

The Oregonian

Democratic registration surges in Oregon's 5th Congressional District

by Steve Mayes, The Oregonian

Monday September 22, 2008

Oregon's 5th Congressional District has never been a sure thing for Democrats or Republicans, but 2008 looks to be the year the voter landscape turns blue.

The voter complexion has changed in the mid-Willamette Valley district that stretches from Mount Hood to the central coast.

For years, Republicans outnumbered Democrats, but aggressive registration efforts that started in the primary battle between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have given Democrats the advantage by more than 20,000 voters.

Oregon residents still have until Oct. 14 to register for the Nov. 4 election.

On paper, the registration edge goes to Kurt Schrader, a Canby Democrat who wants to replace Rep. Darlene Hooley. She is retiring after six terms.

Schrader is running against Republican Mike Erickson and four minor party candidates.

Since Hooley was first elected in 1996, the district has become more suburban and less conservative.

"Politically, I'm not so sure a straightforward conservative would be able to make as much progress in the district now," said Kevin Mannix, a Salem attorney and former legislator who lost to Erickson in the May primary.

Erickson, a Lake Oswego businessman, founded a successful transportation consulting business. He says he's an outsider who will use his private sector know-how to solve public sector problems.

Erickson is employing the same strategy in this campaign as he used against Mannix in the primary, portraying Schrader as a career politician who favors tax increases.

Schrader, a state senator and veterinarian in Canby, says he is more in tune with 5th District voters. He cites his 12-year record in the Legislature as proof he's a fiscal conservative and a prudent manager of taxpayer money.

The differences between Erickson and Schrader were on display Monday night at a candidate forum at Willamette University sponsored by the Oregon League of Minority Voters.

Erickson introduced himself as a man with little political experience and a lot of business savvy. Schrader offered a quick tour of his positions: Get out of the Iraq war, reinvest in the nation's infrastructure and health care, provide more loans to college students and more aid to rural Oregon.

Asked what Congress should do about illegal immigration, Erickson said the U.S. should tighten its borders to keep out terrorists, drug smugglers and illegal immigrants and streamline the visa process.

Schrader said the nation needs a more comprehensive approach that includes changes in the guest-worker program that ensure foreign workers won't take jobs from Americans and provides a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants.

Asked about Measure 58, the Oregon ballot measure that would limit the time English language learners spend learning English in public schools, Erickson did not state a clear position.

The Oregonian

They both addressed the economic troubles on Wall Street and Main Street, and Erickson criticized Schrader for failing to pay his property taxes on time. Schrader has missed some deadlines on tax payments and paid them late with interest.

Outside the campaign forum, however, given the gloomy headlines and the high-decibel presidential race, it's hard to know how many 5th District voters are listening.

Jessica and Jack Romaine operate a Wilsonville deli. For them, one issue stands out.

"We're business owners. We count on the economy being strong," said Jessica Romaine. Something needs to change, she said. "We need an aggressive approach."

The Romaines did more than talk about change, they switched parties earlier this month. The lifelong Republicans became Democrats.

They joined an unprecedented wave of new Democrats in the 5th District. This year, Democrats gained more than 23,000 new party members while Republicans lost more than 2,000 voters.

"It's Kurt Schrader's race to lose, given the political climate that favors Democrats and political problems that bedevil Mr. Erickson," said Dan Lavey, a Portland public affairs strategist and a Republican.

Last spring, an Oregon City woman told The Oregonian that Erickson knowingly paid for her to abort their child seven years ago. The woman provided medical and other documents detailing their relationship. Erickson, who says he opposes abortion, has denied knowing about the abortion. Last month, The Oregonian reported that a 2004 trip Erickson made to Cuba that he called a "humanitarian mission" was actually a pleasure trip.

The flood of new Democrats won't help Schrader if they don't fill out their ballots.

"In the (May) primary, there was a huge drop-off. Some people said they didn't know who to vote for. They voted for president and they left," said Liz Kaufman, a Democratic political consultant who lives in Clackamas County.

"That's scary to candidates on the ballot in November because it's a longer ballot. You've got to make sure the newbies find your name," she said.

Mannix said new Democrats are not necessarily as partisan as old ones.

"I'd say there are a lot of new voters who don't feel bound to any particular philosophy or party and want to be shown the party and the person they're looking at will work to get results," said Mannix, who served in the Legislature as both a Democrat and a Republican.

Latinos, who are getting more engaged in Oregon politics, reflect that view.

More than 2,000 Latinos registered in Marion and Polk counties since last summer, said Francisco Lopez, of the Voz Hispana Voter Registration Project.

Few are likely to support Erickson, who called for sealing the Mexican border and cracking down on illegal immigration.

"We're looking for candidates that have a concrete and comprehensive plan for immigration reform," Lopez said.

-- Steve Mayes; stevemayes@news.oregonian.com