oregon’s leading gubernatorial candidates in their final debate as the two clashed on public pensions, immigration, the state’s housing crisis and several other hot-button issues.

quo and rescue our schools, homeless and foster children,” spokeswoman Monica Wroblewski said.

Christian Gaston, spokesman for Brown’s campaign, was flabbergasted.

“It’s just like bizarro world,” Gaston said.

He said the \$13 billion figure is a false Republican talking point, which includes the failed corporate tax Measure 97 in 2016 and other revenue proposals that were defeated.

On foster care, Brown has increased funding by 19 percent, Gaston countered, and replaced agency leadership. She pushed a 22 percent increase in education funding and saw a historical increase in graduation rates.

Gaston disagreed with Duffy’s characterization of the public pension system, saying it’s 81 percent funded, which is greater than the national average. On transparency, Gaston pointed to Brown’s overhaul of the state’s public records law.

“If you’re not looking at the polls and you’re just watching Knute Buehler’s ads, maybe you could come to that conclusion,” Gaston said. “But that doesn’t comport with reality.”

He said he doubts that the Cook Political Report will swing the election and claimed that Buehler “duped the Political Report” with misleading campaign messaging.

Wroblewski said the report is a sign of Buehler’s increasing momentum in the race.

“Knute will do this,” she said. “He will lead where Kate Brown has failed.”

Duffy’s article comes on the heels of *The Oregonian* and *Portland Tribune* endorsing Buehler.

The impact of those editorials is yet to be seen, Moore said.

“Newspaper endorsements are important if Buehler does something with them and they catch on with people,” he said, adding that over the past 30 years, there has been a continual decline in the influence of newspaper endorsements.

Moore said he expects Buehler to use the endorsements as fodder in a campaign ad, but it’s unclear how many undecided voters there are to sway, or how many decided voters are open to changing their mind this late in the game.

John Horvick, political director of DHM Research, said his recent poll found 17 percent of likely voters statewide were undecided. In rural Oregon, a greater percentage — 21 percent — remained undecided. Those areas are where Buehler could make up ground, as many voters are just starting to tune into the race, Horvick said.

Horvick concluded that Duffy’s analysis is a “fair assessment.”

“Given that spread, a ‘Tossup’ or ‘Lead D’ seems fair,” he said. “There are a lot of structural advantages in Oregon for Democrats, so I tend to think a tie will favor Democrats. But ultimately, voters will decide.”

strategy is to become something different than what he’s been as a politician, and that makes people distrust what he’s truly going to be if elected,” Looper said.

Peter Toll, the chairman of the campaign committee for the Clackamas County Democratic Party, said Democrats moving from Multnomah County in search of more affordable housing have dramatically changed the political demographics over the past few years. Milwaukie specifically has become a liberal enclave, he said.

Democrats are mostly interested in health care, education and enhanced services. However, Toll and his 600 volunteers knocking on Clackamas County doors are engaging primarily with Democrats, he said. He didn’t have a good sense of what potential Republican voters wanted.

Hoar said some independent and nonaffiliated voters and even some Democrats in Clackamas County want someone like Buehler.

“Clackamas County is a battleground. There is no doubt that Republicans tend to do better there ... but both (Clackamas and Washington

counties) have a lot of voters that sit right in Knute’s wheelhouse,” he said. “We know that area is rich with the kind of voters that Knute is attracting.”

Policy wonks can debate which issues play well in which precincts, but the average voter doesn’t view elections that way, Looper said. They often go by feel, and Buehler, a surgeon, made a fortune at his private practice and has a conservative voting record, he said.

Looper said the state is changing in that historical conservative strongholds, such as Pendleton, Hood River and Bend, are growing and becoming more liberal. It’s a math question, not a geographical one, he said.

Looper isn’t alone. When asked where the race will be won, several pollsters and analysts pointed to the Portland suburbs.

To win the governor’s office, Buehler would have to take Washington and Clackamas counties and receive 30 to 35 percent of the vote in Multnomah County, said Jim Moore, politics professor and director of the Tom McCall Center for Policy Innovation at Pacific University.

“You don’t have to win by much, but you have to win in both of them,” he said. “That is getting tougher over time especially in Washington County, because it’s getting more Democratic.”

Tim Nashif of The Hoffman Research Group said its polling in September showed Buehler at about 22 percent in Multnomah County.

The last time Brown and Buehler faced off was in 2012 when Brown was elected secretary of state. In that race, Buehler won Clackamas County by more than 2,000 votes, but Brown won Washington by about 20,000 votes. In Multnomah County, Brown won by 144,152 votes, which is a larger margin of victory than she got statewide.

However, multiple pollsters said the 2012 race is not a good comparison. For one, a secretary of state race doesn’t garner the attention the governor’s does. They were also campaigning on different issues. Most importantly, though, Buehler didn’t have the name recognition in 2012 that he does today.

Even in January, polling indicated Buehler wasn’t a

household name, as a DHM Research poll had him at 29 percent.

While it’s true that the number of registered Democrats is increasing in both Washington and Clackamas counties, their percentage of all voters is declining slightly, from 40 percent in 2012 to 37 percent in 2018 in Washington County and from 38 percent to 34 percent in Clackamas County, according to voter registration statistics from the Oregon Secretary of State’s Office.

Republicans’ percentage has dropped more steeply in both counties, from 35 percent in 2012 to 29 percent in 2018 in Clackamas County and from 31 percent to 23 percent in Washington County.

Nonaffiliated voters’ percentages, meanwhile, have burgeoned in both counties because of automatic voter registration, from 21 percent in 2012 to 30 percent in 2018 in Clackamas County and from 24 percent to 33 percent in Washington County. While Secretary of State statistics show that nonaffiliated voters are less likely to turn out, their presence injects a wild card

in the election results.

During the 2016 presidential election, for example, 63 percent of nonaffiliated voters turned out in Clackamas and Washington counties. The turnout for Democrats and Republicans ranged from 86 percent to 90 percent

“It’s still Brown’s race to lose,” Moore said. “It’s partly because this is a Democratic state and partly because he’s just got a coalition of gnarly Republicans, centrists and Democrats together. When he talks to Republicans, he ticks off Democrats, and when he talks to Democrats, he ticks off Republicans. It’s just really tough to make that work.”

Analysts were quick to point to Buehler’s strategy of pulling to the left to court independents, undecided voters and even Democrats. He often says what Oregon needs is a leader, not a partisan, and he is a leader for voters of all parties. But will it work?

Several pointed out that as Buehler takes stances that will play better statewide, he is straying from his base, which can be a risky political strategy.

“The liberals are going to vote for Kate, and the conservatives are not excited about Knute, but when it comes down to it, the (conservatives) who are going to vote are going to vote for him,” Nashif said. “So it’s a matter of who is energized enough to go to the polls.”

Toll said Clackamas County voters are keyed into the election, as it’s all over TVs and newspapers. He said the race will be tight, but predicted Brown takes the county by about three points.

“Kate is perceived as a solid governor, but not a flashy one,” Toll said. “Whereas her opponent is considered a solid opponent, but dull and predictable.”

Nearly all analysts interviewed for this story brought up the millions of dollars — totaling \$20 million and counting — being poured into the race. Horvick said writers of the large checks being written for Buehler obviously believe he’s got a chance.

Looper said he thinks Buehler will end up outspending Brown, which will keep him in the race.

Political analysts can use data to pinpoint swing voter blocks, issues of concern or gaffes that tank a candidate. But they can also look at historical data, which shows it’s been 39 years since a Republican won the governor’s seat.

“At the end of the day I doubt the race actually gets decided on issues,” Looper said. “I think this is going to come down to character and trust.”

Aubrey Wieber: aubrey@salemreporter.com or 503-575-1251. He is a reporter for Salem Reporter working with the Oregon Capital Bureau, a collaboration of the Pamplin Media Group, EO Media Group, and Salem Reporter. Paris Achen: pachen@portlandtribune.com or 503-363-0888. Achen is a reporter for the Portland Tribune working for the Oregon Capital Bureau, a collaboration of EO Media Group, Pamplin Media Group and Salem Reporter.

DEAL: Contingent on city getting more land from Happy Canyon

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While the Round-Up is getting more than four times the amount of property and right-of-way than the city is getting under the deal, Councilor Chuck LeValle argued that it didn’t need to be “an apples-to-apples exchange” because “the property we’re getting is more valuable to us.”

Between 2006 and 2015,

the city bought properties on Byers and Southwest 18th Street, collectively known as the G2 properties, with the thought of redeveloping the residential land into a bigger development.

The city spent \$296,000 to buy those parcels, cycling through ideas for the space like a hotel, parking for the Round-Up, and new housing.

The Round-Up was also simultaneously buying land

in the area, and by acquiring more property from the city, it’s now the majority landowner on both Byers and 18th Street.

Although the city is set to lose its stake in the G2 properties, Turner said the city will meet its longtime goal of redeveloping the area.

Contact Antonio Sierra at asierra@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0836.

JAIL: Detox possibilities under consideration

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possible drugs they find in an inmate’s clothes.

Harp explained staff used to give those substances to an evidence technician, who in turn would take them to the Oregon State Police crime lab for testing. The careful steps helps ensure the chain of custody, he said, but also carried the risk of exposure to sheriff’s staff.

“In some cases,” Harp said, “we’re just going to

destroy it rather than risk exposure.”

That means passing on a contraband charge, but he said the safety of the staff and occupants of the jail has to take priority.

Rowan said while he is kicking the tires on inmate detoxification, he remains steadfast in his commitment to obtaining the \$1.1 million to remodel the jail to accommodate offenders with mental health issues. He said both are part of the spectrum of what the jail

has to take on.

Big questions remain about the feasibility and even regulatory hurdles of medication-assisted treatment, Rowan said, but the process carries promise. He said policing is good about the who, what, when and where of crime, but not so much the why.

“If we can get to the why, we can make it where that individual doesn’t commit the crime again,” he said. “Maybe we can break the cycle.”