

Oregon GOP: Buehler, once nominee for governor, says party can win, but not with 'wacky' politics

Continued from A1

Despite all that, the executive committee of the Oregon Republican Party took a stance saying Trump actually won, and adopted a resolution branding the violent breach of the Capitol as a “false-flag operation” by parties other than the ones who bragged live on Facebook and Twitter as it was happening.

That’s when Knute Buehler, the 2018 Republican nominee for Oregon governor, left the party altogether.

Buehler, a physician and former state representative from Bend, says there is a route for Republicans to win again — but not by embracing “wacky conspiracy theories.”

“Our political system works best when there is a balance of power, and not when one party dominates, especially for such a long duration,” Buehler said. “Things get unbalanced and you do not get good policy. Instead you get a lot of people who are disenchanted, who feel shut out of the process and disregarded.”

“But,” Buehler added, “it is a pretty hard route for a Republican right now, especially with the events in January.”

Decline and fall

Bob Packwood’s rise to the U.S. Senate in 1968 coincided with continued Republican dominance in Oregon over a couple of decades, despite a Democratic voter registration edge dating back to 1956. “But we have no bench” of potential candidates for statewide office, Packwood said, either in the Legislature or elsewhere.

Thousands more have left the party without fanfare.

According to the Oregon secretary of state, whose office compiles figures at the end of each month, registered Republicans statewide dropped by almost 8,500 from November to January. Republicans now constitute just 25.5% of all registered voters, compared with 36% 20 years ago.

Oregon’s share of registered Democrats also declined during those decades, even as their totals surged past the 1 million mark, from 39.4% in 2001 to 35.5% in 2021. The share of voters not affiliated with any party grew from 21.7% to 31.8%.

In those two decades, voters have elected Republicans statewide only twice.

One was Gordon Smith, who won a second term in the U.S. Senate in 2002 but lost six years later. He became



Oregon Capital Insider photo

“It is a pretty hard route for a Republican right now, especially with the events in January.”

— Former state Rep. Knute Buehler of Bend

president of the National Association of Broadcasters. He maintains a home in Pendleton, but has said he will not seek public office again.

The other was Dennis Richardson, a former state representative who lost to Democratic Gov. John Kitzhaber in 2014, but was elected secretary of state two years later. Richardson died of cancer in 2019.

One of Richardson’s early endorsers for governor in 2013 was Atiyeh, who knew about second chances. He was elected governor on his second try in 1978 (he lost four years earlier) and was re-elected in 1982.

He endorsed most of the subsequent GOP nominees, with the likely exception in 1998 of Bill Sizemore, who won just 30% in a landslide loss to Kitzhaber.

But Atiyeh never endorsed his party’s rightward drift and focus on social issues.

“I never left my party,” he said in 2012. “My party left me.”

The party lions

Here is what Republicans, all current or former officeholders and statewide candidates, had to say:

KNUTE BUEHLER

Buehler, 56, made two losing statewide runs — one for secretary of

state in 2012, the other for governor in 2018, both against Democratic incumbent Kate Brown — and a third loss for the 2nd District congressional seat last year.

“I think there may be an opportunity for an independent with prior name recognition and the ability to fund a campaign independently,” he said. But Buehler says he will not be that independent candidate in 2022, when Brown cannot run again because of term limits.

He says it may take someone like Jesse Ventura, the former pro wrestler who, as a third-party candidate, beat better-known Democrats and Republicans for governor of Minnesota in 1998. Or Arnold Schwarzenegger, the bodybuilder and actor who won a multiple-candidate race for governor of California in 2003. (Schwarzenegger is a Republican, but prevailed in a winner-take-all recall election.)

Buehler said, if there is one thing he would have done differently in 2018, it would have been to pursue the Independent Party nomination, which went to Patrick Starnes. Buehler said a winning coalition could be built around small-business supporters — 98% of Oregon businesses have fewer than 100 employees — private-sector workers including union members, and legal immigrants not limited to

Hispanics.

“A lot of them have seen problems with big government. They are not naturally inclined to go in that direction,” he said. “But when Republicans do not give them a viable option, they are left to vote Democratic.”

BEV CLARNO

Clarno, 84, was secretary of state for almost two years by appointment after the death of Dennis Richardson. She had been a county commissioner, a federal agency representative and just one of two people — and the only woman — to lead Republicans in both chambers of the Oregon Legislature.

She had made her own statewide run in 1996, passing up one more try for the Oregon House in a term-limits era, but lost to Democratic state Treasurer Jim Hill.

Some people urged her to seek a full term as secretary of state — Clarno said Gov. Kate Brown, who sought an interim appointee, never asked her directly whether she would run — but she said she did not want to go through another statewide campaign.

Clarno was a prominent defender of rural interests as a legislator, but also was a pragmatist.

When she returned to the Legislature as a senator in 2001, Clarno said she heard Atiyeh speak at the annual Dorchester Conference and endorsed his approach.

“He said we will not win statewide until we stop making the social issues a litmus test,” she recalled. “I was impressed by his speech, and he so wanted Republicans to understand the importance of winning and having the opportunity to govern. He realized they were not going to do so if they were to continue the way they were.”

JEFF GUDMAN

Gudman, 66, was the GOP’s two-time nominee for state treasurer, losing a three-way race to Democrat Tobias Read in 2016 when Chris Telfer, a former Republican state senator from Bend, was the Independent Party nominee. Gudman lost again to Read last year.

Gudman said he aligned himself with the one-time middle of the Republican Party and its Oregon officeholders of the past.

Gudman said one way for the party to return to relevancy, as he tried to

do in his campaign last year, is to focus on accountability for the failures of state programs under Democratic governors and legislatures. Among them were major projects such as the Employment Department’s computer modernization — a contract with a vendor is being negotiated more than a decade after Oregon received \$89 million for it — and the botched Cover Oregon rollout that promised a one-stop website for health insurance coverage back in 2013.

“There is not a single elected official who has paid the penalty for continued mismanagement,” he said. “It is about governance and delivering services to the people who need it. It’s about staying focused on local issues. But apparently we have not reached the tipping point.”

Gudman says Republicans should seize a chance to campaign on balancing economic opportunity with a government safety net that works for people.

“It’s a future we can win on,” he said. “The way to that is to focus on competence and the old phrase: Had enough?”

KEVIN MANNIX

Mannix, 71, has been a four-time candidate for attorney general and governor — the Republican nominee for each office once — and also was the state party chairman.

Mannix, a former Democrat, says there is an opening for Republicans to capitalize on what he sees are Democrats’ failings on their handling of the pandemic, the economic downturn, violent protests and persistent homelessness, whose effects reach beyond Portland.

“I think Republican candidates who approach these issues — not in a nasty, but in a straightforward way — would have an opportunity to reach out to nonaffiliated voters, who are fed up,” he said. “But they are not going to want to hear doctrinaire answers. They want to hear how you identify the problem and address it.”

Mannix said a different approach by Republicans could hold down their losses, or even gain support, in the three Portland area counties that determine statewide elections.

Homelessness, he said, cannot be dealt with only by sending police to clear out camps. He said a long-lasting solution must take into account

Continued on next page

Paid Advertisement

Leveraging Virtual Connections for Lifelong Learners.

With the pandemic continuing, older adults across the state embrace virtual platforms to study various topics and engage with one another through the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Oregon.

During this ongoing pandemic, so many of our citizens are dealing with the loneliness and isolation it causes. Senior citizens are impacted by this isolation even more, as we are particularly vulnerable to the virus and potentially less mobile than others.



OLLI-UE in Central Oregon members on a field trip to the Erickson Air Museum outside of Madras, February 2020.

We would like to offer an option for dealing with this situation: it is called the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Oregon, or “OLLI-UE” for short. We are part of a network of 124 Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes around the country, all associated with universities. Philanthropist Bernard Osher started the OLLI Institutes to encourage lifelong learning in adults aged 50 and better who want to learn for the joy of learning. We have hundreds of members in both Central Oregon and in the Eugene/Springfield area and recently expanded our reach to engage participants in Northwest Oregon. Although we are sponsored by UO, there is no requirement to have

an affiliation with the University of Oregon or to be an alumnus.

“At OLLI-UE, I have found my people! My outlook on life is improved immensely! I jumped in with both feet and signed up to volunteer. It helped me make connections even faster. It has also kept me busy during the pandemic. Moving to Zoom has helped me stay connected.”

Elizabeth Polidan, Central Oregon member

OLLI-UE is an ideal choice for connecting via shared interests and learning everything you desire, from art, to science, history, international affairs, writing and book groups, and field trips. We have a modest number of dedicated staff who are critical to helping us run the programs, but our members all volunteer to help find speakers, lead classes, and make recommendations to improve our organization.

Pre-pandemic, we were meeting at the Elks Lodge in Bend and at the University of Oregon’s Baker Downtown Center in Eugene. Now, we are holding all our classes and meetings on Zoom. While this was a bit of a challenge in the beginning, we have adapted to the new format and expect that when we once again meet

in person, we will continue to share many programs in a hybrid model. The bright spot in this new format has been more sharing of classes with our counterparts in Eugene and Northwest Oregon, and now we don’t want to give up those shared experiences. Engaging via video has also enabled people in remote locations to attend and provides a feeling of connection between members.

“The thing I like most about OLLI-UE is the members. We have a tremendous diversity of people with real life experience and backgrounds that span the entire spectrum. This opens up the possibility to learn far more than you would get from reading a book or watching a video. Before the pandemic, we were able to tour the Bend Seed Extractory because an OLLI-UE member was a professional in agriculture research and was able to get us access.”

Ron Polidan, Central Oregon member

We OLLI-UE members welcome fellow lifelong learners with open arms. We know that curiosity never retires, and you will have the benefits of



At the University of Oregon



Central Oregon OLLI-UE member Ronald Polidan examines seeds through a dissecting microscope extracted at the Deschutes National Forest’s Bend Seed Extractory.

keeping your mind active and engaged, and have the opportunity to share with others what you have learned and experienced.

In fact, we are offering a chance to Discover OLLI-UE the week of March 15-19 with a sampler of classes all week, including art, history, science, international relations, music, and philosophy. Learn more about this unique year-round program for active Oregonians who know that curiosity is ageless.

This event is free, but advanced registration is required. Register today https://osher.uoregon.edu/discover_olli or 800-824-2714. Participants are asked to register once for the entire week.

Loneliness is banished when you join us. We look forward to welcoming you!

