

## G.O.P. Voters Back QAnon Conspiracy Promoter for U.S. Senate

Jo Rae Perkins won her primary campaign in Oregon as the QAnon conspiracy theory has continued to gain momentum in Republican circles.



By Mike Baker

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SEATTLE — Republicans in Oregon have selected a Senate candidate who promotes the [QAnon conspiracy theory](#), the latest sign that conservatives are increasingly willing to embrace a movement built on a baseless series of plotlines about President Trump battling a shadowy globalist cabal.

Jo Rae Perkins was carrying about 50 percent of the vote in [Oregon's primary as of Wednesday afternoon](#), vanquishing three other Republican candidates to become the party's nominee for the seat currently held by Senator Jeff Merkley, a Democrat. While the incumbent is considered a strong favorite, and Ms. Perkins's embrace of fringe ideas could alienate mainstream voters, she has the backing of party leaders for a seat Republicans held as recently as 2009.

Ms. Perkins said in an interview that the vote in Tuesday's election was "monumental" as she saw QAnon supporters around the state and the country back her campaign.

"We are seeing more and more people getting emboldened as we see more and more information get out there," she said. "And as people put together more and more pieces of the puzzle, they can see, yeah, this is real."

[The conspiracy theory](#) began in 2017 when someone claiming to have top-secret information began posting under a pseudonym to the online message board 4chan. Those continuing posts from the person identified as "Q" have woven a fantastical plot about the planet's elites: a global cabal of politicians and celebrities controlling governments, media, banks and a child sex-trafficking ring.

The posts portray Mr. Trump as a heroic mastermind working with patriotic members of government to dismantle the cabal and "deep state" actors, leading up to mass arrests of the likes of former President Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and others. Adherents pore over each new Q message, hunting for clues and patterns, pointing out coincidences involving the number 17 because Q is the 17th letter of the alphabet and embracing theories such as the idea that John F. Kennedy Jr. faked his own death and is alive now posting as Q.

While some of Q's most fundamental claims — for example, that [the investigation by Robert S. Mueller III](#), the special counsel, into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election would actually end with prominent Democrats being imprisoned at Guantánamo Bay — have never come to fruition, the movement has continued to seep into mainstream conservative circles. Mr. Trump has stoked the flames with references to "deep state" and retweets of Qanon adherents. [Q signs have appeared at rallies for Mr. Trump](#), and believers have been arrested in a series of troubling episodes, including an armed standoff near the Hoover Dam.

Those actions have raised growing fears that delusional theories about a covert battle for global control could lead to more violence. Last May, the F.B.I. included QAnon in an intelligence bulletin that warned of potential violence stemming from "fringe political conspiracy theories." But pushback against the conspiracy theory has been met with yet further theories of a growing plot.

"I believe that that was some of the deep state actors in the F.B.I. trying to put out disinformation," said Ms. Perkins, an insurance agent who had previously lost primary campaigns for seats in Congress in 2018, 2016 and 2014. She has promoted other issues in her campaign, including expanding the wall at the border with Mexico and restricting the size of the federal government.

A series of candidates for public office have promoted or dabbled in the conspiracy theory, but Ms. Perkins's victory has offered the most compelling evidence that Republican voters were willing to embrace proponents of the conspiracy theory. A spokesman for the Oregon Republican Party did not immediately return a call seeking comment, but the party's vice chairwoman, Tracy Honl, said in a brief interview that she supported Ms. Perkins's candidacy.

Oregon has largely backed Democratic statewide candidates in recent history, with its last Republican governor serving in the 1980s. In Tuesday's election, [voters in the Portland area approved a new tax](#) to fund homeless services.

Jim Pasero, a political consultant and publisher in Portland who once ran speechwriting operations for the Republican National Committee, said that Democrats had so come to dominate politics in Oregon that mainstream Republicans hesitate to run for office.

"People are afraid to put money into Republican contests," he said. "So the fringe candidates get to have a voice."

But the state also has deep Republican pockets, largely in rural areas, and a Republican secretary of state. [Alek Skarlatos](#), known for helping foil a terrorist attack on a train in Europe in 2015, was running as a Republican in the state's 4th Congressional District and won on Wednesday with 87 percent of the vote.

Some of the state's far-right elements have at times [surfaced for demonstrations in Portland](#) or more recently to protest the state's stay-at-home orders. That protest included people [carrying signs promoting Q](#).

Joseph Lowndes, a political scientist at the University of Oregon who researches right-wing political trends, said the Republican Party in the state had shifted rightward since the 1990s but in the past few years had turned increasingly toward the fringe.

Mr. Lowndes attended one of the recent reopening rallies and said he was surprised how many QAnon advocates were there. He said that even if there were Republicans who were not fully on board with the movement, the theory was not taboo in the way the John Birch Society once was.

"It's clearly growing," he said.

Q posts have also helped shape growing wariness of government interventions to halt the spread of the coronavirus. Q has portrayed the virus response as a larger plot to undermine the president and his re-election.

Ms. Perkins expressed wariness about the medical leaders advising the president and said she would not get any vaccine that would be developed in response to the coronavirus.

"I don't know what they are pumping me full of," Ms. Perkins said. "I don't want that crap."

Ms. Perkins said she saw Mr. Trump as being involved in the Q effort, saying that she believed he was posting online under the pseudonym Q+. While she insisted that Q was real and that it was "a mathematical impossibility" for Q not to be real, she later left open the possibility that Q was not.

"It's always a possibility that Q is fake," Ms. Perkins said. "But I do not believe at this point in time, based on everything that I know, that Q is fake."