

“On a dark and stormy night, Republicans got blown away”

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Our late October poll showed that in a matter of a few weeks, Gov. Ted Kulongoski had risen from a dead heat to an insurmountable lead. While many of voters' decisions stemmed from the efforts of local campaigners, a measure of the Democrats success has to be attributed to the failures of Republicans on the national stage.

Despite low unemployment, low inflation, and record stock markets, the national Republican party finds itself in the center of the bull's-eye for all that's wrong with America. Along with broad based disdain for president's Iraq war effort, one national Republican scandal after another has contributed to the wave that carried Oregon's Democrats and thwarted conservative causes.

From the governor's race on down, the Republican meltdown had an enormous impact. Oregon's registration numbers favor Democrats by about three percent, but returns also indicate that Democrats voted at a higher rate than Republicans. Add in the fact that the normally balanced independent voters were breaking hard for Democratic causes, the Republicans were forced to pitch their hopes on generating big last-minute returns in the midst of a record breaking rainstorm. All these factors combined to form the “perfect storm” for Democrats. In Oregon, this meant lots of upsets, support for scores of tax measures, and resounding defeats for proposed spending limits.

But with the governor's race so competitive just a few weeks earlier, why the sudden change? According to our poll, Republican challenger Ron Saxton's numbers had not shrunk appreciably; the lion's share of the governor's surge came from the ranks of previously undecided voters. That included some 16 percent of Republicans. So what were the reasons?

In part to verify that our poll results were correct, and in part to better understand the dynamics behind the changes, we called back samples of independent and Republican voters to find out why they were supporting Kulongoski.

Many of the answers from independent voters reflected an uncertainty about what a Ron Saxton governorship might look like. Reasons for supporting Kulongoski included: “The environment,” and, “I don't trust Saxton.” Other comments parroted the governor's campaign ads: “He has done a good job, considering the economic situation,” “He took a cut in pay; hasn't done a lot for Oregon, but I'll vote for him anyway.”

We asked the Republican Kulongoski supporters why they were supporting the Democrat. Many of the responses alluded to the character of the governor. One said, “Kulongoski's done an effective job, and I'd like him to continue.” Another said, “He's a sincere individual and has done a good job overall.”

Others indicated nervousness about Saxton's candidacy: "Kulongoski is the one who would support education." One said, "I'm not a big fan of taking money out of schools to give to private corporations." Another said, "I didn't like (Saxton's) remark about firing all the state employees." A disillusioned Republican stated: "Saxton is a dreamer if he thinks he can make government more efficient."

Some comments were more indicative of many Republicans' sense of hopelessness and weariness of the problems on the national stage. The nail in the coffin for Saxton could probably be characterized in the comment that: "I'm tired of the Republican party and everything it stands for."

For Ron Saxton, the effort to bail a flood of negativity out of a sinking ship proved to be insurmountable. Nationally and here in Oregon, the Democrats will now have an opportunity to pilot their own ship of state.