

Musings of a Pollster (or how I've come to believe in the need to retool government and politics in the State of Oregon)

by Adam Davis

In a state known for “death with dignity,” it may be time to do some mercy killing of our old ways of doing government and politics in Oregon. In their place, let's submit to Oregonians a system that is more aligned with their current and future values, beliefs, and behavior.

Community leaders in Oregon are very concerned about the future of the state. They have been working hard to find solutions to a wide range of problems including hunger, unemployment, rising health care costs, school funding, the state's budget deficit, traffic, deteriorating bridges, and water shortages. Efforts to date have mostly proven unsuccessful.

Underlying this futility are many economic and social problems that are unlikely to be resolved in the near future, if ever. These problems include a weak global, national, and local economy, the Public Employee Retirement System deficit, the exodus of corporate headquarters, continued population growth, and an unstable system for financing public services.

On top of this are decreased federal funds available to Oregon communities, increased demands on government from the war on terrorism, and growing public detachment from politics and government. Currently only 74% of eligible Oregonians are registered to vote. That is down from 85% in 1988. And 18-34 year olds? They've basically disappeared from the political radar screen. Furthermore, there is some evidence that this lack of engagement continues as the 18-34 year olds move into the next older age group. The thinking that as young people grow older and have more at “stake” in terms of family and job that they'll reengage with politics and government now appears not to be valid.

There has been much commentary about these issues, and indeed they represent formidable obstacles to government and political reform in Oregon. But the problem may be even larger. An analysis of current public opinion in Oregon and a comparison of attitudes of Oregon's community leaders with those of the general public suggest some additional challenges for the state. When combined with the problems noted above, the reality may be that it is time to stop the wishful thinking and the spinning of wheels and face reality: it is time to retool government and politics in this state.

What are these public opinion research findings that suggest that our situation in Oregon may be even more critical than currently thought and argue for a bold approach to changing government and politics in Oregon?

NEWCOMERS AND THEIR BAGGAGE

I often serve as the moderator of focus groups that have only two or three Native Oregonians including myself. About twenty percent (20%) of adults in Oregon are new to the state in the last 10 years and 40% are new to the state since 1982. The consequences for current reform efforts are many-fold.

Many of these residents have no connection to Oregon's proud, ground-breaking history during the last several decades – passage of the Beach Bill in 1967 and the Bottle Bill in 1971, creation of Oregon's pioneering statewide land use planning system in 1973. Using semantics and imagery based on this legacy to motivate Oregonians is falling on deaf ears.

These new residents are importing with them their own frame of reference for judging how good a job Oregon is doing in different areas. Recent survey findings indicate Oregonians actually give Oregon better marks in job performance than in 1992 in a number of different areas including controlling crime, maintaining clean air and water, providing economic access to health care, protecting natural resources, and providing government services generally. Indeed, compared to where they moved from, things may not look that bad for the newcomers. While many community leaders are spinning tales of current and future doom and gloom and argue for doing this or that differently, many Oregonians are instead thinking, “Why? Things don't look that bad to me. It could be a lot worse.”

IGNORANCE IS BLISS

“Government isn't a part of my life; it doesn't do anything for me.”

– 2002 Values and Beliefs Study Focus Group participant

Oregonians' awareness and knowledge about state and local government and politics is at an all-time low. This is much more pervasive than just not being able to name one's U.S. Senator or Representative. It includes not being aware of how government contributes to their quality of life through services ranging from sewage treatment and parks to justice services and health care for the poor. It also includes no knowledge about how much state and local government services cost and how services are paid for. Finally, there is little understanding of not only the basics of how the political system works, but also how to effect change through legislative or regulatory processes.

When asked to make a list of government services at the state, regional, and local levels, most focus group participants will think of and record police and fire services. But beyond these, it becomes a struggle.

Without assistance, few participants will name services like water and sewer, the courts, and public health. Even public education is not a sure bet to be mentioned, nor are environmental, parks, and open spaces programs. Many Oregonians see little connection between the services they greatly value and their government.

In recently conducted survey research, about 20% of area residents did not know what Metro's (the Portland area's regional government) responsibilities are and an additional 10% named a service like education or public safety. In another survey, 41% of area residents could not select between two response options when asked how the Portland International Airport is funded and instead answered don't know. When asked to name the kind of taxes that are used to fund public services in Oregon, 28% did not know. And as far as senators and representatives go, 43% did not know the number of U.S. Senators Oregon has and of the 57% of Oregonians who said two, 55% could not give both their names.

There are many reasons for these low levels of awareness and knowledge including the fact that the media of all kinds and at all levels gives local, regional, and state government and politics little coverage, but regardless of the causes, consider the consequences. The challenge for the advocates of change is two-fold.

It simply is not enough to assume that people care enough and know enough about government or politics to be interested and make informed decisions when arguing the pros and cons of proposed changes. You have to drop back another step to make them aware of what the institution is currently doing for them and how things work. Otherwise, they're unlikely to care or to become engaged because they don't see and appreciate what is personally at stake. Thus, you're talking about more time and more money to educate the public, which may be a problem itself because of limited communications options as noted below.

While many state programs are out of sight and out of mind for most Oregonians, the Oregon Lottery is different. Compared to other government programs, this one often receives commentary in opinion research. Unfortunately, most of it is ill-informed.

Many Oregonians are not going to be supportive of any changes in the public services funding system because they feel lottery mismanagement is the problem. This position is based on misinformation about the amount of funds available to the state through the lottery and what those funds can legally be used for. But regardless, these Oregonians are not going to be open to other proposals unless their perceptions of the lottery are changed.

I'M MAD AS HELL AND CAN'T TAKE IT ANY MORE

Low awareness and knowledge is one thing; the hostility many Oregonians have for government and politics generally is

another. In a recent survey, Oregonians were asked to rate the contributions 12 different institutions or organizations made to the quality of life in their community. Rated among the lowest were political parties and the different levels of government.

It is noteworthy to observe in focus groups how susceptible people are to arguments about inefficiency, waste, and bad priority setting, even though they initially were positive or neutral about state and local government or politics. When exposed to such arguments, they are much more likely to become more negative in their feelings toward government and politics.

If Oregonians have difficulty talking about what government does well and how it contributes to their quality of life, they sure don't have a problem talking about government waste and inefficiency. For a long time all you heard about was the DMV computer system. It still comes up (people have a long memory for these things). For people in the Portland area, the Portland Water Bureau's billing system problems are still mentioned. Public employee severance packages, lottery mismanagement, and PERS also are on the current list of complaints.

But the real oldie and goodie is the state transportation system. The gripes continue to fall into three categories: no foresight in planning, too many workers standing around doing nothing, and too many projects being redone due to lack of inter-agency coordination in construction projects.

The latest symbol for upset with government and politics is government regulations. Proponents of Ballot Measure 7 which required payment to land owners if government regulations reduced property values tapped into this sentiment. It seems everyone in a focus group or survey can give an example of an unnecessary or “ridiculous” government regulation. Arguments pro and con related to equity, fairness, and the public good are often met with glazed-over eyes, and related discussions reveal low levels of awareness and knowledge of the regulatory process.

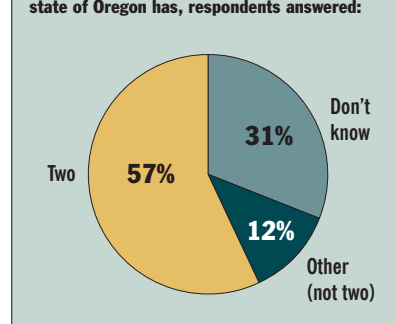
Many Oregonians also are angered by politicians and courts overturning their votes on such issues as Ballot Measure 7. The complaint comes up often in focus groups and is one of the many reasons Oregonians give for not bothering to learn about the issues and to vote, “Why bother, my vote isn't going to count anyway.”

Overriding all of this anger is the public's inclination to throw politics and all levels of government into the same pot. This means that headlines about a squabble between party leadership in the legislature can negatively influence public opinion about the performance of local school districts and city councils.

IT ISN'T JUST THE ECONOMY, STUPID

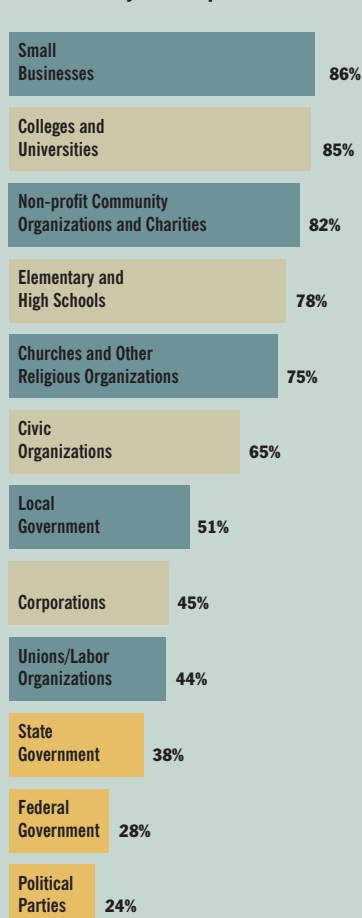
“Career and job opportunity” is the second highest rated core value and belief in Oregon next to family. Along with education, Oregonians tell us that a job is the key building block to everything else that is important to them. The discussion goes something like this, “Without a job, I can't provide for my family. We've got to have money on the table to be able to do anything else – to afford food, health care, and to do recreational things together outdoors.” Furthermore, Oregonians are very supportive of a strong, diversified economy in Oregon and want the state's economy driven by leading edge companies headquartered in the state that design and market products worldwide.

When asked how many U.S. Senators the state of Oregon has, respondents answered:



SOURCE: DAVIS & HIBBITS, INC., 2003

Percentage of Oregonians who feel the following institution or organization makes their community a better place to live:



However, even in tough economic times, what Oregonians tell us they value most about living in Oregon are the state's environmental quality, natural beauty, and proximity to outdoor recreation. They are less likely to tell us that they value a robust job market, the opportunity to make a lot of money, and low taxes.

Despite this, much of what you hear coming from state and local leaders is the pounding of the economic development drum, calling for cuts in business taxes and rollbacks in environmental and land use regulations.

Economic development messages alone are unlikely to resonate with a majority of Oregonians. Though they value having a job and a healthy economy, many are willing to do with less to live in a place with cleaner air and water and less urban sprawl. Many people in focus groups and surveys say they are not living in Oregon because of their job and to make more money, but because it is environmentally and socially a superior place to live and to raise a family. In nearly every focus group, a participant says they could be living somewhere else and making more money or a bigger name for him/herself, but choose instead to live in Oregon because of the environment and intangibles such as the slower pace of life and sense of community and neighborliness.

In a recent survey, a plurality of Oregonians (47%) said it would be desirable if environmental protection became more important than economic growth over the next 10 years, 33% said undesirable, 16% were neutral, and 4% did not know. In focus groups, "growth" and all the negatives it represents – more traffic congestion, more crowded classrooms, etc. – proves troublesome for many participants. This finding too suggests a lukewarm feeling about economic development. Maybe the message is: An economy and jobs yes, but not at the expense of other things that are important to us.

Furthermore many pro-economy residents are not strong in their convictions. Perhaps most telling is how susceptible they are to the argument that protecting the environment is important because it is less expensive to keep things clean now than to have to pay more later to clean things up.

As noted above, many community leaders and the general population are not on the same page when it comes to the economy vs. the environment. While leadership is more likely to support relaxing environmental protection regulations to make it easier for companies to do business in Oregon as a way for promoting economic growth, the general population feels the better strategy is to maintain a quality environment to attract people and companies to Oregon.

Oregonians also are more likely to feel the best way to improve Oregon's economy is to improve its education, health care, and social services systems. They are less likely to say that trade delegations to foreign countries, tax breaks for corporations, and regulatory roll-backs are the answer, much to the dismay of many business leaders.

But the environmentalists should not think they have a mandate for more economically restrictive laws and regulations. Focus groups and survey research suggests that statewide sentiment about environmental protection, as with economic development generally, can best be described as lukewarm. Survey research shows Oregonians are less supportive of strong environmental protection initiatives than 10 years ago. Part of this is people feeling that things are better environmentally and that it isn't as high a priority as it once was, but there is also concern about environmental extremism, things being out of balance, and concern about the impact of laws and regulations on jobs.

More and more Oregonians who are proud of what has been accomplished relative to the protection of forest and farm lands now question if things perhaps have tipped too far in one direction and become too restrictive. They are now more likely to support increased timber harvesting to assist with fire management and to help rural communities economically. But such support is conditional upon the harvesting being done in a way that protects water quality and animal habitat.

A STATE DIVIDED

We are a very divided state. There is no single issue that a majority of Oregonians identify as the most important one facing the state. In the Portland area, you would think it is school funding with the coverage the issue receives in the media. Statewide, the business community makes it sound like unemployment is the issue. Neither, though, enjoys support as the biggest problem by more than 25% of the population.

The divisions continue. Thirty-two percent (32%) of Oregonians feel their community will be a better place to live ten years from now, 35% say a worse place, and 29% say about the same as it is today. Five percent (5%) do not know.

Regarding education, forty-three percent (43%) of Oregonians believe major change is needed in their neighborhood school, 36% do not, and almost a quarter (21%) don't know.

What about the land use system? About equal numbers believe that it protects farm and forest land from urban sprawl, is an essential tool in protecting Oregon's quality of life, and should be kept as it is (38%) as feel that the system has resulted in too many unnecessary regulations and needs to be changed (42%). Only 8% feel the system should be eliminated and 11% do not know.

Whether about future quality of life, education reform, or the land use system, Oregonians are divided in their feelings. The same holds true for tax reform in the state and the funding level for public services. While 66% of Oregonians believe a change is needed in Oregon's tax system at this time, there is a split in opinion as to what that change should be: more tax revenues for public education vs. elimination of waste and inefficiencies in government and lower taxes.

As for funding of public services, about the same number of Oregonians feel the state spends too much on public services and that taxes should be reduced (28%) as feel the state doesn't spend enough on public services and that some taxes should be increased (22%). The plurality (44%) says we spend about the right amount on public services and taxes should remain the same.

Regarding a sales tax: while 46% agree that the state needs a sales tax dedicated to a specific purpose like education, health care, or public safety, 49% disagree (and these 49% are stronger in their convictions).

Perhaps not surprising then is that about the same number of Oregonians identify themselves as liberals as they do conservatives. Party registration is also the closest it has been in 45 years: Democrat 39%, Republican 37%, and Independent 24%. The percent of those not affiliated with either of the major parties is the highest it has ever been in Oregon. Independents were at only 2% in the 1950's. This trend suggests a message about people's satisfaction level with government and politics.

The division in how people feel about key issues facing the state is based on strongly felt values and beliefs. It is not difficult to understand why cultivating a strong majority in support for any initiative that can withstand the rigors of campaign politics is such a challenge in Oregon.

THE EVER SHRINKING LIST OF COMMUNICATIONS VEHICLES AND CREDIBLE MESSENGERS

To increase public awareness and knowledge and to help get leadership and the general population back on the same page require communication with the public.

Problem number one is that public affairs and government relations managers and advertising and public relations firms have fewer tools available to them. Fewer people are reading the newspaper these days and there are more radio and television stations making communications targeting more challenging and expensive than ever before. As for mailings, focus groups usually split about 50%/50% between those saying they read direct mail pieces and those saying they chuck them unopened and unread into the recycling bin.

Then there is the messenger issue. Never before in recent history has this been as big a problem as it is now. We already know how the public feels about government officials and politicians. The new phenomenon is that they don't feel that much better about corporations and even religious institutions. Attitudes toward environmental organizations have slipped too and the media is trusted by fewer and fewer people, even before the recent eye-brow raising incident involving the *New York Times* reporter. This leaves few sources of credible communications with the public. The most likely candidates are non-profit/charitable organizations and small businesses, each with their own set of limitations when it comes to being effective advocates.

CONCLUSION

These public opinion realities, combined with the issues described above, help to explain why we're so stuck in Oregon and unlikely to become unstuck unless we do things differently.

The evidence is irrefutable: lack of public awareness and knowledge regarding the importance of government and politics and the positive contributions they make to our quality of life, a deeply felt distrust and hostility towards government and politics, a divided state with many leaders having different values and beliefs than the general public, and communications challenges. It suggests a bold approach is needed to reconnect Oregonians to their government; that the same old messages delivered by the usual list of suspects won't cut it.

Because Oregonians overwhelmingly feel that things are not headed in the right direction and a majority feels that it would be undesirable if government provided fewer services over the next 10 years, there is reason to feel optimistic about the opportunity to effect change. It will take something different, something that could potentially BRAND Oregon and Oregonians as forward looking, realistic risk-takers, and innovative. Oregonians tell us that they are tired of business as usual. They want changes.

Specifics? I'm not the expert, but the same focus group and survey findings that reveal our problems also suggest that the public would be receptive to different approaches that are being proposed to begin changing government and politics in Oregon.

Research findings from across the state show that using more e-government would be well received by Oregonians and a signal to voters that they're being heard and that things are changing. The public would strongly support George Beard's efforts at the Mark O Hatfield School of Government to persuade public agencies to use more electronic government to reduce costs, expand access, and improve services.

There are other ideas as well. The "P" word – privatization – is something that many Oregonians feel makes sense. "Without the competition, there is just no hope for improved and less costly services." Even without private sector privatization, Oregon could explore ways to provide incentives to realize the benefits of competition within the public sector structure.

As for the political system, one idea appealing to Oregonians is an open primary system as proposed by former Secretary of State Phil Keisling. A recent statewide survey shows that by a 59-21% margin voters favor an approach where every voter, regardless of party affiliation, receives the same ballot in the May primary with the ability to vote for any candidate, including those belonging to other parties or running as Independents. If no candidate received a majority vote, the two top vote-getters would advance to the November general election even if both belonged to the same party – or neither was a Republican or Democrat. The support for the proposal was strong across every demographic group and registered Democrats and Republicans are as supportive as Independents. Focus group research shows that Oregonians would also be open to election law changes that would promote a "multi-party system" much akin to many other democracies.

The new Oregon Public Access Network represents an effective way for people to learn more about government and politics and to address the awareness and knowledge level issues noted above. Its support among Oregonians in a recent statewide survey is a clear indicator of how ready we are for new ways of doing business.

It is my feeling that, along with resolving the PERS mess, it would take these and similar initiatives to reconnect Oregonians statewide to their government and politics and enable the state to begin addressing the issues and problems described above. Only after all this might there be enough public trust to support higher taxes.

But the research suggests that any tax proposal would have to be different as well, offering a new, multi-dimensional vision for the state to capture majority support at the polls and be perceived as a measure to fund a better Oregon, rather than more government and politics as usual. It would likely have to be initiated by ordinary citizens and rely on a new communications strategy involving everything from meeting with Oregonians at their places of employment to their places of worship to their home computers. ☞

