

Demographics drive GOP nosedive on West Coast

For the first time in recent memory, registered Democrats in Deschutes County eclipse number of Republicans

By **ANDREW SELSKY**
Associated Press

BEND — In the early 1990s, the population of Bend was around 25,000 and leaned Republican. A lumber mill operated along the banks of the Deschutes River in Oregon’s high-desert country.

Today, the lumber mill is an REI outdoor recreation store. The population has quadrupled. And for the first time in memory, the number of registered Democrats in Deschutes County recently eclipsed the number of Republicans.

The transformation shows how demographic shifts and the GOP’s tack further to the right are helping push the party into a nosedive along the West Coast.

The last Republican presidential candidate that California went for was George H.W. Bush. For both Oregon and Washington, it was Ronald Reagan. Now, Republicans are struggling to hold seats in Congress, statehouses and city councils up and

down the coast.

California, Washington and Oregon will hold their presidential primaries on March 3, March 10 and May 19 respectively, and which Democratic candidates they favor will become clear. But this much is certain: In November, none of the three states is apt to go for President Donald Trump, and there is little hope Republicans will claw back much ground in other contests.

Political districts have flipped in population centers, from San Diego in the south to Seattle in the north.

“There is no way out,” Chris Vance, a former Washington state Republican Party chairman and legislator, said in a telephone interview.

In San Diego, by the U.S.-Mexico border, each of the nine city council districts now has more registered Democrats than registered Republicans, including one that until recently leaned strongly Republican.

In 1980, Orange County, near Los Angeles, was 80% white and a GOP stronghold.



AP Photo/Andrew Selsky, File

The population in Bend went from around 25,000 in the early 1990s and leaned Republican to roughly 100,000 and, for the first time in memory, the number of registered Democrats in Deschutes County recently eclipsed the number of Republicans.

Today, Orange County is mostly Hispanic and Asian, with many displeased by Republicans’ hard stance on immigration. In 2018, voters there dealt a stunning defeat to a two-term GOP congresswoman.

The California GOP wound up losing six other U.S. House seats that year, leading a former Republican leader in the state to declare: “The California Republican Party isn’t salvageable at this time.”

Democrats also hold the

California governor’s office, both U.S. Senate seats and almost complete control of the Legislature.

In Seattle, tens of thousands of tech employees have flooded into the city and its suburbs, hired by Amazon, Microsoft, Google and Facebook. The influx of highly educated workers over the past decade helped fuel a population boom that made many communities much more diverse and affluent, and turned them away from the GOP and

toward Democrats.

The result: The GOP has lost all the statehouse seats it once held in Seattle’s eastern suburbs.

Vance blames the area’s exodus of college-educated white voters, particularly women, from the GOP on the party’s turn toward more fundamentalist values under Trump. Vance himself abandoned the party in 2017 after an unsuccessful run for the U.S. Senate as the Republican candidate.

“This was the party of nerdy, wonky, tweedy capitalists who cared about economic growth. Now it is the party of populists: alt-right, let’s keep the immigrants out, truck- and rifle-populists,” Vance said. “That works in Mississippi and Arkansas and stuff, but it does not work in the Seattle area.”

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, among a line of Democratic governors dating back to 1985, faces no significant GOP challenge as he seeks a third term in November. Both of Washington’s U.S. senators are Democrats, and seven of its 10 U.S. House members belong to the party. Democrats hope to expand their majorities in the Legislature, where they hold

a 28-21 edge in the Senate and a 57-41 advantage in the House.

And Democrats in Oregon — who already hold the governorship, both U.S. Senate seats and four of five U.S. House seats — wield super-majorities in the Legislature, and are gunning for more seats.

One of them is the House seat representing Bend, currently held by moderate Republican Rep. Cheri Helt. Challenging her is Deschutes County Deputy District Attorney Jason Kropf, whose treasurer is a veteran political fundraiser.

After the demise of the timber industry, Bend became a mecca for outdoor enthusiasts and beer lovers. The town of roughly 100,000 is arrayed along a scenic river and below the Cascade Range, with one of the highest number of breweries per capita in America.

“Bend is full of beautiful, very fit, beer-swilling jocks,” said James Foster, professor emeritus of political science at Oregon State University-Cascades in Bend.

The shifting demographic has made Bend, and Deschutes County, “much more moderate” than in the past, he said.

Forecast for Pendleton Area

