

A HISTORIC RACE: Oregon's three candidates for governor answer questions about issues that matter to rural Oregonians

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SALEM — On Nov. 8, Oregonians will elect a new governor.

Several factors make this race unique and explain why it's garnering national attention.

First, many Oregonians are disenchanted with the state's current leadership. Outgoing Gov. Kate Brown, a Democrat, is America's least popular governor, according to a 2022 poll from the data firm Morning Consult.

The race is also capturing national interest because it's a tight contest. Sabato's Crystal Ball at the University of Virginia Center for Politics, a nonpartisan newsletter with a high rate of accuracy in predicting election results, labeled Oregon's outcome as a "toss-up."

Oregon is hosting an unusual three-way race among a trio of women who are all recent members of the state Legislature: former state House Speaker Tina Kotek, running as a Democrat; former House Minority Leader Christine Drazan, running as a Republican; and former state Sen. Betsy Johnson, running as unaffiliated, formerly a moderate Democrat.

If Kotek wins, she will be America's first out lesbian governor. If Drazan wins, she will be the first Republican to win an Oregon gubernatorial race since 1982. If Johnson wins, she will be the first independent governor to win since 1930.

The Capital Press sat down with each of the candidates to talk about issues that matter to rural Oregonians. Each candidate answered the same set of questions.

The candidates' answers have been shortened for readability. Words in parenthesis are written by the Capital Press to add context and clarity. Follow-up questions are indicated in italics.

Capital Press: If you are elected, how do you plan to bridge the political divide between Oregon's urban and rural communities?

Johnson: "Well, show up is the first one. We've just come back from a trip to Eastern Oregon. I think being there is important and understanding that whether you're making silicon chips, or wood chips, or potato chips out in Boardman, or fish and chips in Astoria, that we have throughout Oregon different micro-economies, and the governor needs to understand that."

Drazan: "The opportunity to bring Oregonians together is a big part of why I'm running. When we have a Portland focus and hard, progressive Democrat agenda, you end up taking that agenda and you impose it on the rural parts of the state.

"Too often in the public policy-making process, you have folks drive six or eight hours to Salem and testify for two or three minutes. No one asks them questions and their proposals do not change outcomes because this single party control machine — they've got the votes.

Having a Republican governor ensures (lawmakers) have to compromise. They have to listen to the stakeholders, because if they don't, they'll get a veto in my administration."

Kotek: "For me, it is about how you listen to people, making sure you're out in local communities, engaging with local leaders.

"As speaker of the House, it was really important for me to represent the entire state. I made a point to encourage my colleagues, Democrats and Republicans, to visit each other's districts.

"As governor, getting out of Salem more often — it's important. You bring people together by listening. And focusing on issues that I don't think are very partisan. Every part of this state has a housing problem. That's not a partisan issue. I honestly think water's not a partisan issue. We all need water.

"So, focusing on issues that aren't highly politicized is a good place to start."

CP: What marching orders will you give the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality?

Johnson: "Big ones. I want that agency to stop torturing Oregonians and to help Oregonians.

"Frequently, DEQ's answer has been no — to everything. I want can-do, want-to, will-do people running state agencies. I want them to start at yes. I want agencies with regulatory authority to work with farmers and not constantly be looking for fault or wanting to over-regulate."

Drazan: "My favorite thing that's going to happen on my first day is asking all the agency heads to turn in their resignations — all of them. And we're going to sit down and have a conversation.

"My commitment to Oregonians is to lead in a new direction. We're not going to get that done if you keep the entire bureaucratic machine crankin' along like nothing's changed. I have an expectation that my agency heads are expert in the subject matter, committed to customer service, to being problem-solvers, to getting to 'yes' first and 'no' second and to partnering with Oregonians rather than standing as a barrier."

Kotek: "I think one of the biggest issues right now is to make sure (DEQ has) the resources and staff power to meet current regulations.

"Nothing is more frustrating for me than to hear someone say, 'I want to expand my business, but it's taking 18 months to get my new water permit or my air permit renewed.'

"The other issue is making sure our rulemaking processes and rules are inclusive. Oregonians support regulations that have goals.

"We believe in clean water, clean air — we all agree on that. And things have to be set up in a way that businesses can function."

CP: Do you support Oregon's existing water rights system under the doctrine of Prior Appropriation, or "first in time, first in right," in which the person with



Democrat Tina Kotek, left, nonaffiliated Betsy Johnson, center, and Republican Christine Drazan are running to be Oregon's next governor.

the oldest water right on a stream has seniority and is the last to face a shutoff?

Johnson: "Our water rights system is very complicated. Before politicians change the system, they need to get everybody at the table.

"We need to convene the parties and have a conversation about: What does changing the water rights really mean?"

"But I don't want somebody to come away with the opinion that I'm for changing the water rights system.

"What I'm supportive of is, if there is a problem statement that people agree on, what's the statement? Is it that the water rights system is too complicated? Is it that some are getting deprived of water? I would want to have some collective understanding of: What are we solving for?"

Drazan: "I support our existing water rights system."

Would Drazan try to maintain the system if it was challenged?

"I would," she said. "And just to be clear, I don't think any system is perfect. I do believe in the ability to be flexible. I think that needs to be a stronger, more dominant characteristic of our state government in particular, that we're responsive to local needs, but as a principle, and as a construct under which we all operate, I support the existing system."

Kotek: "It is the fundamental starting place for how water is utilized in the state. It is the law. It is the starting point, yes."

However, Kotek said she is open to conversations about potentially changing other laws. For example, under Oregon water law, if a water rights holder does not use the full water right for five consecutive years, that user could forfeit the right. Kotek expressed concern over this.

"Some people say, 'If I don't use my water, I will lose my rights.' When I listen to that, I'm like, 'OK, does that make sense when the third person down the line also needs water?' Right?" said Kotek.

"So, how do you have thoughtful conversations about assessing that? The starting point is where we are today, but with the understanding that we have to consider perhaps some new ideas."

CP: Do you think agriculture has too large a claim on Oregon's water supply?

Johnson: "I do not. Oregon's economy rests on the back of agriculture. Farmers, fishing interests, ranchers, other producers are part of the backbone of our economic past and certainly our economic future."

Drazan: "I don't. Oregon agriculture has always been a critical partner in Oregon's economy, to Oregon culture, to Oregon families. And we cannot overlook the need for access to local food production."

Kotek: "I don't know if I can comment on that. What I do know is Oregonians like the fact that we grow things, that we are a leader in export products in the ag sector, and it's kind of in the DNA of Oregon to grow things. So, I think ag is really important."

CP: Statewide, how do you plan to balance the competing water needs of agriculture, growing human populations and fish under the Endangered Species Act — for example, in the Klamath Basin?

Johnson: "Klamath is beyond complicated. And I really have not immersed myself. That's a bi-state problem too because one of the tribes is in Northern California. And I'm not an expert on Indian law.

"But I think you should leave with the notion that I fully embrace the idea of using the governor's office as the bully pulpit to convene people. I think we have not had adequate balance, particularly in about a decade on the boards and commissions or in the agencies. Not all voices have been at the table."

Drazan: "You just struck on one of the most complex, political issues that Oregon has faced for decades.

"We've had administration after administration that has not necessarily stood up for Oregon in that conversation and said: 'We need real, long-term solutions.' Instead, you have folks in the Klamath Basin in particular that get tossed by the political winds."

What does Drazan plan to do?

"I think it's important that the people that are impacted are the ones to define what that range of policy objectives should be," she said.

"I'm not gonna jump in with both feet and say, 'Here, edict from on high, what I think is the solution that no one's looked at.' But I can tell you we have not had enough advocacy for the impacts on the community down there and that the political weight has been given in a heavier percentage to the needs of species."

Kotek: "I think that is a key role of the governor: to make sure everyone is heard and balance all needs to the degree that we can.

"It's complicated. I am not a water expert. The water situation in the Klamath Basin is incredibly important, and we have to make

sure that all stakeholders are at the table.

"Being on the ground and seeing what's at stake is important. You can't go forward on these conversations without local input. I'm gonna be honest with folks: I don't know if we can balance all the different needs. But we're gonna try."

CP: What does good forest and public lands management look like to you? For example, do you support prescribed burning, grazing, thinning and logging?

Johnson: "Yes, yes, yes, yes."

Although Johnson supports all four practices, she described nuances.

Johnson said she supports prescribed fire but has "questioned the competency of the Forest Service not to let some of those prescribed burns get away."

Johnson said there are "subtleties" on grazing: "Do you keep the critters out of the streams?"

On thinning, she said, "We have got to thin."

Johnson said she also backs post-fire salvage logging.

Drazan: "There's a place for all of that, to be clear. We need to have active management of our working lands, and that has got to include forests.

"Technology exists for us to be able to identify, say, when lightning strikes occur, which may result in a fire start. We also have the Good Neighbor Authority program; we should continue to invest in that. (The program allows states, counties or tribes to do forest, rangeland and watershed restoration projects on federal lands.)

"I think we should make more of our forestlands available for logging. We're either gonna manage (our forests) or we're gonna watch (them) burn."

Kotek: "My baseline is: Talk to the experts. OSU (Oregon State University) is a huge resource for us, understanding what the experts at OSU think we should be doing.

"I believe we do need some level of prescribed burning, and it has to be done safely.

"In terms of overall forest practices, the Private Forest Accord is a template of how we can improve forest practices." (The accord was a deal that timber and conservation groups reached last fall.)

Where does Kotek stand on logging and grazing?

"I don't have a particular agenda on either of those issues because I'm not an expert," she said.

Kotek says solving Oregon's housing crisis is a top priority. Does she support using timber harvested from Oregon's forests to build houses?

"We're gonna have to build 36,000 housing units per year for the next decade to actually meet our gap and get ahead of it," she said. "I love the cycle of using Oregon-based mass timber to construct homes. Mass timber is a very viable product that we have to promote."

CP: Many family farmers say the farmworker overtime pay rule, which passed during the 2022 legislative session, will hurt their businesses. Do you have plans to amend the law?

Johnson: "Let's start from the premise of: Increasing the safety and wages and working conditions of low-income workers is a laudable goal. OK. This bill, I think, was an overly simple solution to a really complicated issue.

"My concern is that good intentions can't mandate good jobs. I think we're gonna have all sorts of work-around schemes, (employers) capping (employees') hours, or it will create a highly transient workforce. I'm just not sure that it was thought out as carefully as it should have been for a policy change of this magnitude."

Does Johnson plan to change the law?

Johnson did not name specific plans but said amendments might relate to "highly perishable crops" such as grapes.

Drazan: "Yeah, absolutely. I look forward to the opportunity to find a more balanced approach to that issue. With single-party control, the needs of all stakeholders were not taken into consideration with the passage of that legislation. It does need to be reworked and amended."

Does Drazan have specific amendments planned?

Drazan did not outline a plan, but said: "I look forward to having the conversation and proposing a more responsive piece of legislation that allows Oregon ag to continue to be Oregon ag."

Kotek: "Before I left the Legislature, we were gearing up for this conversation in last year's session. I had dairy farmers calling me up saying, 'This isn't working for us.' I listened hard. Before I left the Legislature, I said, 'Look, we have to transition this in a way that helps farmers to do their business.'

"It was very important to me to have a reasonable transition (timeframe) plus resources to support farmers — the tax (credit). I am defi-

nately open to maintaining the (tax credit). (The law includes temporary tax credits for employers to cushion costs.) But it would be nice if the federal government solved this. From a competitive standpoint, it would be good if every state was doing this. It's the right thing to do."

CP: Was it a mistake to shut down schools and businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Johnson: "Hell, yes.

"I think we did enormous damage. I don't think we've measured the social, emotional, mental health and academic damage that we've done to our kids.

"A lot of the hospitality industry is not going to recover. We've dissipated the workforce. And our response to the distribution of money was not consistent or objective."

What would Johnson have done differently?

"I would have approached the issue with more humility," she said. "I would have talked to county commissioners and city councilors and mayors. If you don't have the affected people's opinion(s), you just have what emanates out of Salem.

"My reaction to what happened was that the agencies were punitive (and) retaliatory. They didn't work with business to try to prescribe the safest conditions for patrons and workers. Rather, they just had their little regulatory Bigger Book of Bureaucracy out, running around trying to tell people what they were doing wrong."

What if there's another pandemic?

Johnson said she plans to be better prepared with personal protective equipment on hand and "clearer lines of communication."

Drazan: "I'm a mom of three kiddos. I had my daughter at home online trying to teach herself algebra in middle school. It was absolutely a mistake to keep schools closed as long as they were.

"Those first days where we did not fully understand how to navigate COVID, who was at risk, how this was going to move through our communities. ... As House Republican leader, I sent a letter to the governor on behalf of our caucus saying: Whatever you need, however we can work with you, we need to do everything we can to protect public health.

"And that suddenly became: She did whatever she wanted. And she mandated everything. I think that the duration of that shutdown was heavy-handed and was an absolute abysmal failure."

What will Drazan do differently if there's a future pandemic?

"I'd give more local control to our school boards with recommendations," she said.

And businesses?

"And businesses," she said. "You can trust Oregonians with the best information and the most support possible to make the right choices for themselves, their customers, their clients and their families."

Kotek: "There was certainly disagreement across the state on how best to do this.

"I think it was important that we instituted public health requirements that kept people safe, and frankly, alive. There are a lot of people walking around today because we tried to do the right thing."

Will Kotek keep schools and businesses open moving forward?

"The No. 1 priority to me is, no matter what, we have to keep our schools open. We have to have students in person," said Kotek.

What about businesses?

"I think one of the things (that) didn't go well is you can't tell businesses they are open and give them 48 hours and say, 'Oh, and you're closing in two days.' You have to give people advance warning," said Kotek. "It's important to have businesses part of the conversation and give them adequate notice whenever you're gonna do something that could impact their business."

CP: Rural economies are largely based on agriculture and natural resource industries. What do you see as the ideal jobs of the future in rural Oregon?

Johnson: "I think that industry in rural places is doing it. Walking through the plywood mill in Elgin, realizing how much of that is now computer-driven.

"We're innovating new products we had never even dreamed of. Oregon is uniquely positioned to do the things we've already talked about — thinning, logging — but also, I think we're uniquely positioned to innovate."

Drazan: "Across every generation, you see the evolution of community. What we have to continue to protect and preserve, though, is the autonomy of local communities.

"We live in a free society. That is the beauty of our nation — its independence. Oregonians should have the right to choose for themselves and their families their best lives.

"And I frankly don't believe there is a future for our state and nation without rural communities that continue to provide the values and benefits that our agricultural community has provided for centuries."

Kotek: "I'm super bullish about the strides we're making on broadband infrastructure. The other issue for me is clean energy jobs.

"We have to produce more clean energy in our state. That is jobs for rural Oregonians. That is large-scale solar. It's offshore wind. It's the pumped storage (hydropower) facility down in Klamath.

"One of the things about large-scale solar in particular (is) finding properties that are on low-grade or low-value farmland. We have to protect the land use system.

"So, clean energy jobs and broadband (are) very important and supporting our traditional industries as well."

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