

GOP hoping to cut into Dem dominance in Salem

By Gary A. Warner
For the Oregon Capital Bureau

Coronavirus pandemic, record unemployment, shuttered businesses, massive street demonstrations, armed militias on the streets — with the wildfire season just starting.

It's 19 weeks until the Nov. 3 election, and the run-up to the 2020 vote is playing out against one of the most bizarre backdrops in Oregon history.

President Donald Trump will be trying for a second four years in the White House, a prospect that will likely push record numbers of Oregonians to the polls. In a solidly Democratic state where Democrats have a near monopoly on major political offices, the biggest impact will likely be on the races for the Legislature.

Democrats hold a record-tying 38-22 edge in the House, and outnumber Republicans 18-12 in the Senate. Democrats looking at the electoral map say there's room to build on those numbers.

"While we take nothing for granted, we are confident that we will protect and grow our majorities in both chambers," said Molly Woon, deputy director of the Democratic Party of Oregon.

Kevin Hoar, spokesman for the Oregon Republican Party, says the electorate is feeling slammed by the COVID-19 crisis and the state's economic shutdown.

They'll take it out on the Democrats, he believes.

"A significant number have lost confidence in Gov. Kate Brown," Hoar said. "Watch it play out in the legislative races. In swing districts, Democratic candidates will be running away from her."

With Portland a voter-rich Democratic stronghold and the wide swaths of Eastern Oregon resolutely Republican, the competition comes down to a handful of seats.

Democrats look to Bend and



Rep. Cheri Helt, R-Bend

State Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend



Jason Kropf

Eileen Kiely

maybe Salem to add to their numbers. Republicans want to flip three suburban Portland districts they lost in 2018 and perhaps pick off districts around Astoria and Coos Bay.

Democrats hold most major state posts

Only the most starry-eyed Republican sees much opportunity up and down the ballot. No Republican presidential candidate has won Oregon since Ronald Reagan's reelection in 1984. Democrats running for reelection for the U.S. Senate, state treasurer and attorney general are favorites. Four of five seats in Congress are Democrats, a ratio that odds-on will hold on election day. Republicans' main hope is to keep the open Oregon secretary of state job on the Republican column.

That leaves the Legislature as the most fertile battleground. With their current supermajorities in the House and Senate, Democrats can pass budget and tax bills without Republican help.

The small GOP contingent led then-House Minority Leader Carl Wilson, R-Grants Pass, to muse in 2018 that the GOP weren't "even speed-bumps" against the Democratic juggernaut. The party resorted to guerrilla tactics, staging walkouts in 2018 and 2019 to deny the quorum needed to do any business.

Republicans said the move was necessary to block the "tyranny of the majority." Democrats said the absent legislators were abdicating their roles and stifling the electoral will of the people. Which narrative gets more traction at the

ballot box will shape what the Legislature looks like next year.

The question on Nov. 3 is whether those numbers can hold or if the GOP can flip enough seats to force Democrats to negotiate in the 2021 session.

How blue is Bend?

Democrats looking to increase their majority or at least offset losses elsewhere have their eyes on the seats held by two Bend Republicans — first-term Rep. Cheri Helt and veteran Sen. Tim Knopp.

House District 54 takes in all but a sliver of Bend. Democrats last won House District 54 in 2008, despite a growing Democratic voter registration edge. Helt kept the string alive in 2018 when the campaign of Democrat Nathan Boddie imploded amid allegations of sexual harassment.

Helt has shown she isn't a lockstep Republican, splitting with her caucus on key issues such as mandatory vaccines and health care for the poor. She was the lone House Republican who didn't walk out in 2020, and has slammed Donald Trump, saying he is "unfit to serve as president."

Helt is an impressive fundraiser, outpacing her 2020 Democratic rival, Deschutes County Deputy District Attorney Jason Kropf.

The 8,000-person Democratic voter registration edge and the likelihood that Trump at the top of the ballot will generate a big voter turnout in the liberal-tilting city may be too much for the Republican to overcome.

"Cheri Helt looks like she is in trouble," said Jim Moore, a longtime Oregon political analyst and professor at Pacific University. "Even if she runs a really strong race, the reality is she won last time because the Democrat disintegrated. That's unlikely to happen again."

Democratic strength has been building in Senate District 27, where Knopp is vying for another four-year term. Knopp took part in the Republican walkout in 2019, but made a point of being the only GOP senator who remained in Salem this year.

Woon said Democrats will remind voters of Knopp's vocal stance for the walkout in 2019, where he gave television interviews from a cabin in Idaho, where he stayed to avoid any attempt by state officials to bring him back to Salem.

"Republicans who walked out on the job will be held accountable for their actions," Woon said.

Knopp is facing Eileen Kiely of Sunriver, who lost the 2018 House District 53 race to Rep. Jack Zika, R-Redmond. Kiely is a strong campaigner and has good political connections as secretary of the state Democratic Party. But Knopp is one of the best fundraisers in the Legislature and has turned down the volume on his conservative image in recent years.

"The numbers are getting worse and worse in the district for Knopp," Moore said. "But I would bet he still has the edge this year."

Democrats believe they have a chance in the Salem area to knock-off Republican Sen. Denyc Boles and Rep. Raquel Moore-Green. Officially incumbents, both were recently appointed to their seats and will be facing district voters for the first time.

Moore said an election result in which Democrats held their

current seats would be a victory to celebrate. Any additional pick-ups would be a welcome bonus for Democrats.

Suburban shuffle

The Republican's Legislature wish-list starts with three Portland-area House seats they lost in 2018. Rep. Rachel Prusak, D-Tualatin, Rep. Courtney Neron, D-Aloha, and Rep. Anna Williams, D-Hood River, will be running for re-election for the first time.

In all three races, the Republican strategy is to cast the Democrats as acolytes of Brown. The challengers are also running against a common foe: Portland. Brown is from Portland, as are House Speaker Tina Kotek and House Majority Leader Barbara Smith Warner.

Hoar said the GOP believes voters are angry over the economic collapse during the pandemic, mass demonstrations in Portland that are now stretching into their third week and calls to "defund the police" supported by some Democratic officeholders.

"Voters are seeing what's almost the collapse of the ability of local government in Portland to function," Hoar said. "The Democratic candidates who are following the Portland leaders in Salem are going to have to own all this."

Woon, the Democratic leader, said the trio of new lawmakers reflect the values of their districts and the increasingly Democratic hue of the politics in and around the state's largest city.

Moore said the three races will be a test of whether voters embrace the idea of a cosmopolitan shared future with Portland or revert to a traditional urban vs. suburban antagonism.

Capturing the coast

Crunching the numbers, Republicans see a newly fertile area: the northwestern knob of counties along the Pacific Coast and the mouth of the Columbia

River. Columbia and Tillamook were the only Oregon counties that voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, then flipped to Trump in 2016. In Clatsop County, a pair of candidates backed by Oregon Right-to-Life and other conservative groups unseated two incumbents, giving the GOP a de facto majority on the officially non-partisan county commission.

Republicans see opportunity in the politically wobbly House District 32. Rep. Deborah Boone, D-Cannon Beach, stepped down in 2018 after seven terms. Tiffany Mitchell, a state child welfare worker, mounted an insurgent campaign with backing from public employee unions, winning the seat with less than 50% of the fractured vote in both the primary and general elections.

The Timber Unity activist group targeted Mitchell for recall over her support for a carbon emissions cap. The recall fizzled, but Mitchell decided to call it quits after one term, announcing she would move to Washington for family reasons. Tillamook Mayor Suzanne Weber won the Republican primary. Democrat Debbie Boothe-Schmidt, a trial assistant from Cannon Beach backed by the AFSCME public employee union, is the Democratic candidate.

Republicans also see opportunity in Coos Bay, where two Democratic veterans — Sen. Arnie Roblan and Rep. Caddy McKeown — are retiring. The area has been a stronghold for protesters of the Timber Unity coalition against a Democratic carbon emissions tax. It's also been roiled by a long fight over a proposed liquid natural gas terminal in Coos Bay. Roblan won re-election by just 349 votes in 2016.

Republican Teri Grier came close to knocking-off McKeown in 2016, a wake-up call for the Democrat who would raise over \$1 million to beat back Grier in a repeat race in 2018.

70,000 newly eligible unemployment claims remain unprocessed

By Peter Wong
Oregon Capital Bureau

About 70,000 Oregonians newly eligible for unemployment benefits — the self-employed, independent contractors, gig and temporary workers — await state processing of their claims.

Having virtually eliminated a backlog of 38,000 claims for regular benefits by a self-imposed deadline of June 12, Employment Department officials have turned their full attention to the new batch of claims created when Congress broadened the categories of eligible workers at the end of March.

Interim Director David Gerstenfeld said Wednesday that a total of 97,000 claims have been filed by workers newly eligible under the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program. Of 24,000 processed so far, he said, just under 17,000 are receiving benefits, totaling \$90 million — but the rest remain.

"We know these numbers are discouraging, frustrating, and frankly frightening," Gerstenfeld said in a conference call with reporters. "It is certainly not the news I had hoped to deliver today. But I am committed to transparency, accountability and swift action."

"We recognize this is a crisis situation, and we will continue

treating it as one."

Many of the most experienced claims processors have been reassigned from the old backlog to work on the new claims, along with some newly hired people, for a total of 60.

"We have learned how much progress we can make when we have our most experienced staff process those applications," he said.

But the same coronavirus relief bill that made these workers newly eligible for benefits — the first significant expansion of the unemployment insurance system in decades — also requires states to verify that the workers are ineligible for regular benefits. Gerstenfeld said 79,000 applicants were deemed ineligible for regular benefits, but may be eligible for the new benefits — if they apply separately.

"We have had to create an entirely different claims process outside our normal system," he said. "Sometimes this requires a detailed review to see if someone is considered an employee or an independent contractor under the law."

The minimum benefit is \$205 per week, though Gerstenfeld said many applicants can qualify for more after their claims are reviewed.

They also qualify for the additional \$600 per week in

benefits available under the coronavirus relief bill through July 31. U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, is pushing for an extension, but it is caught up in congressional politics. The Democratic-led House has passed \$3 trillion more in various forms of federal aid. But the Republican majority in the Senate has balked at the price tag, though some are conceding more money is needed to counter the downturn caused by business shutdowns during the coronavirus pandemic.

Gerstenfeld said benefits are retroactive to the first week of eligibility, so people who have given up should apply again

under the new program.

The agency also added 138 telephone lines — and plans 150 more over the next couple of weeks — to help staff handle calls to and from the newly eligible workers. A dedicated number, 833-410-1004, is reserved for this program.

"We know people are still getting busy signals and are having to wait too long on hold," Gerstenfeld said.

He said the agency will lay out a timetable, similar to Project Focus 100 for the backlog of regular claims, to inform people generally about how the agency will deal with their claims.

The agency will sched-

ule several webinars, the first planned at 1 p.m. Friday, to help answer frequently asked questions.

"We are trying to get more information out to answer some of the common questions we

are seeing," he said.

"They are not just numbers. Each number represents either a person we are able to get directly needed benefits to, or a person anxiously waiting for us to do so."

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