Guest Opinion

Kulongoski, Saxton entering positioning part of the race

The Portland Business Journal - July 28, 2006

by Michael J. Riley

Special to the Business Journal

By this fall, when the pundits say voters will only be beginning to pay attention, the incumbent governor and Republican challenger will be locked in one of Oregon's closest and most dramatic contests in a generation. Yet polls seem to suggest most Oregonians have already made up their minds. A May 23 Rasmussen online poll had Ted Kulongoski at 43 percent, virtually tied with challenger Ron Saxton, who garnered 41 percent.

With Oregon's modest primary turnout at less than four of 10 registered voters, the party that motivates their base most effectively will win in November. In a mirror-image primary, Democrats and Republicans turned out virtually identical proportions of their members -- 44 percent and 45 percent respectively. Kulongoski's lead in the polls exists only because Democrats have slightly higher numbers registered, and if the Rasmussen poll is correct, the independents and others are impacting the major parties about equally.

If this holds, the key to the general election will be less about the potential spoilers, and more about the grassroots efforts. With little public fanfare, campaigns are currently working feverishly to get contributors on board, while working to solidify their base and expand their organizational strength.

For Kulongoski, a "status quo" campaign is a risky option. According to a May Oregonian/KATU poll by Davis Hibbitts & Midghall, almost one-fourth of Democrats are dissatisfied with the job Kulongoski is doing. During the primary, Kulongoski lost support from environmental and union groups. His challenge now will be to get their money and their votes. It may be impossible, however, for him to get their passion and activism.

For Saxton, the watchword is change. Traditionally a significant proportion of the electorate views the occasional change in leadership as a way to balance competing ideologies. Every once in a while, voters are willing to give the other guys a shot, despite the power of incumbency. Saxton has gotten a measure of traction with promises of a reduction in the state bureaucracy along with additional public employee retirement system reform.

Most businesses face occasional budget setbacks and many wonder why state government couldn't survive, if not benefit from, a similar fate. If Saxton has stumbled a bit in explaining his

plans so far, the fall campaign will indicate how well he has used this time to recraft his positions.

By now, both sides will have done their own polls and laid out their plans. Fund-raising is the No. 1 priority. Saxton's private-sector experience makes him a natural for many business interests, but his high poll numbers also make him a legitimate hedge bet for anyone who expects to work with next year's governor. The close race may draw national support as well. Saxton's challenge is at the grassroots level, where he has to craft a message that appeals to the faith-based block, nervous party moderates and the independents.

Potential wild cards include the initiatives and ballot measures, both in terms of the voters and contributors they attract. Casino interests have been "all-in" since before the primary. Depending on where voters live, they could also face more than a half-dozen new tax measures, including law enforcement, fire departments, schools, libraries, greenspaces and municipalities. Many of these constituencies are committed voters.

During the dog days of summer, the messages will be tested in focus groups, debates, in stump speeches and maybe with a trial balloon press release or two. But given the closeness and drama of the campaign, along with a host of third-party spoilers, and special interest measures, the political observers and media vendors have high expectations for this fall.

While things may appear quiet on the surface, observers will be watching campaign finance reports, debates, and the peripheral campaigns. Rest assured, however, despite the lack of headlines, the contenders are working feverishly below the radar.

Our next article will appear in August, when we will comment on new campaign activities and when and we'll know which measures have qualified for the ballot.

Michael J. Riley is the research director of Riley Research Associates, a 17-year-old opinion polling and market research firm based in the Portland area.