

Voters

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Deschutes County, home to Bend, Sisters and La Pine, is Central Oregon's largest county, with about just over 190,000 residents, according to the latest census data. About 87% of the county's residents are white alone, just over 8% are Hispanic or Latino, and the county's median age is 42.4. A third of the county's 150,000 registered voters are nonaffiliated; 31% are Democrats, and 29% are registered as Republicans.

Crook County, where Prineville is located, has the region's oldest population, with a median age of 46.8 among its 23,700 residents. It's also the region's whitest county, where 88% of residents reported being white alone and 7.7% being Hispanic or Latino. Politically, the county leans Republican, with 44% of its 20,000 voters registered as Republicans, 32% as nonaffiliated and 16% as Democrats.

Jefferson County, the heart of Central Oregon agriculture and home to Madras, is the region's most ethnically diverse county. Of 24,000 residents, 20% are Hispanic or Latino, and 59% are white alone. The county's median age is 41. Just under 40% of its 17,000 voters are nonaffiliated; a third are registered Republicans and 20% are Democrats.

Despite wide differences in voter demographics, concerns and hopes seemed to align.

Diane Belnavis — Prineville

Without hesitation, vendors at the CROP Farmers Market stacked leftovers in wagons, filling truck beds with pallets of berries accompanied by sounds of folding lawn chairs squealing. Belnavis said she believes this is a space that creates a sense of community.

"We have different beliefs, but we all love the same thing. This community is forced to interact with each other, and I just love it," said Belnavis, sitting beside the farmer's market that she helps organize weekly. "I've always lived ru-



"I'm running out of things to be proud about," said Carson Janssen, owner of Janssen Metalworks in La Pine.

Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

rally. I like to farm. I've been living in Central Oregon for the past 40 years or so."

Belnavis shares her farmland with her neighbors allowing the bordering sheep extra space to graze, but also provides Belnavis a meeting point for differing political parties to communicate. She says their fence serves as a place to discuss current events and learn about their differing views.

Whitney Bell — Madras

"I like that we are the hippie state; people in Oregon are a lot nicer and a lot more accepting of everything," said Bell, sitting behind a white foldout table, which was covered with sweet treats, including shortbread cookies glued together by strawberry jam. The tantalizing baked goods could not divert from the concern-ridden conversation.

While Bell has utilized health care to overcome an inability to eat — she was prescribed a pool pass to swim weekly — the Madras resident recognizes that not all health conditions are equally considered.

"I hope our government puts mental health in the same category as physical health," Bell said. "We go once a year to get physicals, but your primary care provider never says, 'Hey maybe you should check in with a counselor.'"

Laurie Gonzalez Axsom — Madras

"They say we can't save the world, but we can save one soul at a time," said Gonzalez Axsom, working at the Madras Saturday Market at Sahalee Park. She comes from a family of addicts. A lack of rehabilitation facilities and focus on mental health causes the "generations to mess up."

The percentage of Oregon residents addicted to drugs and alcohol is among the five highest in the nation, and the state's access to drug treatment is the worst in the U.S., according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health 2020 state report and the nonprofit Oregon Recovers.

Gonzalez Axsom shared that she sees a pattern of parents not having resources to help themselves get through addiction, jail and mental health crises. Children are left to fend for themselves, often falling into drug use as their parents did.

Her daughter struggles with mental health. "She's at the point of smoking marijuana, and I kind of just want to say it's OK because it's better than doing meth because that's where I come from."

Jeremiah Teter — La Pine

The aroma of greasy, home-cooked burgers wafted around the red leather booths and framed jerseys at Coach's Drive-In. Heavenly scents were paired with a discussion of the rising living costs.

Teter has lived in La Pine since 1996 and loves the hospitality of Oregonians. His appreciation of Oregonians' kindness is outweighed by frustrations that resources are inaccessible in his community.

"I want to move out of it because everything is getting too high priced and political everywhere," Teter said.

Carson Janssen — La Pine

Sparks flutter like fireflies at Janssen Metalworks. Janssen's hands were coated from nail to wrist in dirt and his head was covered with a weathered, black bandana.

"I'm running out of things

to be proud about," said Janssen, sitting on the bed of his truck as his golden retriever begged to play. "The world is changing, and it's getting scary."

He's lived in La Pine on and off since 1975. Janssen described the vast amounts of gentrification and other changes affecting his small town: Hiking trails now require parking permits, trash blankets the forest and affordable housing plans are not designed with the lowest income demographic in mind.

"I lost my house in 2008, and to get my feet back in the housing market, to come up with a down payment and afford a house here in my own town is almost impossible," Janssen said. "As little as this town used to be, it isn't that way anymore."

Michael and Ismael Morales — La Pine

"When people get together, they have each other, but I think we are alone," said Ismael Morales, a La Pine resident. "I don't like politicians. They don't care and as soon as they get elected, they forget about all the issues that are going on."

His son, Michael Morales is 15 years old and plans to get involved in voting. He explains how within his younger community there is an exponential increase in drug and alcohol use. This is affecting parent-child relationships.

"They usually have parents who are out a lot of the time and are addicted to drugs or alcohol," Ismael Morales said. "They come back to rough home lives with drinking, yelling, drug use in the presence of them."

The father and son share the belief that they need to have more accessibility to rehabilitation facilities that focus on interventions for parents and their children.

"I think drugs are the biggest issue in small and big towns," Michael Morales said. "There should be more facilities to help those guys because there are not many facilities for it."

Lindsay Serrano — Redmond

Children drenched in chlorinated water scooted their way up to Serrano working at the concession stand at Centennial Park, eager to pass her a crisp dollar bill for their Spongebob popsicle. A quintessential summer day brought conversations about an absence of diversity in Redmond.

"We don't have a lot of exposure and education about all different people, and I think it makes people here close-minded, which can be bad and dangerous," Serrano said. "It's hard in smaller towns, but as we grow, it would be nice to see more people move here and feel welcomed to come here."

Serrano, 27, urges for inclusion and diversification in her community. She credits her love for Oregon to the community's respect for nature, which is a sentiment that resonates with many rural Oregonians.

"I love the area we live in; the nature and respect we have for nature is a big one because I've been to other places and the respect is not there," Serrano said.

Devon Bowen — Redmond

"There are always things that are broken, but those are things I respect. Everybody's got a place in our community," said Bowen, while standing by his farmers market canopy, offering fresh produce from the area. His father and 9-year-old son stood at a distance, ushering the local regulars that strolled by.

Bowen owns a ranch and has been a captain of the Redmond Fire Department. He's been fighting fires for 25 years.

The past three years have been, "really bad," he said. "We just have water issues. The environmentalists came in and took our water away for the frog, so they're pretty much putting the frog above humans," he said. "I don't have as much water. They won't give you water because you have 5 feet of water for the frog to breed and that's more important than feeding people and the community."

He's referring to the Habi-

tat Conservation Plan, which places limits on how much water is supposed to remain in the Deschutes River for the frog's survival and reproduction cycle, limiting the amount of water released for irrigation.

"In three to five years, there will be no farming, which is the production of our entire community. My son wants to be a rancher, but it's just not a sustainable livelihood anymore," he said as his father and son approached quietly. "Give me an honest answer, and if you're not going to go that way," Bowen said. "Give me a choice or else it's a deception."

William Schultz — Prineville

"We need to step away from extreme political parties and come back to a more central, critical thinking political party," said Schultz, a 17-year-old is a senior in high school who is also taking college courses and working at Prineville Men's Wear.

When discussing the most prominent issues facing his community, Schultz said, "It's becoming increasingly harder to find homes." Housing has skyrocketed in price. "We know what's happened to Bend, but we don't want that here."

According to Schultz, the recent impacts of housing and labor laws have led to an exodus of young ranchers. Ranching has been a vital source of employment and cultural heritage for the people of Prineville for decades.

With almost a year to go before he'll be registered to vote, Schultz said that he'll, "vote for somebody that understands the entire state, not just the West side," said Schultz. "In order to be a good leader, you have to be able to understand both metro and rural."

■ This story was developed in collaboration with the Catalyst Journalism Project at the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication. Catalyst brings together investigative reporting and solutions journalism to spark action and response to Oregon's most perplexing issues. To learn more visit <https://catalystjournalism.uoregon.edu> or follow the project on Twitter @UO_catalyst.

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