

# Merkley seeks third term in Senate

■ Republican Jo Rae Perkins hopes to replace Merkley, keep Senate in GOP hands

By Gary A. Warner  
Oregon Capital Bureau

Democratic U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley is seeking to sew up his seat for another six years, hoping Democrats can snatch the Senate majority from Republicans on Nov. 3.

"I'm going to work to fix our broken and dysfunctional Senate so it isn't just a graveyard for good ideas," Merkley said in a March 3 video to supporters.

Merkley ironically made the comment while throwing in the towel on his unofficial bid to be the Democratic nominee against President Trump.

Since 2019, he'd visited Iowa and New Hampshire to court progressive Democrats. He's the third most liberal member of the Senate, according to voting site GovTrack.us, with only Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Kristen Gillibrand of New York to his left.

Unfortunately for Merkley, Sanders and Gillibrand were also running for the presidential nomination.

With his polling numbers behind most of the 15-person primary field at the time, Merkley switched his attention back to the Senate. There he starts out with the advantages of incumbency and the 286,560 voter registration edge Democrats hold over Republicans in Oregon.

Linn County Republican Party Chair Jo Rae Perkins is his opponent in the Senate race, but Merkley more often is running against Donald Trump and the Senate majority that has made the president's policies into laws.

Merkley voted for Trump's impeachment and against the president's nominees for the Supreme Court, Brett Kavanaugh and Neil Gorsuch. Against a Senate Republican majority, Merkley was on the losing end of those votes.

Merkley has called out the "racist rants and glorification of violence" of white supremacist groups he says Trump implicitly condones. He co-sponsored legislation to ensure there are enough polling places on election day. He's criticized what he says was Trump's dismissal of COVID-19 at the beginning of the pandemic crisis. Merkley says presidential inaction, delay and misinformation undercut efforts to slow the virus, which has killed more than 208,000 people in the

United States.

Merkley has been outspoken on what he says is the mistreatment of immigrants at the U.S.-Mexican border. He gained national attention in June 2018 when he tried to visit a shuttered Walmart in Brownsville, Texas, that a federal contractor had used as a detention center for immigrant children separated from their parents. The contractor called local police to bar him from entry.

Last month, Merkley called for an investigation of hysterectomies allegedly forced on immigrant women by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement at a facility in Georgia.

Merkley's also hit issues of local importance to constituents. Following wildfires that burned 1 million acres across the states, he joined other top Oregon Democrats meeting with FEMA Administrator Pete Gaynor to push for faster federal aid on safe drinking water, emergency housing and debris removal.

With Oregon's senior senator, Ron Wyden, Merkley announced that schools across Oregon will receive over \$150 million in federal support to better educate low-income students.

Democratic Party of Oregon chair K.C. Hanson points to Merkley's roots in southern Oregon and his tenure in the Legislature, including a stint as Speaker of the House, as giving him the political skills needed to take action on regional to international issues.

"The best advocate we have," Hanson said. "I challenge anybody to name an Oregonian who cares about people as much as Jeff does."

That's a narrative that Perkins, the Republican Senate nominee from Albany, would like to flip around. Perkins says she is a social and fiscal conservative who is an outspoken supporter of Trump and his policies on immigration, gun rights and taxes.

In her online ads, Perkins portrays Merkley as an absentee senator enamored with issues beyond Oregon. She paints him as one of the Democrat "leftists" leading the state, the state, abetted by fellow Democrats including Wyden, Gov. Kate Brown and state Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum.

Perkins says Democrats' impact on the state is best illustrated by the 100+ days of protests in Portland. In a recent online ad, she zeroed in on Merkley amid visuals of demonstrators running in streets, law enforcement in riot gear and the air swirling with tear gas.

"This is not the Oregon you signed up for," the ads say before shifting to a scene of Perkins looking out across a sweeping rural landscape.

"She wants to bring back a kinder, more caring, more loving Oregon that we used to know," the ad says.

Oregon Republicans hoped to recruit a state lawmaker or other high profile Oregonian to run against Merkley. Merkley was first elected to the Senate in 2008, when he beat incumbent Sen. Gordon Smith by just over 2% of the vote. Merkley's first bid for re-election in 2014 attracted multiple well-known, well-connected GOP opponents.

Former Oregon Medical Association President Monica Wehby beat Rep. Jason Conger, R-Bend in the 2014 GOP primary. Wehby ran as an opponent of Affordable Care Act with the campaign slogan "Keep Your Doctor, Change Your Senator." She raised \$3.3 million.

Merkley beat Wehby 56% to 37%.

In 2020, none of the 30+ Republican state legislators signed up to run against Merkley. Neither did retiring U.S. Rep. Greg Walden, R-Hood River, who had passed up earlier opportunities to run for the Senate or governor.

The May 19 Republican Senate primary ballot featured unknowns and perennial candidates who were also-rans in previous bids for public office. Perkins won with 49.2 percent of the vote. It was her first primary win in three tries for congressional offices. Perkins lost the 2014 Republican primary won by Wehby, receiving 2.8 percent of the vote. She lost GOP primaries for the 4th Congressional District in 2016 and 2018.

Merkley ran unopposed in the Democratic primary and received 564,000 votes — 200,000 more votes than all the GOP candidates combined.

Perkins has attracted national attention for her support of QAnon, a growing conspiracy theory movement that believes a "deep state" of government officials is trying to undermine Trump. The group is designated by the FBI as a domestic terrorist threat.

After winning the Senate primary, Perkins made a video using the QAnon slogan "Where we go one, we go all."

"I stand with President Trump," Perkins says. "I stand with Q and the team. Thank you, anons, thank you, patriots. Together, we can save our republic."

Perkins has since deleted the video from her websites,

but it was downloaded by media organizations.

The "digital soldiers" of QAnon first gained public attention in 2017 for posting that Hillary Clinton and other top Democrats were running a child prostitution ring out of a Washington, D.C. pizza parlor. That March, Edgar Maddison Welch of Salisbury, N.C., drove more than four hours to the Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria in the nation's capital and stormed inside with an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle and a revolver. Customers and workers fled as Welch stormed through the small restaurant, firing three shots that injured no one. He searched closets and a small storeroom in what he later said was an attempt to free captive children, but found none. He was sentenced to four years in prison for the assault.

Perkins supporters either can't or won't put their money where their mouths are. Federal Elections Commission reports are filed quarterly. The current campaign finance reports only run through June, with totals through September expected to be released soon. The early totals show a yawning gap between the candidates: Merkley has raised \$4.7 million and spent \$2.8 million since the beginning of 2019; Perkins has raised \$ \$37,255, and spent \$31,389.

All major national non-partisan vote analysis websites rate Merkley the overwhelming favorite and the Senate seat as "solid Democrat."

Merkley has also been endorsed by the Independent and Working families parties. Gary Dye is the Libertarian and Ibrahim Taher has been endorsed by both the Pacific Green and Progressive parties.

## DROUGHT

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In order for the reservoir to fill, Wickiup typically has to be at least 25% full at the end of an irrigation season. Even a strong winter won't fill the reservoir in the coming year, said Kyle Gorman, Oregon Water Resources Department Manager.

"There is no scenario that could I imagine where Wickiup will fill this winter," said Gorman. "Its inflow is largely dependent on groundwater, and it just doesn't respond quickly enough in one winter to fill the reservoir given where it is today."

While drought has caused Wickiup Reservoir to empty, a better water conservation plan in Central Oregon could help patrons in the North Unit Irrigation District, said Tod Heisler, Rivers Conservation Program Director for Central Oregon LandWatch.

Heisler blames Central Oregon Irrigation District, one of the largest and oldest districts in the area, for using too much water in the Deschutes Basin.

"State law requires irrigators to put the water to beneficial use without waste, but COID does little to reduce its waste, other than its big piping project, which will not solve the current water supply problem," said Heisler. "Rather than manage the water wisely, we saw business as usual, a tragedy of the commons."

Gorman said the state water resources department cannot force other districts to use less water to assist a junior water rights holder, unless it can identify legitimate waste. When water waste is identified, the department can curtail the district's diversion until the waste is stopped.

"This would likely play out with a change of a couple of cubic feet per second and in the big scheme of things and overall supply, would not make any difference for NUID," said Gorman, referring to the North Unit Irrigation District.

Gail Snyder, executive director for Coalition for the Deschutes, advocates collaboration between the senior water rights holders and irrigation districts to find solutions that benefit both farmers and the environment.

"Farmers are the stewards of the land and water. If we in the broader community hope to have a healthy environment for all, including farmers and rural communities, we need to step up and support our neighbors," said Snyder.

Oregonians should "urge decision-makers to make much-needed changes to Oregon water law and policies that allow water to be shared more equitably between stakeholders, including rivers," said Snyder.

As the irrigation districts continue to seek ways to collaborate and share water, and everyone crosses fingers for a few wet winters needed to fill Wickiup to the brim, farmers in the North Unit district count their losses and wonder how much longer they can stay in business.

"I am hoping for a miracle, but if it ends up being less water than we received this year, then if that is the case it's going to be a one-and-done deal for a lot of people," said Thomas. "Fifty percent (of fields) will probably be fallow. That is losing too much money to continue for long."

## PRISONS

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Pete Hemberg, the president of BMCC's faculty union, said prisons could actually see a dip in quality from running its own education program, citing a press release from the Oregon Education Association announcing the union's support for the community colleges.

In the press release, the educators' union states that successful program completion dropped by 50% and costs rose when the Oregon State Penitentiary moved its education program in-house from 2003 to 2006.

"We really think it's a disaster for the state and its AICs," Hemberg said.

Vanderzee couldn't verify the statistic, but added that it only applied to one institution from 15 years ago.

Much has changed since then, Vanderzee wrote, including the use of inmates as tutors and educational software that can adapt to the inmates' needs.

As the year winds down, the department isn't backing down from its proposed reforms to its adult education program.

If community colleges wanted to keep their contracts, Peters wrote in her Sept. 30 letter, they would need to agree to a list of requirements determined by the DOC. The colleges could take it or leave it, but the requirement list wasn't meant to act as an opening offer for negotiations.

Instead of each college negotiating its own

contract, each school would need to agree to a standardized contract that would pay out based on each prison's capacity. Additionally, each school would also need to offer flexible class schedules and year-round education, disregarding school or term breaks.

Regardless of who leads the adult education programs, the DOC wants to continue contracting out vocational training.

Cam Preus, the executive director of the Oregon Community College Association and a former BMCC president, said her organization is acting as a "convener" for the community colleges that are affected by the state's decision, which also includes the community colleges in Portland, Salem, Bend, Ontario and Coos Bay.

Preus said the college presidents and their staff are currently formulating a response to Peters' letter, but have indicated that they need more time to study the proposed funding formula and look at how the new requirements would affect their institutions.

"We are committed to the success of adults in custody," she said.

In the meantime, the colleges and their labor unions are trying to rally support for their cause.

Hemberg said BMCC's faculty union has already put in calls to the governor's office and is organizing an effort to call legislators.

The college is trying to stave off another round of cuts after encountering a \$2.8 million shortfall earlier this year. BMCC closed the gap by eliminating two dozen positions, cutting half of them through layoffs.

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