

# Republicans reflect on cost of 'litmus test' for abortion

*After so often failing in state elections, Oregon party leaders ponder the downside of the single-issue focus*

By BRAD CAIN  
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SEASIDE — It was one of the funnier bits in the Tent Show, the political parody performed by Oregon Republicans at their annual Dorchester Conference.

On stage was state GOP Chairman Kevin Mannix, who narrowly lost last November's governor's race to Democrat Ted Kulongoski, asking what it would take for him to win a statewide office.

Several women on stage went about giving Mannix a makeover, and when the process was completed and a giant sheet was pulled away, there sat former Gov. Vic Atiyeh, smiling and waving to the crowd.

The Saturday night skit got big laughs but it also underscored a nagging feeling among many Republicans that while the GOP is in sync with voters on issues such as taxes, it can't translate that into election victories.

Except for U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith's re-election in November, Republicans have lost every statewide office; they've lost five consecutive elections for governor, and they lost control of the state Senate.

Atiyeh — the last Republican governor, who left office in 1987 — addressed the issue in a weekend speech in which he said Republican candidates too often find themselves held to a single-issue "litmus test" — abortion.

He cited last year's GOP gubernatorial primary in which social conservatives threatened to get behind a spoiler candidate to defeat Ron Saxton in the November election because he wouldn't support a ban on "partial birth" abortion. Saxton ultimately lost the GOP primary to Mannix.

Atiyeh said it's "insanity" to force GOP candidates to adopt a strong anti-abortion stance in primary elections that only makes it difficult for them to win general elections.

"I'm really getting tired of that litmus test," Atiyeh said, adding that social conservatives "should not spend their energy defeating Republicans and electing Democrats."

Atiyeh, known as moderate to conservative, noted that when he was governor, the other statewide offices also were held by moderates — Norma Paulus was secretary of state; Dave Frohnmayer was attorney general and Clay Myers was state treasurer.

"Could any of us get through a Republican primary today? No," Atiyeh said.

Others who traveled to this coastal resort town for the weekend conference also said the party needs to broaden its appeal and emphasize pocketbook issues.

State Rep. Dan Doyle strongly opposes abortion and thinks it's an important moral issue, yet he said Oregonians in general are becoming more conservative on tax and spending issues.

"For Republicans to have a chance to win statewide, they must be focused on the economy, because that's where the voters are at," the Salem Republican said. "A

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REP. DAN DOYLE,  
R-SALEM

candidate who has a strong message on that will prevail."

Mannix waged a surprisingly strong campaign against Kulongoski in which he made a major issue of Kulongoski's support for the income tax increase that ultimately was rejected by voters Jan. 28.

Mike Beard, who served as Mannix's campaign spokesman, thinks Mannix narrowly lost the governor's race largely because Democrats were able to paint Mannix as a single-issue candidate on abortion.

"It made him unelectable in the Portland area. It kept him out of the governor's office," Beard said.

Mannix, for his part, makes no apology for his strong stance against abortion. But he said as state GOP chairman, his main focus will be on helping President Bush win Oregon in 2004 and, beyond that, finding good candidates for congressional and statewide offices next year.

"The Republican Party is not and should not be a one-issue party," Mannix said. "I want the party to return to its tradition of reaching out to a variety of Oregonians. There's no such thing as a perfect Republican."