Oregon Politics
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With less than a month before Oregon's 2006 general election ballots hit the mail, what can we expect for the balance of this year's political campaign? Vicious attack ads? Fierce debates? If history is any indication, the incumbents will take the high road, while challengers will try to find chinks in the opponents' armor to motivate undecided or unlikely voters.

Gubernatorial challenger Ron Saxton, the only serious threat to unseating the incumbent, has been accused by some of being too similar to Kulongoski, yet the unions have painted him as an extremist, poised to decimate the ranks of the public employees who deliver important government services.

While hardcore voters turn out every time, some issues draw additional votes into the mix. The governor's race is the marquee event, drawing the most voters to the polls, but additional voters will turn out to weigh in on statewide ballot measures, tax measures, and various other races. To win in November, gubernatorial candidates will need to appeal to the backers – or opponents – of a handful of defining issues.

There are a number of reasons why this gubernatorial race is different: Republican moderates have tried for years to get a "more electable" middle-of-the-road-Republican on the ballot, which is what they have in Ron Saxton. Saxton's credentials include a strong record on education, with the bonus of being well known in the most populous part of the state.

Voter registration numbers and history favor the Democrats, and although polls have shown that roughly one-fourth of Democrats were uninspired by Kulongoski's first term effort, traditionally, most Democrats will circle the wagons and vote for "their guy." Recent polls, however, have Saxton closing in on Kulongoski and are showing greater solidarity among Republicans than among Democrats.

With so many registered voters not bothering to vote in the May primary (including most Democrats and Republicans), the candidates need to either motivate a larger turnout among registered partisans, or attach their star to one or more of these tangential, but defining issues set to appear on the ballot.

Besides the governor's race itself, one of the issues with the greatest potential for motivating turnout is that of tax restraint. On this issue Saxton and Kulongoski could not be further apart. Many fiscally conservative (or just plain fixed-income) voters will weigh heavily in on ballot measures for spending limits, tax reform, and a hoard of local tax measures. Kulongoski himself has added fuel to this fire, by continuing to talk about new taxes throughout the campaign.

But giving Kulongoski strategists confidence is a history of socially-conservative Republicans demonstrating a willingness to abandon the party's candidate in favor of a dark horse who more closely represents their view on one particular issue (Pro-Life versus Pro-Choice).

The multi-million dollar question in 2006 remains: have the social conservatives "seen the light" in terms of supporting a candidate who could win, or would they rather make a statement by spending their vote on the staunchest possible right-to-life candidate, Mary Starrett? Among all of those issues: taxes, schools, and social values, the most dynamic is the one that impacts the Republican solidarity.

Faith voters shocked pundits in 2004, passing Ballot Measure 36 ("Defense of Marriage") by a whopping 57 to 43 percent margin. The likely scenario is that those voters will re-appear this year in support of Ballot Measure 43 (Parental Notification Prior to Minor Abortions) and if a significant proportion of their votes go to Starrett, that could spell doom for Saxton.

Indeed, the Kulongoski strategists may look back to Saxton's primary victory, in which the more socially conservative candidates Kevin Mannix and Jason Atkinson split the conservative vote.

But if, on the other hand, the broader faith community rejects Starrett's argument that Saxton is no different than Kulongoski, a new chapter in Oregon politics may be approaching. If history is any indication, that's a big "if," but what makes this year's election intriguing is the notion that, should Oregon's weary taxpayers and the broader "faith community" unite behind Saxton, the Kulongoski campaign hasn't got a prayer.

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