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Summary

At Cascade Policy Institute's 35th Anniversary Dinner, keynote speaker Kimberley Strassel contrasted Washington's dysfunction with a wave of state-level reform, from school choice to tax and licensing reform. Oregon lags behind, she argued, but recent voter pushback signals change is possible—and renewal depends on citizens getting involved in civic life.

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A Policy Renaissance Begins at Home: Kimberley Strassel’s Message for Oregon

How Oregon can turn crisis into renewal—and why the next chapter starts with its citizens.

By Naomi Inman

Cascade Policy Institute's 35th Anniversary Dinner offered many memorable moments, with Kimberley Strassel's keynote as the highlight of the evening. Speaking to a packed room of Oregonians yearning for better governance, Strassel delivered a sweeping, humorous, and ultimately hopeful assessment of American politics today. While Washington, D.C. may be mired in dysfunction, she emphasized that many states are leading a renaissance of policy innovation—and Oregon has an opportunity to join them.

Strassel opened with personal reflections rooted in her Oregon upbringing. Recalling childhood trips to Seaside's "very old aquarium" and the Ashland Shakespeare Festival, her affection for the state and her wry humor immediately warmed the audience. "At my amazing old age," she laughed, "this is the first time I have ever, ever been invited to speak in Oregon. This is also the first time that most of my family has ever seen me speak." She added, "To read the press, you wouldn't think that there were this many free market, liberty loving people in all of Oregon—and here you all are."

From nostalgia, she pivoted to a candid diagnosis of federal politics. After three decades covering national affairs, Strassel argued that Congress has abandoned its core responsibilities, describing Washington, D.C. as "a certifiable clown car... every time you think it can't get more absurd, something crazy jumps out at you." Budgets go undone, appropriations stall, and major national challenges remain unaddressed. Instead, she said, "Washington has devolved into politics all the time," a perpetual cycle of investigations and partisan trench warfare. The result is institutional decay, executive overreach, judicial politicization, and—she emphasized—"It took this country 230 years to reach its first 20 trillion in debt. It took this recent Congress nine years to double it."

"We're not doing policy, we're doing politics," she lamented, before breaking the tension with a smile: "So, are you all demoralized yet?"

Then she lifted her tone. "We are seeing something amazing going on in the country right now. It's the kernel of rejuvenation that we need. But it is not happening in D.C.—it's happening in the states."



She highlighted a “school choice revolution” surging in 33 states, with dozens of programs expanding and 19 states adopting universal eligibility. During COVID, she noted, “parents suddenly saw the extraordinarily deplorable state of education in this country and it absolutely energized them... demanding that politicians give them choice in education.”

She pointed to additional reforms gaining traction: tax reform, property tax revolts, occupational licensing reform, litigation reform, and pluralism in higher education. Millions of Americans, she noted, are leaving high-tax coastal states for places offering lower taxes, safer communities, stronger schools, and more freedom.

“This brings me to the elephant in the room,” she said. “Why all this talk about revolution when we aren’t seeing it in Oregon?” She acknowledged Oregon’s challenges—high taxes, struggling schools, homelessness, and a hollowed-out downtown Portland—but insisted that political change begins locally. Recent signs of voter pushback, including the 83–17 rejection of new transportation taxes, suggest Oregonians may be ready for a new direction.

Strassel closed with a tribute to Cascade Policy Institute and its supporters. Free market organizations in blue states, she argued, do the hardest and most essential work: educating, equipping, and sustaining the ideas that make reform possible when political tides finally turn. “If we aren’t involved in groups like Cascade, then the other side takes over, and we have no voice anymore.”

“All this work—the education, the good ideas, the fortitude—this is going to be, I promise you, the basis of a revival in the state. But it also very much depends on you... Get re-involved in your universities, your civic groups. Our founders viewed that world as the place where almost everything was supposed to be happening. Politics was supposed to be very limited.”

Her message landed as both warning and encouragement. Oregon may be near rock bottom—but renewal is possible. “The revolution always starts at home,” she concluded. “It’s a republic if you can keep it. And keeping it starts right here. Go out there and save Oregon.”

Naomi Inman is External Relations Manager at Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon’s free market public policy research organization. As a staff journalist and writer, Naomi helps Cascade make the case for free-market policies through media affairs and publications.

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