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While Democrats will still control the Oregon Legislature, they have lost their supermajority status in both chambers.

Democrats poised to keep majorities in Oregon Legislature

By PETER WONG
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Democrats will remain in charge of both chambers of the Oregon Legislature when the new session opens Jan. 9, but will lack the 60% majorities required to pass revenue-raising measures on their own.

Results are incomplete, but Republicans managed to reduce the Democrats' 18-12 majority in the Senate and 37-23 majority in the House.

Whichever party has a majority usually names the House speaker and Senate president. They appoint the members and leaders of committees — where most of the work of the Oregon Legislature is done — and assign bills to the committees. The majority party usually sets the agenda for the chambers.

Democrats have held majorities in both chambers for a decade, and supermajorities — 60%, the requirement for revenue-raising measures — since 2019.

Republicans were aided by the Bring Balance to Salem political action committee, founded by former U.S. Rep. Greg Walden — himself a co-founder Phil Knight.

Republicans mounted a strong bid to win their first majority in the Senate, or at least force a 15-15 tie, in two decades. They lost their majority in 2002, when Democrats gained a tie, and then Democrats won three seats for an outright majority in 2004.

Oregon House

Democrats are likely to retain their majority over Republicans in the House. But that majority will be smaller than in the past four years.

Results are incomplete, but Republicans apparently gained a net two or three seats, enough to reduce Democrats below the supermajority mark of 36. There will be at least 20 new members — 13 Democrats and seven Republicans are vacating their seats — and if all six appointees on the ballot win their elections (most were leading), almost half the House will be serving their first 160-day long session in 2023.

Rep. Greg Smith, R-Hepner, said the election outcome was something of a mixed bag.

“It wasn’t as big a wave as internally we were being told,” he said. “And so there was really an expectation that we would get to 28, maybe 29 in the House.”

Smith said while he is grate-

ful and even excited about the Democrats losing their supermajority, he is a bit disappointed his party didn’t gain more seats.

Overall, he said, the election reflected a generational shift. The longest-serving Senate president, Peter Courtney, retired. The longest-serving House speaker, Tina Kotek, now is the governor-elect. And more than 70% of the Legislature has never served in a public setting.

The change makes Smith not just the most senior member of the House, but of the whole legislative assembly.

Democrat Dan Rayfield of Corvallis, who succeeded Tina Kotek as speaker at the start of the 2022 short session, is likely to be his party’s nominee for a full two-year term as presiding officer. The speaker is chosen by the full House, but the majority party’s choice usually prevails.

Smith said he had a recent conversation with Rayfield, and he seems to be taking a



different approach to the role from past speakers of the House.

“He’s very collaborative, and I really think he is trying to be a speaker of all Oregonians,” Smith said. “For me, while I’m not going to compromise my basic principles, I look forward to working with him.”

The House had 25 new members in 1999 after Oregon’s term limits kicked in, and 24 new members in 2001. Those totals exclude two members with prior legislative service in 1999, and one in 2001. The Supreme Court tossed out term limits in 2002.

Smith said the change in the Legislature could bode well.

“Hopefully, it’s a new era in Oregon,” Smith said, “to where there can be broader collaboration and broader problem-solving.”

Republicans were in the majority most recently in 2006. They managed to force a first-ever 30-30 tie with Democrats after the 2010 election, but Republicans lost — and Democrats gained — four seats in 2012, which enabled Democratic leader Tina Kotek to become speaker.

Oregon Senate

Republicans were mounting a strong bid to win their first majority in the Senate, or at least force a 15-15 tie, in two decades. They lost their majority in 2002, when Democrats gained a tie, and then Democrats won three seats for an outright majority in 2004. Democrats have kept it since then, although there were 16-14 splits between the parties from 2011 through 2014.

The Senate Leadership Fund raised more than \$2 million to aid Republican candidates and attack Democrats.

The new lineup apparently will be 16 Democrats, 13 Republicans and one independent, Brian Boquist of Dallas, who left the Republican Party. This excludes the undecided District 20 seat, where Democratic Rep. Mark Meek of Gladstone held a slim lead in his challenge of Republican Sen. Bill Kennemer of Oregon City. Most of the district is in Clackamas County, where about half the ballots were yet to be counted.

Meek is a three-term state representative; Kennemer was seeking a full term to the seat he was appointed to in 2021 after Republican Alan Olsen of Canby moved out of state. Kennemer was first elected a senator in 1986, then as a Clackamas County commissioner in 1996, then as a state representative in 2008 before he left in 2018.

“These results should give renewed optimism to every person in our state fighting for the well-being of hard-working Oregonians,” said Senate Majority Leader Rob Wagner, D-Lake Oswego, who is expected to be a candidate for the Senate presidency. “Soon, we will turn our attention to the 2023 legislative session and continue our work to support a brighter future for every community in our state.”

Sixteen of the 30 Senate seats were up for election on Tuesday, Nov. 8, one for a two-year term in a redrawn District 18, which is now entirely within Washington County. Democratic Rep. Wlnsvey Campos of Aloha was elected; she will be up again in 2024 for a full term.

Ten Democratic incumbents appear headed for reelection, plus Aaron Woods of Wilsonville, who won the redrawn District 13 seat.

Three Republicans will move from the House to open seats in the Senate: Daniel Bonham of The Dalles, succeeding Republican Chuck Thomsen of Hood River; Cedric Hayden of Fall Creek, succeeding Democrat Lee Beyer of Springfield; and Suzanne Weber of Tillamook, succeeding Democratic appointee Rachel Armitage of Warren in the seat that Democrat Betsy Johnson of Scappoose vacated in her losing nonaffiliated bid for governor.

Sen. Kim Thatcher of Keizer lost her District 13 seat in redistricting, but appeared to be winning her bid for the open District 11 seat vacated by Democrat Peter Courtney of Salem, the longest-serving legislator at 38 years and Senate president for a record 20 years.

— East Oregonian news editor Phil Wright contributed to this report.

Bentz, Wyden coast to victory

Kotek wins governor’s race; gun control, health care measures still tight

EO Media Group

SALEM — U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz easily won a second term to represent Oregon’s 2nd Congressional District.

As of 10 a.m. Wednesday, Nov. 9, Bentz had 66% of the votes, easily defeating challenger Joe Yetter, who had just 33%.

Bentz, a Republican from Ontario, is currently Oregon’s only Republican representative at the federal level.

Yetter, who retired as a colonel in the U.S. Army after serving 36 years, faced an uphill battle to unseat the incumbent. Only two Democrats have held the office in its history — Walter M. Pierce from 1933 to 1943 and Al Ullman from 1957 to 1981.

Oregon’s 2nd Congressional District includes all or part of 20 counties across Northern, Eastern, Central and Southern Oregon.

Wyden holds Senate seat

Oregon’s senior U.S. senator, Democrat Ron Wyden, won reelection easily Tuesday, Nov. 8, defeating Jo Rae Perkins from Albany, a Republican opponent who has never held elected office.

Wyden, who was first elected to the Senate in 1996, chairs the powerful U.S. Senate Finance Committee and also sits on the Energy and Natural Resources, Budget and Intelligence Committees.

As legislative accomplishments, he points to his work on clean energy tax credits — including a key role in the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act — prescription drug price reduction measures, tax reform and boosting the semiconductor manufacturing industry.

Wyden, 73, is known for holding town halls in each of Oregon’s 36 counties, with thousands of those gatherings taking place over the years.



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian, File

A vendor at the Crosshair Customs booth at the 2018 Pendleton Gun Show at the Pendleton Convention Center talks to prospective customers.

ple voting to keep the language, unofficial returns indicated that the measure was passing by a clear margin.

As of 10 a.m. Nov. 9, the measure had received more than 759,000 votes and held a nine-point lead, 54%-45%.

“Talking with some voters, there was confusion about the measure and whether that language was needed for there to be accountability for people who had committed crimes,” said Sandy Chung, executive director of ACLU of Oregon, which supported Measure 112.

Health care measure trails

Measure 111, which would guarantee access to health care as a right in the Oregon Constitution, remains too close to call after early-morning returns on Nov. 9.

As of 10 a.m. the measure was failing with 703,479 — 50.4% — opposed and 690,313 or 49.5% in favor.

If it passes, Measure 111 would make Oregon the first state in the nation with a constitutional obligation to provide access to affordable health care to all its residents, similar to the constitutional guarantee of a public K-12 education.

The language of the measure states: “It is the obligation of the state to ensure that every resident of Oregon has access to cost-effective, clinically appropriate and affordable health care as a fundamental right.”

But Measure 111 does not spell out what the state would have to do to meet its new constitutional obligation, were the measure to pass, or define what access to affordable health care means. Were the measure to pass, it would be up to the Legislature to shape what health care access for all looks like and how to pay for it. The Legislature will be back in session starting in January.

Measure 113 passes, punishing lawmakers who walk out

Oregon voters appear to have impaired the ability of state lawmakers in the minority party to block contentious bills by fleeing the Capitol, a maneuver Republicans employed in 2019 and 2020.

Measure 113, pushed by public employee unions and supported by top Democrats, was headed for passage by a wide margin after early returns.

Voters backed the concept 67%-32% in partial returns tallied as of 10 a.m. Nov. 9.

The measure adds language to the Oregon Constitution preventing any lawmaker from running for reelection if they have 10 or more unexcused absences in a single legislative session. It also prevents such lawmakers from winning office in the other legislative chamber.

Measure 113 was conceived as a way to get around Oregon’s constitutional quorum requirement, which requires two-thirds of lawmakers in a chamber to be present in order to conduct business. That’s a higher bar than exists in many states, which often require a mere majority of lawmakers present to achieve a quorum.

Stephenson easily wins Oregon labor commissioner

Labor attorney Christina Stephenson handily won the race to be Oregon’s next labor commissioner Tuesday, Nov. 8, with early returns showing her securing 60% of the vote. Rival Cheri Helt was far behind in the two-person race, with 39%, and fewer than 1% of the votes going to write-in candidates.

“Oregon should be the best place to live and work in this country, and I’m going to do everything within my power at the Bureau of Labor & Industries to make that a reality,” Stephenson said in a statement.



Stephenson



Kotek

Kotek elected governor

Democrat Tina Kotek emerged the winner in a tight race for governor, edging out Republican Christine Drazan.

Two media organizations, The Oregonian newspaper and Oregon Public Broadcasting, called the race in Kotek’s favor by midday on Wednesday, Nov. 9, but the race was still so close that Drazan refused to concede until Friday, Nov. 11.

As of late Wednesday night, Kotek was leading Drazan by 46.7% to 43.8%, with more than 1.59 million ballots cast.

Unaffiliated candidate Betsy Johnson received just over 9% of the vote.

Johnson, a former Democratic state senator from Columbia County left the party and her Senate post to run for governor and was widely seen as a spoiler in the race.

Kotek, the former speaker of the House, and Drazan, the former House minority leader, both gave up their legislative seats to seek the governor’s office.

Measure 114 remains too close to call

SALEM — Oregon Measure 114, which would regulate firearms, remained too close on Nov. 9, with 50.3% of voters approving the measure and 49.6% voting “no” according to preliminary unofficial results.

Measure 114 qualified for the ballot through a petition drive by a coalition of religious and other organizations. It would require people to complete firearms training before they can obtain permits to purchase guns, and limit ammunition magazines to 10 rounds each.

It is the first gun regulation initiative on the ballot in 22 years, although the Legislature has passed several measures of its own over the past seven years.

Measure 114 drew the most attention of the four that qualified for the ballot, two by legislative referral, and two others by initiative petition.

Measure 112 passes, removing slavery language from Oregon Constitution

Oregon voters passed a measure that strips language from the state’s constitution allowing for slavery and involuntary servitude when used as a punishment for a crime. Notwithstanding more than 637,000 peo-

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