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Election 2016: Voter Turnout and Results Across Oregon

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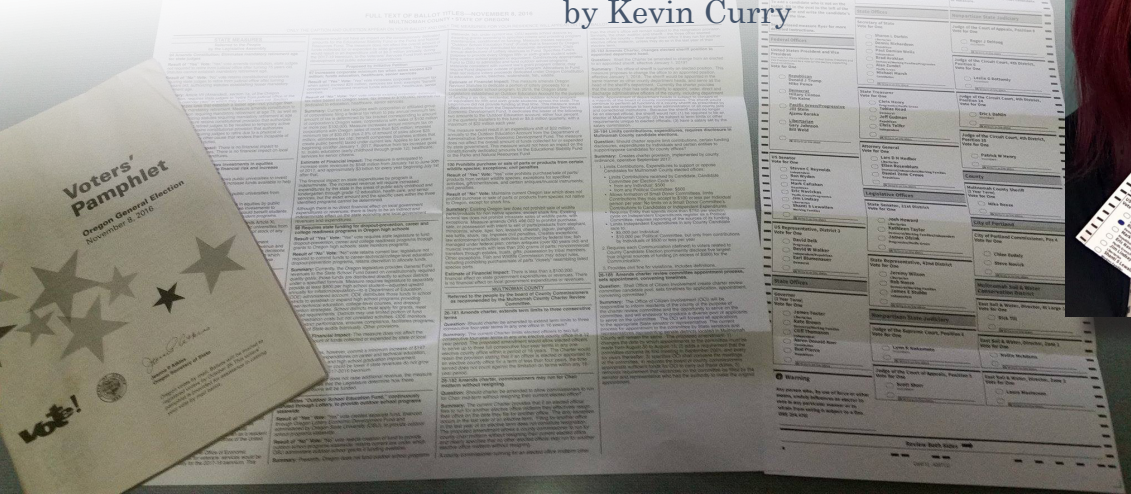
Election 2016:

Voter turnout and results across the region

by Kevin Curry



Sierra Stringfield Perryman poses with her ballot before mailing it in.



Multnomah County voter's pamphlet and ballot. November 8, 2016

Metroscape went inside the numbers from the 2016 general election. We examined Oregon's new "motor voter" law to see if it affected turnout and to better understand the new voters added to the rolls in the 'Beaver State.' We looked at voter turnout and election results in Clackamas, Columbia, Multnomah, Washington, and Yamhill counties in Oregon and Clark and Skamania counties in Washington to answer several questions about the 2016 General Election.

Overall Turnout

If you look at the percentage of eligible voters who turned out on November 8, you might think it was a down election year in Oregon. After all, only 78.7 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot. Of the 15 general elections over the past 30 years, Oregon has cracked 80% turnout five times, and the 2016 turnout only ranks 8th on the list. You would miss a

bigger story, however, by focusing on turnout percentage versus raw vote total.

Largely due to Oregon's new "motor voter" law^[1], Oregon clocked its largest voter turnout in history at 1,979,048 votes cast. This exceeded the previous record turnout from the 2004 General Election by more than 127,000 votes cast. Certainly, some of the increase can be attributed to population growth in general, but with nearly 100,000 of this fall's ballots coming from motor voter registrants, this new law cannot be ignored (Figure 1).

Oregon's New Motor Voter Law

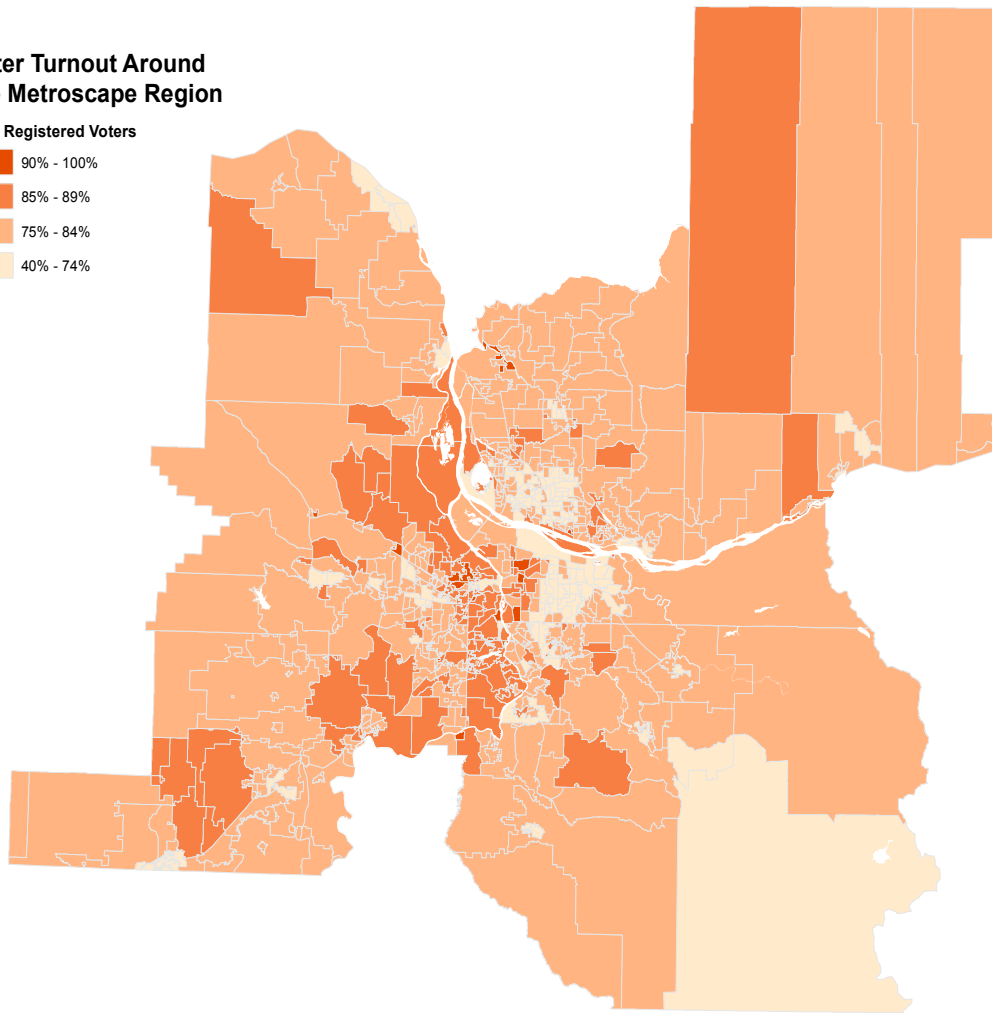
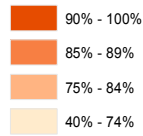
Starting January 1, 2016, Oregon began automatically registering eligible citizens to vote when they go to the DMV to apply for, renew, or replace a driver's license, permit or ID card. With this new law, Oregon continues to be a leader in

[1] HB 2177, passed in 2015 took effect January 1, 2016

Figure 1

Voter Turnout Around the MetroScape Region

% of Registered Voters



Election data courtesy of Clackamas, Clark, Columbia, Multnomah, Skamania, Washington, and Yamhill counties.

the field of elections, becoming the first state in the nation to implement this system.

After being automatically registered at the DMV, new voters receive a postcard from the Oregon State Election Office giving them three options. If they do nothing, new voters are registered as non-affiliated voters. If they want to join a party, they can return a postcard indicating which party they want to affiliate with. Finally, if they wish to opt-out of registration, they can return a card to do that as well.

According to statewide data from the Oregon Secretary of State's office, by

the end of October, 269,630 new voters had been forwarded to county election offices. Of these, more than 244,000 maintained their registration and 25,112 opted out. The New York Times reported on December 2 that nearly 100,000 of these new registrants voted in the 2016 General Election.

As one might expect, the vast majority of new registrants (237,200) decided to do nothing after receiving notice from the Elections Division and remain non-affiliated voters. Of the 28,709 citizens who chose to affiliate with a party, the breakdown is:

- 50.4% Democratic Party

- 37.6% Republican Party
- 8.4% Independent Party
- 3.5% Other

to vote. This number will be interesting to track over time as Oregon continues to automatically register people to vote.

Why are people opting out? Christopher Shortell, associate professor of political science at Portland State University, suggests it could be several factors including a statement against the law itself, a fear of the government tracking citizens, or religious reasons.

“Or some combination of those factors or others,” Shortell said. “It is definitely something to watch.”

Metroscape also asked both Governor Kate Brown’s office and the Secretary of State’s office if they had any thoughts on why so many citizens opted out of being registered to vote. Neither office wanted to speculate.

“Governor Brown is not judgmental about why someone would opt out,” said her communication director, Kristen Grainger. “She believes Oregon has the best policy, which errs on the side of participation, and assumes eligible voters should be registered unless they indicate otherwise, and respect their right to opt out.”

Figure 2: Oregon counties voting results

	PRESIDENT	GOVERNOR	SECRETARY OF STATE
CLACKAMAS	Clinton (47/41)	Pierce (48/46)	Richardson (52/39)
COLUMBIA	Trump (49/38)	Pierce (49/42)	Richardson (52/36)
MULTNOMAH	Clinton 73/17)	Brown (72/21)	Avakian (62/27)
WASHINGTON	Clinton (56/30))	Brown (54/39)	Avakian (47/44)
YAMHILL	Trump (47/39)	Pierce (54/39)	Richardson (56/34)

Source: Oregon Secretary of State

Thus, one of the main effects of the new motor voter law is to increase the percentage of Oregonians who are not registered with a political party. In December 2015, party breakdown looked like this:

- 38% Democratic Party
- 29.6% Republican Party
- 24.3% “Non-affiliated” with any party
- 5.1% Independent Party

With more than 237,000 added to the non-affiliated ranks, Oregon’s party breakdown now looks like this:

- 38.3% Democratic Party
- 28% Republican Party
- 26.6% “Non-affiliated” with any party
- 4.6% Independent Party

One of the most interesting numbers from year one of motor voter is how many people opted out of being registered to vote. As noted above, 25,112 (8.3%) of automatic registrants chose to return the postcard and not be registered

Figure 3: Washington counties voting results

	PRESIDENT	GOVERNOR
CLARK	Clinton (46.37/46.18)	Bryant (52/48)
SKAMANIA	Trump (52/39)	Bryant (56/44)

Source: Washington Secretary of State

The Office of Secretary of State gave a similar answer but did suggest that testimony from the legislative process might provide additional insight into those who opt out.

“We don’t question people’s motives, we merely respect their right to opt out of the process,” said Molly Woon, communications director for Secretary of State Jeanne Atkins, who oversaw the implementation of the law and first year of the program. “I imagine that there is testimony from when the bill was heard in 2014 and 2015 from people not wanting to be on a voter list, those with religious exemptions, or people concerned with personal autonomy, etc. But we don’t require a reason, nor do we keep track of reasons, for opting out of the process. We simply respect people’s wishes.”

Drama in the Presidential Election, Not As Much Down the Ballot

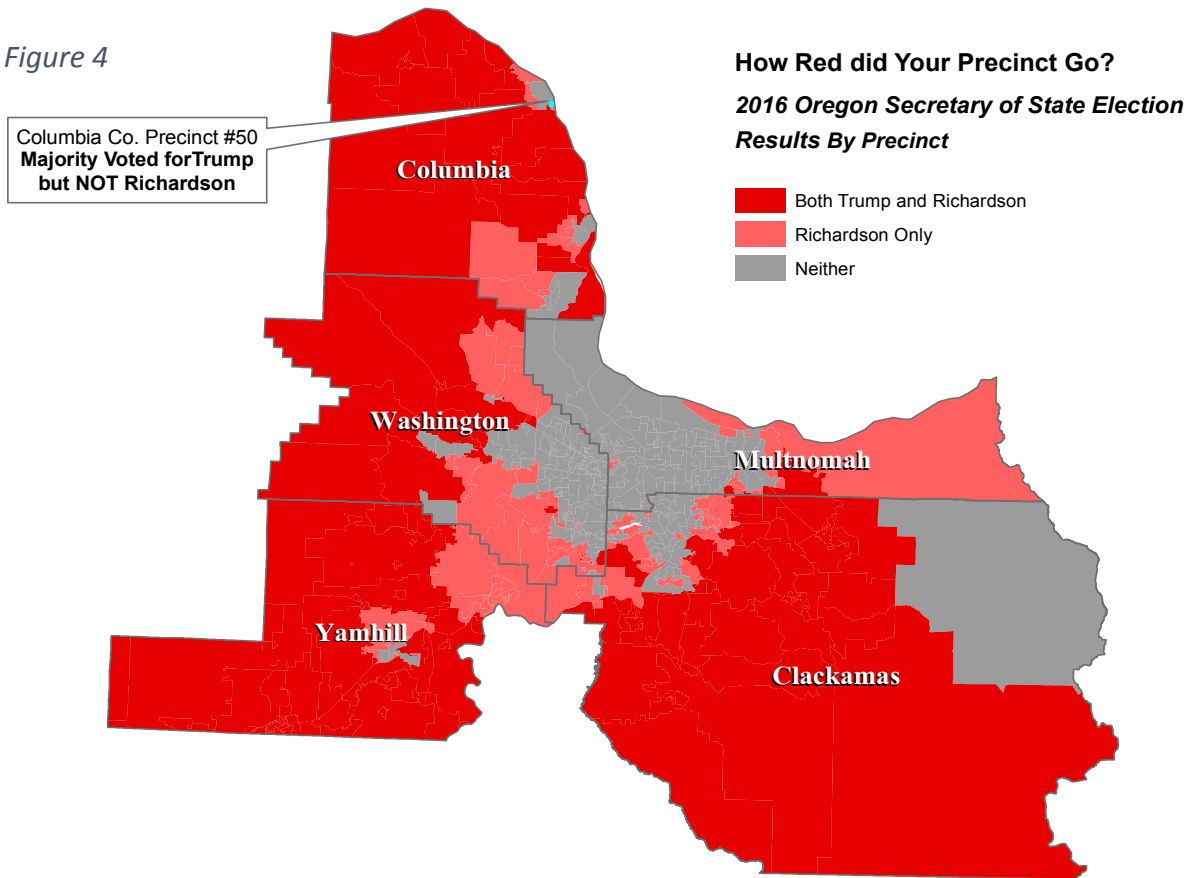
While the national presidential election provided a measure of excitement and

surprise, down the ballot in Oregon and Washington things remained status quo for the most part. In Congress, like the rest of the country, voters in Oregon and Washington returned all of their congressional representatives as well as US Senators, up for reelection or replaced them in open seats with members of the same party. Nationally, of the 466 races for seats in the US Senate and House, 445 of them were retained by the same party.

The exception to the status quo was Oregon’s secretary of state race, where Republican Dennis Richardson broke the Democratic Party’s 10 year hold on statewide offices by winning the race.

Despite the relative sameness of these results, there are interesting numbers to

Figure 4



Election data courtesy of Clackamas, Columbia, Multnomah, Washington, and Yamhill counties.

look at within the counties Metroscape examines. Figure 2 breaks down results for president, governor and secretary of state for major party candidates in Oregon.



Two-year old Raymond casting a ballot for Hillary Clinton at the St John's library.

Four out of five of the counties examined voted for the same party across the three races. The exception is Clackamas County, which went Republican for governor and secretary of state but voted Democratic in the race for president.

Looking more closely at the percentages for candidates in each race, Trump underperformed his fellow Republican candidates in four of the five counties examined. The exception is Columbia County where he received the same percentage of votes as Pierce did for governor. In fact, in the raw votes Trump did better, receiving 13,217 votes to Pierce's 12,925. Everywhere else, the Republican candidates for governor and secretary of state did better than Trump. This indicates that a number of voters either voted for a non-Republican candidate for president or did not vote in that race (Figure 4).

This is most apparent in is Clackamas county where Richardson won but Trump lost. Richardson won his race

with about 17,500 more votes than the total Trump received for president. Multnomah County also provides a good example, where Richardson received about 35,000 more votes than Trump.

In Oregon, Richardson's win in the race for secretary of state was perhaps the most surprising. His success was even reflected in Multnomah and Washington counties which he lost. In both counties, Richardson lost by a smaller amount compared to the other two races analyzed. In the same manner, his win in the counties that voted straight Republican was also wider. What cannot be discerned merely from looking at the numbers is how much of this difference, and that described above relating to the Trump vote, is due to pro-Richardson sentiment versus anti-Avakian votes. As Figure 2 indicates, Avakian underperformed his fellow Democratic candidates in all five counties.

In Washington, weakness at the top of the Republican ticket was also demonstrated via results in Clark and Skamania counties. As Figure 3 indicates, Republican gubernatorial candidate Bill

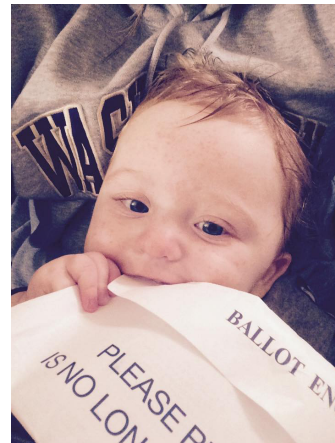


Portland resident Rachael Martin casting her vote.

Bryant won both counties. In the race for president, however, Hillary Clinton won Clark County by a razor-thin margin.

Looking Ahead

It will be interesting to keep an eye on Oregon's motor voter law to see if it continues to sign up as many new voters and what those voters choose to do in terms of party affiliation. One big question that needs further analysis is what to make of the more than 25,000 Oregonians who opted out of being registered to vote. Why do these citizens make the effort to unregister to vote? Finally, Oregon Governor Kate Brown is up for reelection in 2018, since this year's contest was just to fill out the remainder of John Kitzhaber's term. Have Republicans identified a campaign model based on Dennis Richardson's success that might make them competitive in the 2018 gubernatorial contest?



Jessica Sammin Liedtke's son helped his mom prepare her ballot.

Kevin Curry is completing a doctorate in public affairs and policy at Portland State University's Hatfield School of Government. He is the director of integrated media at Linfield College, where he also teaches communication courses.



The Jordan family poses with their completed ballots.