

Editorial

Party Favors

Okay, so we had a little fun with the cover.

For a few brief days in late April and early May 2002, Ron Saxton led the polls in the gubernatorial Republican primary. Under the counsel of longtime Oregon political operative Elaine Franklin, Saxton's campaign imploded in the final days as he moved aggressively left on social issues, abortion and assisted suicide. Now, four years later, Saxton has a new face to his campaign, new political consultants...and a new political bedfellow, Lars Larson. Has he done wrong?

Last month, a Sunday *Oregonian* editorial began the paper's campaign for an open primary. The idea, an initiative of political outsiders Phil Keisling and Norma Paulus, is aimed at the November ballot. The *Oregonian* has consistently argued that partisanship is the root of all evils in Oregon politics. The newspaper made the argument that if someone as moderate and intelligent as Ron Saxton is forced to cuddle up to Lars Larson and the right wingers in order to win his party's nomination, it proves how broken our state's partisan political system is.

Richard Nixon is the American politician credited with the adage that you run to your party's extreme base in the primary, and then you run back hard to the middle in the general election. This was Saxton's strategy, as he took a position on illegal immigration to the right of and in conflict with President Bush during a three-way candidate debate with Kevin Mannix and Jason Atkinson.

This hot button issue happens to be the passion of conservative talk show host Lars Larson. Larson, whose radio show is a big factor in the GOP primary, dumped his former favorite candidate, southern Oregon State Sen. Atkinson, and endorsed Saxton. Larson did this because Atkinson, claiming to know something about the need for illegal workers in Oregon's agriculture industry, refused to part from the president's position, which would allow guest worker passes for illegal immigrants already in the country. Larson labels this amnesty and Saxton, at the time, agreed.

Larson previously dumped Mannix as his GOP favorite two years ago when Mannix, as GOP chairman, declined to defend comments Larson made about Hispanics. Mannix, who grew up in Guatemala, claimed he seldom listened to Larson's show, even though Larson had been instrumental in helping Mannix win the '02 GOP gubernatorial primary.

Illegal immigration isn't the only issue in this year's primary that Ron Saxton has moved right on—PERS is another. In the May 2005 issue of *BrainstormNW*, Saxton wrote about PERS reform: "Thus, the radical idea is to 'reconstitute' the system by terminating public employees, and later rehiring them under new contracts with different terms." Saxton's comment made a splash not only in Oregon, but it also caught the attention of the Louisiana State Employee's Retirement System (LASERS) whose members were directed to the article. Later Saxton would refine his position on PERS reform, as he

would illegal immigration, but not before he got the attention he needed as the “new” Ron Saxton, and also got Larson’s endorsement.

Illegal immigration and PERS reform won’t be the only issues that Saxton will be moving right on in this year’s primary—land use and transportation are two others. In 2000, Saxton voted against the land use Measure 7, but in 2004 voted for Measure 37.

None of these position switches/enhancements play well with the *Oregonian*’s editorial board, who portray Saxton’s move right as evidence of a broken political system. The paper also believes that Oregon’s extreme partisanship is forcing smart and well-intentioned moderates such as Mark Hass, Max Williams, Wayne Shetterly, and Len Hannon to quit the legislature.

Typical *Oregonian* headline: “Another respected lawmaker leaves the Legislature, fed up with partisanship.” Solution: Rid the state of political parties.

But hold on there. To judge whether political parties help or hurt our system of government, perhaps the perspective should be a little broader. Since 1856, the U.S. has been exceptionally well served by two dominant political parties. No other democracy in existence can claim such long-running success as ours, with its Republican and Democratic parties framing the issues. Our system, despite its flaws, made the 20th century “the American century.” So it *has* worked well nationally.

As Tom Daschle said at the 2006 Tom McCall Forum, “Democracy is by nature an adversarial system.” In his defense of our system, the well-known partisan politician pointed to a constructive, rather than destructive, tone as the crucial element in maintaining a workable, civil political discourse.

As for the political divisions in the country, concerns that the two parties are too divided, too bitter, too polarized for civil discourse...well, it was only a decade ago that citizens constantly complained that the two parties didn’t have enough differences, that they resembled each other too much. So stick around—things change. Besides, peeling a label off someone’s lapel does nothing to change their hearts and minds.

On a state level, much of the extreme partisanship that the state’s daily papers abhor is blamed on the Republican-controlled House, and particularly Speaker Karen Minnis. During the ’05 session, Minnis refused to give in to the governor, the Democrats or the editorial boards on two key GOP issues: her defense of Measure 37 and her unwillingness to support new taxes in bad economic times.

So what happened? The Oregon Supreme Court ruled that 61 percent of Oregon voters were right in approving regulatory relief to Oregon property owners, and twice Oregon voters backed up the Speaker in defeating statewide income tax increases. Yes, Minnis was partisan in defense of two of her party’s key issues. But last month in his State of the State address, Governor Kulongoski argued that Oregon was back, emerged from the

state's worst economic crisis in 30 years. Maybe Minnis' partisan, hard line on tax increases should get a little credit for what the governor sees as a miraculous comeback.

It is only within the third, fourth and fifth levels of government—city, county and Metro politics—that political parties don't exist. The result according to one Portland City Council observer is 0 Republicans, 0 Democrats, and 5 Socialists. In the '90s, Neil Goldschmidt once referred to the sitting Portland council members as the smartest group he had ever seen, but he also warned that they were the *least differentiated in ideology*. In 1990, as reported by the Portland Business Alliance (PBA), the city of Portland had 110,000 jobs in its downtown financial core. A dozen years later, PBA reported there were only 80,000 jobs in downtown core. Perhaps political parties in local politics might have improved the situation.

But back to the cover. Forgive the cliché, but politics does make strange bedfellows: Ron Saxton and Lars Larson. Does anyone really believe that by moving to the right in this year's gubernatorial primary and taking the time to actually get to know members of his own party (and by doing so, giving himself a shot at winning this year's primary), Ron Saxton is a less effective candidate, or governor? Is it really so wrong to be right? Maybe. But as for us, hold the open primary, and turn up the Brokeback radio.

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