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Bradbury chides, Kitzhaber jokes in latest Democratic gubernatorial debate

By Harry Esteve, The Oregonian

April 30, 2010, 4:41PM

Bill Bradbury, trailing badly in the polls, did what he could today to rattle a confident, relaxed John Kitzhaber as the two Democratic candidates for governor met for yet another head-to-head debate in Portland.

During cross-questioning, Bradbury chided the former governor for failing to vote in a critical health care election and questioned his ability to lead a state he once criticized as "ungovernable."

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Kitzhaber's response? An apology for not voting and a series of softball and humorous questions to Bradbury, whom he considers a friend and political protege.

Kitzhaber, grinning, asked Bradbury if he remembered a story he once told while the two were river-rafting together about Bradbury's days as a restaurant owner in Bandon. Bradbury, according to Kitzhaber, had described finding tiny footprints and a tail mark in the diner's deep-fat fryer one morning.

"I can't remember, did you just turn that sucker on and cook some more chicken?" Kitzhaber asked to noisy laughter.

It's easy for Kitzhaber to joke. Recent polls show he has about a 30-point advantage over Bradbury as ballots hit voters' mailboxes in the May 18 primary.

Bradbury did his level best to put some heat on the frontrunner during the City Club of Portland debate. He questioned why Kitzhaber, a longtime proponent of health care reform, didn't vote in the 2007 election, which included a ballot measure that would have taxed tobacco to pay for children's health insurance.

"Can you explain to me why you failed to even bother to turn in a ballot?" Bradbury said.

Kitzhaber said he brought his ballot to a drop box but forgot the crucial step of signing the envelope, so it didn't count. He acknowledged he doesn't have a perfect voting record. "I offer no excuses," he said. "Voting is important."

Then he turned to Bradbury and asked him about the moment he decided to go into public service.

Bradbury tried again, raising the "ungovernable" comment. "Given the fact you walked away from governing the state when it was ungovernable, why should voters give you a third chance?"

"Actually, I didn't walk away," Kitzhaber replied dryly. "I was term-limited." Then he asked Bradbury to name his greatest achievements.

After the debate, which did little to show much daylight between the two candidates' political views, Bradbury said he asked tougher questions because voters expect them. Kitzhaber, he said, clearly thinks those are unnecessary.

"It's a sign he's feeling a little like he's ahead and he doesn't want to dirty it up, so to speak," Bradbury said.

Bradbury's campaign manager, Jeremy Wright, took a harder line. "His questions show he's not taking Democratic



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Former Gov. John Kitzhaber



Thomas Boyd

Former Secretary of State Bill Bradbury

voters seriously," Wright said. "Frankly that's kind of insulting to voters and not very respectful of Bill."

-- **Harry Esteve**

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