

How Much More ‘Progress’ Can Portland Endure?

The Oregon city, already foul and dysfunctional, now has a major socialist bloc on its City Council.

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Portland, Ore.

People wait in line to receive free food in Portland, Ore., Nov. 4, 2025. WU

New York isn't the only place where socialism is on the rise. In November, Oregon's largest city formed a new City Council and elected four members of the Democratic Socialists of America. They dominate the 12-person council, with the help of two other members, and they are driving the city in a dangerous direction—at the worst time. Oregon is struggling with self-inflicted ills, from rampant vagrancy to an exodus of high earners.

Even before the new council was formed, a September [poll](#) found that two-thirds of Oregonians believe their economy is “pretty seriously off on the wrong track.” Many say progressive policies are hurting growth, and that crime and homelessness are driving away businesses. The new council members' policies will make matters worse.

I saw this firsthand during a weeklong visit in November. The city is reeling from a series of growth-killers: high taxes, union contracts, an unaccountable government, surging vagrancy and drug addiction. Walk through downtown and you'll see a raft of vacant storefronts and empty office buildings riddled with graffiti. Local officials estimate the metropolitan area is losing \$1 billion in annual income as high earners flee.

In Portland, I drove past an open-air drug market where fentanyl pills are so common that their cost is three for \$1. I spotted hundreds of tents and tarps—on sidewalks, at building entrances, in parks, at highway underpasses. Many of these makeshift shelters likely came from the county government, which has issued thousands since the pandemic and only last year started to limit its tent distributions. The city also allows organizations to hand out clean needles, syringes and crack pipes. A city cleaning crew stages occasional sweeps to collect and throw away the detritus. But more tents and tarps soon pop up.

Many locals described the state as a victim of its own self-inflicted policy errors. They came from many backgrounds—business owners, a former candidate for governor, a former congressman, a Democrat operative, a Republican adviser, the CEO of the Oregon Historical Society and an expert on

homelessness. Most said Oregonians need to stand up and push back against the Democratic supermajority that runs the state.

Dan Lavey, a Republican strategist, told me that he used to be viewed as a RINO (Republican in name only), but these days, “I sound like Rush Limbaugh. I feel like a reactionary conservative in a way that I never was. And I think there’s a lot of liberals in Portland who are this way now.”

Kristin Olson, a longtime Democrat, lawyer and host of the podcast “Rational in Portland,” worked downtown for two decades until she was assaulted last year while walking from her car to her office building. She never returned and moved to new space elsewhere.

During the Black Lives Matter riots that ravaged the city in 2020, protesters damaged Multnomah County’s Democratic Party headquarters. Ms. Olson says Portlanders are “left of the Democrat Party, which, as a Democrat, just blows my mind, because to me the Democratic Party is insane. It is progressive insanity, and we’re left of that.”

Oregon hasn’t elected a Republican governor in more than 40 years. The state is so overwhelmingly Democratic that it lacks diversity of ideas, says Kevin Looper, a veteran Democratic operative who helped build the party’s dominance in the state.

“I started to realize, shoot, the problem here is, without any kind of loyal or disloyal opposition, there is no accountability to anyone, to the voters,” he says. “The voters are stuck with no choice here. And I had a helping hand in creating that situation.”

When someone dares to take a public stand against progressive policies, the Portland left retaliates—hard. Democrat Kevin Looper and Republican Dan Lavey started a bipartisan group in 2021, People for Portland, aimed at paring back some of the lax homelessness policies that have roiled the local economy. “We did a round of TV interviews to talk about it from the left and from the right,” Mr. Looper says. “You’d think it would be pretty compelling.”

The same week, he says, someone shot out the windows of his car as it was parked in front of his home. In 2024 the organization shut down.

Mr. Looper is working with a bipartisan business group to collect the thousands of signatures needed to get 11 reform measures on the state election ballot for 2026. Meanwhile, Mr. Lavey is pushing a city ballot measure that would divert millions of dollars from a climate-change fund to expand the city police force from around 800 officers to 1,200. The City Council’s response to these proposals has been at best lukewarm.