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Kevin Curry 92
Linfield University

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Revisit the Moment

By Kevin Curry '92

Americans are paying attention to vote-by-mail more than ever before, thanks to the run-up to and fallout from the 2020 presidential election. The pandemic made voting in person problematic, and states are now arguing over whether to continue vote-by-mail in future elections.

Oregonians, meanwhile, wonder what all of the fuss is about. Earlier this year, Oregon marked the 25th anniversary of making vote-by-mail history. In 1995-96, the state conducted the first federal election in U.S. history done entirely through mailed ballots.

That's the story told in the first season of "Revisit the Moment," a new podcast I am producing from Linfield University's new podcast studio. The four-part series tells the story of the election to fill the seat vacated by the resignation of Sen. Bob Packwood. It pitted Ron Wyden, a longtime member of Congress from Portland, against Gordon Smith, leader of the Oregon Senate. Urban versus rural. Liberal versus conservative.

The race took place over Thanksgiving, the December holidays and January winter storms. It required the campaigns to figure out how to run a race conducted entirely with vote-by-mail – something they were unfamiliar with. It drew national attention as the only Senate campaign going on at the time. More than that, the election revealed the first hints of changes that still reverberate through Oregon politics today.

The series features five people from the frontlines of the event. Secretary of State Phil Keisling led the charge for universal vote-by-mail backed by the state's election clerks. Veteran reporter Jeff Mapes, writing for *The Oregonian* back then and now with Oregon Public Broadcasting, covered vote-by-mail in the legislature and on the campaign trail.



Kevin Curry '92, assistant professor of journalism and media studies, records an episode of "Revisit the Moment" in Linfield's podcast studio, the former home of KSLC.

Brian Clem, then a fresh-faced recent college graduate and now a state representative from Salem, was the deputy campaign manager for Wyden. And two of Smith's top campaign team members, chief of staff Dan Lavey and finance director Lori Hardwick, experienced it all firsthand.

The recollections of these five, along with a trove of historical research, tell a story that remains widely unknown – even in Oregon.

Editor's note: The following excerpt is from episode 1 of "Revisit the Moment."

KEVIN CURRY: A scandal was growing across the United States ... one that gave vote-by-mail supporters another opportunity to make their case.

U.S. Senator Bob Packwood was under increasing pressure to resign.

On September 7th, the Senate Ethics Committee, chaired by Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell, voted unanimously to recommend that Packwood be expelled from the United States Senate.

PHIL KEISLING: Fast forward two months, I'm with my family in a cabin over in the Willowa mountains. We'd just come back from a hike. I get a knock on the door by the person that's the proprietor of these cabins. He says, 'Phil, there's someone on the phone who claims to be Senator Mark Hatfield who'd like to talk to you'... and I said it's probably him, put the call through. My family is gathered around, and he says 'Phil, this is Senator Hatfield, I'm sitting here with Senator Bob Dole, the majority leader, in his office, and wanted to let you know there is going to be a vacancy in the United States Senate. Imminently.'

CURRY: Although he didn't know when it was coming, Jeff Mapes found himself in the gallery of the United States Senate that day Packwood resigned.

JEFF MAPES: I was, actually, happened to be in D.C. when Bob Packwood resigned, I was in the gallery above the Senate floor watching him resign.

CURRY: In addition to choosing to conduct the election by mail, Keisling also had to decide how the candidate nomination process would take place, a choice that had an impact on Dan Lavey, Gordon Smith's chief of staff and future campaign manager.

DAN LAVEY: The state law allows the Secretary of State to choose how the nomination process occurs in a special election and the form the election will take. So, there was a period where Secretary of State Phil Kiesling had to make two decisions. One, would he allow a primary to occur or party conventions to nominate the candidates? And then had he the discretion to conduct the election by mail?

CURRY: Packwood's announcement started an immediate political frenzy. For the first time since 1968, Oregon would have an open U.S. Senate seat. Elected officials at all levels of Oregon government considered what this unique opportunity would mean for their political careers.

Lori Hardwick worked in the office of Senate President Gordon Smith at the Capitol and saw it firsthand.

LORI HARDWICK: As I recall, it was maybe right away that very day. He knew he wanted to run for higher office at that point already. So, when Packwood resigned, there was a discussion of 'Should I run, should I not run?' What would be downsides and upsides. I remember he called his wife, talked to people across the state and he said, 'I guess today's the day; we've got to go.'

CURRY: Brian Clem and the Wyden team immediately started thinking about the ramifications of Keisling's choice.

BRIAN CLEM: The special election allowed an opportunity for this good government Secretary of State, Boy Scout, Phil Kiesling, to say we're doing this vote-by-mail because it was his discretion. And so, we're adjusting to building an infrastructure and trying to plan differently than anybody knew how to run campaigns.



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