

Gloomy forecasts for Democrats in governor race

By GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — As the last Fourth of July fireworks faded to black Monday night, Oregon moved into the stretch drive of the 2022 election season.

With four months to go until the Nov. 8 election, trying to pick the winners in Oregon's top political races is highly speculative at best. But that hasn't stopped a growing chorus of prognosticators.

Despite a 36-year winning streak, a Democratic victory in the 2022 election for governor was called "no sure thing." The race for the supposedly Democratic-tilting 5th Congressional seat was "too close to call."

Four-decade winning streak on the line

Back in 2018, The New York Times came to Oregon in the final two weeks of the race for governor and pronounced the outcome "too close to call" based on analysis by the Cook Political Report and other politically



Betsy Johnson, unaffiliated Oregon gubernatorial candidate, speaks to a crowd June 17, 2022, at the Eastern Oregon Economic Summit in Hermiston. Johnson poses a threat to end the streak of Oregon's Democrat governors.

popular trend-watchers.

When the votes were counted, Gov. Kate Brown had defeated the Republican nominee, former Rep. Knute Buehler of Bend.

Brown's election night exaltations of a "slam-dunk" was an overstatement given

she received just 50.1% of the vote. But when minor party candidates were added to the count, Brown beat Buehler by a fairly comfortable margin of just under seven points.

Fast forward four years and The Times was back in

Oregon, parachuting in to check out the political landscape. Their report issued on June 28 once again suggested that the Democratic colossus could be toppled for the first time in since 1986.

In what could be a "wave year" for Republicans, The

Times said, "even deep-blue Oregon is suddenly competitive."

Citing "Biden, crime, gas prices," New York Times reporter Reid J. Epstein wrote, "almost nobody in Oregon seems to be happy."

Lots of evidence was rolled out to back up the claims of era-upending turbulence.

President Joe Biden's popularity was falling. Inflation was rising. Brown was unpopular in state polls. Gas and food prices were bruising Oregonians' wallets.

Throwing elbows

Unlike 2018, November will be a three-way race to succeed Brown. Along with Democrat Tina Kotek and Republican Christine Drazen, unaffiliated candidate Betsy Johnson is expected to make the ballot.

All are experienced legislators with sharp elbows, churning out a steady stream of press releases fueled by a week-long blast of U.S. Supreme Court rulings on abortion, guns and the environment.

Johnson hit Kotek as too cozy with public employee

unions and derided her as "Tent City Tina" unable to clean up a city she's represented in the House since 2007 that even U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Portland, admitted earlier this year is "broken."

Kotek has grabbed onto Johnson's gun rights stances that polls show are out of line with a majority of state residents, while hitting Drazen's "Life wins!" tweet following the repeal of Roe vs. Wade by the U.S. Supreme Court that the Republican is a danger to Oregon's steadfast abortion rights stance.

Drazen has sought to portray herself as the best "not Kotek" candidate for voters who want a change, casting Johnson, a longtime Democratic state senator, as using the unaffiliated run as a gambit to get on the ballot.

All argue over whether Johnson will take more votes from Drazen or Kotek — and which will emerge with what is almost certainly a close plurality win in November.

With so many wedge issues landing at once, the only political certainty at this point in 2022 is uncertainty.

Oregon voters may decide new firearms requirements

By PETER WONG
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Only two initiatives appear likely to qualify for a statewide vote Nov. 8 as Oregon's deadline approaches for petitioners to submit signatures.

That deadline is Friday, July 8. The state Elections Division will have up to 30 days afterward to verify signatures, generally done with sampling.

The mass shootings in Buffalo, New York, and Uvalde, Texas, have given momentum to advocates of a measure to set new requirements for firearms permits and limit ammunition maga-

zines to 10 rounds each.

At the end of May, they had submitted barely 2,500 of the 112,020 signatures required to qualify it for the statewide ballot. One week before the deadline, that total had shot up to around 120,000 — and a chief petitioner says the goal is 140,000.

The Rev. Dr. W.J. Mark Knutson, pastor of Augustana Lutheran Church in Portland, said a wet spring and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic slowed signature-gathering efforts by 500 volunteers.

Then came Buffalo, where 10 Black people were shot dead May 14 in a supermarket, and Uvalde, where 19

children and two teachers died 10 days later at Robb Elementary School.

"People were saying they could not sit anymore, so we had 1,000 new volunteers come forward to join the 500," Knutson said in an interview. "A lot were parents with children — it was pretty amazing. They are learning about democracy."

"The process is as important as the result — democratic action by the people. In this nation right now, we need to see democracy at work."

In addition to the limit on ammunition magazines, the measure would require people to undergo classroom and live-fire training before

they obtain a firearms permit, and complete background checks. (Current law allows a purchaser to obtain a gun even if the check is incomplete after three days; the measure would require the check to be completed.)

The other initiative awaiting qualification for the ballot is a proposed constitutional amendment to bar legislators from seeking reelection if they have 10 or more absences that have not been excused by the Senate president or House speaker. Advocates have submitted 183,942 signatures; the requirement for a constitutional amendment is 149,360.

Public employee unions

led the drive for the measure after walkouts by minority Republicans stymied legislative action in 2019 and 2020.

The Oregon Constitution pegs signature requirements to a share of the votes cast for governor in the most recent election. It's 6% for an initiative, which changes state law, and 8% for a constitutional amendment.

Voters also will see two constitutional amendments referred by the 2021 Legislature. One would define health care as a right; the other would remove slavery as a punishment for crime.

The Lift Every Voice Oregon movement also had another initiative to ban

assault weapons. Though technically still alive, Knutson said advocates chose to focus their efforts on the other measure.

"That one will save more lives," he said. "The permit (requirement) applies to every gun. People right now can buy guns with no training, no knowledge of how they work and no understanding of what they can do."

The limit on magazines, he said, "would take the ammo from assault weapons."

Assuming the measure qualifies for the ballot and voters pass it, he said, advocates will take a version of the assault-weapons ban to the 2023 Legislature.

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