



Oregon and Oklahoma May Shock Us on Election Day

Description

USA: Ten states currently have governors who are not from the same party as the person who won that state's 2020 presidential election. That number could dwindle after November.

Two of those states, Massachusetts and Maryland, will almost surely replace retiring moderate Republican governors with Democrats, as GOP primary voters nominated candidates far to the right of their states' electorates. In Kansas, Democratic incumbent Laura Kelly is in a tight reelection campaign in a state Joe Biden lost by nearly 15 percentage points. And in Arizona, where the incumbent Republican is retiring, the RealClearPolitics polling average shows that less than a single point separates the margin between Democrat Katie Hobbs and Republican Kari Lake.

It is also possible that new states will soon join the list of gubernatorial ticket splitters, showing that an appetite for bipartisan state governance can be found, even in places with long partisan histories.

President Biden drew attention to Oregon's wild gubernatorial race by campaigning Saturday with struggling Democratic nominee Tina Kotek. The Beaver State has elected only Democrats for governor since 1986, and supported Democrats for president since 1988. But frustrations with crime, drugs, and homeless encampments in Portland have frayed the Democratic coalition. Polls show a Democrat-turned-independent candidate Betsy Johnson is threatening to split the vote and allow a socially conservative Republican, former state House minority leader Christine Drazan, to win with a mere plurality.

While Johnson takes swipes at both major party candidates, her harshest attacks target Kotek. Her [latest ad](#) features a self-described "diehard Democrat" and mother who lost her son to an opioid overdose. The mother says, "Tina Kotek passed the horrible law to legalize hard drugs like heroin, meth and fentanyl." Nothing is said about Drazan.

The charge leaves out many details. The spot makes it sound as though Kotek, the state House speaker until recently, shepherded the law legalizing hard drugs through the legislature. Actually, the law was passed by Oregon voters in a 2020 referendum, with a strong 17-point margin. (Also, the law significantly decriminalizes possession of small amounts of hard drugs, but it stops short of

legalization, while shifting resources into addiction prevention and treatment.)

Kotek does support the measure, but has criticized implementation of the new public health programs as too slow. Drazan and Johnson want the whole law repealed in a new referendum, though repeal is not necessarily the politically safe position. A September poll by Data for Progress found the current level of support for the decriminalization law still matches the 58% support it received in the referendum.

However, in [another September poll](#) from The Oregonian, nearly half of voters said “the most important problem facing Oregon” was either homelessness (32%) or crime (16%). No other issue ranked higher. Tied for fifth place, at 8%, was drugs, but for many, the drug problem is intertwined with crime and homelessness. (Unlike other parts of the country where reproductive freedom is more acutely threatened, in Oregon only 2% of voters named abortion as the state’s most important problem.)

For Drazan to be thwarted, Kotek needs more Democrats to abandon Johnson and come home. Third party candidates do often fade in the stretch. But Johnson’s hard-edged approach to homelessness, crime, and drugs tracks with Drazan, not Kotek. The Democratic nominee’s [ad](#) campaign [touts](#) a progressive plan to end homelessness by relying on more affordable housing, shelters, and outreach programs.

Kotek’s attempt to portray herself as compassionate and effective does not seem to be protecting her from Johnson’s and Drazan’s broadsides. [The Republican’s ads](#) yoke Kotek to the unpopular Democratic incumbent Kate Brown and the problems festering on Democrats’ watch. Drazan also accuses Kotek in ads of blocking a sex abuse investigation of a state legislator, though an Oregonian fact check concluded the charge is “untrue.” Nevertheless, an Emerson poll pegs Kotek’s unfavorable rating at 50%, with only 38% holding a favorable view. Johnson’s numbers are not much better, while Drazan is slightly above water. For Kotek to unify Oregon’s Democratic majority, she will likely need to drive up Drazan’s negatives and argue that a vote for Johnson is effectively a vote for Drazan.

Johnson and Drazan have overlap on crime and other issues (both would rescind the current governor’s executive order capping greenhouse gas emissions). But Johnson is ideologically idiosyncratic, and speaks frequently about melding Democratic and Republican ideas. In contrast, Drazan was known for [obstructionist tactics](#) while serving in the state legislature. The word “bipartisan” does not appear on Drazan’s website. However, in a recent debate a softer-edged Drazan argued, “I will be a person who will reach across the aisle. Because we will likely have Democrat majorities in the legislature, the opportunity to force negotiations only exists with a Republican as Governor.”

Over in Oklahoma, Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt is in trouble. On October 8, the Sooner Poll gave his Democratic challenger Joy Hofmeister a four-point lead. Don’t believe it? Yesterday, a [poll](#) from a Republican political consulting firm, Ascend Action, gave Hofmeister a seven-point lead. And a poll from KOCO-TV gave her a 0.6 point lead. Stitt’s campaign appears rattled by the new numbers. A few days after the Sooner Poll’s release, negative ads appeared attacking Hofmeister.

Why the ultra-conservative Stitt is straining to win reelection in a deep red state may be a surprise to those living outside Oklahoma. He is following a culture warrior model that is working for other Republican governors like Texas' Greg Abbott and Florida's Ron DeSantis. Stitt has banned nearly all abortions, fought pandemic restrictions, and withheld money from hospitals that provide hormone therapies and surgeries to transgender minors.

Yet Stitt may get tripped up by some old-fashioned corruption. As The Oklahoman reported, "Hofmeister has regularly accused Stitt of running a 'corrupt' office, pointing to an [Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation inquiry] into state park restaurant contracts that resulted in the resignation of the governor-appointed Tourism and Recreation Department director, and a federal investigation into Stitt's use of pandemic relief funds for education."

Hofmeister is also a proven vote-getter, having won two terms as Oklahoma Superintendent of Public Instruction, running as a Republican. She only switched parties last year, and her gubernatorial ads don't stress her new affiliation.

In a recent debate she described herself as "aggressively moderate" while tagging Stitt as "pitting neighbor against neighbor." She says in [ads](#) "I'm tired of the extremism" without citing specific examples of Stitt's extremism, lest she step on a political land mine. Her ads do not even mention abortion. (Her website carefully defines her as "personally pro-life" yet believing abortion "is a healthcare decision between a woman and her doctor.") When it comes to issues, she generally sticks to bread-and-butter matters like education and health care; Hofmeister opposes Stitt's moves towards privatization in both areas.

Of course, partisan loyalties may well snap into place in both Oregon and Oklahoma on Election Day. But regardless of the final outcome, the apparent closeness of the two races is a reminder that even in deep red and blue states, bipartisanship is not a dirty word.

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