

**Governor Barbara Roberts, Oregon 1991-1995**

Interview by John Weingart  
September 30, 2013

**John Weingart:** Hello. My name is John Weingart. Today is Monday, September 30, 2013, and the Center on the American Governor is pleased to welcome Governor Barbara Roberts who served as the chief executive in the state of Oregon from 1991 to 1995. Governor Roberts is here with the Eagleton Institute of Politics' Center for American Women in Politics and will be giving a talk later tonight. She will be talking in part about her book, Up the Capitol Steps: A Woman's March to the Governorship. Thank you so much for coming and taking a few minutes to talk with us.

I want to start by asking you about your legacy as governor and really about any governor's legacy. We've talked with former governor Jim Edgar of Illinois for example who said that his view was a governor doesn't really leave a legacy; they can do a good job or a bad job of dealing with what comes their way. You have now been out of office close to 20 years now. How do you look at that question?

**Barbara Roberts:** Well, I think governors do have legacies and some of your legacies go away very quickly because the incoming governors that follow you sometimes don't have-- share your priorities and some of those things go away. But when I look back at my term as governor I see a number of things still in place that I did a lot of leadership on and so I consider those legacies.

The most unusual legacy I have is that in the four years that I served as governor I appointed 54 judges to the courts and that was the most that had ever been appointed in a four-year term. So out of those 54 judges there were 20 women, there were 5 racial minorities, and there were 5 gays and lesbians-- open gays and lesbians-- who I appointed to the bench in addition. So they are now just getting to the point that they finished 20 years on the bench and the first of them are starting to retire, but I watched those members on circuit courts and supreme courts and courts of appeals for all these years and I certainly considered the quality of those judges to be a legacy for me.

One of the other things that for me has always felt like a legacy was that way back when I was a county commissioner I had the opportunity to vote on the first light rail line in the Portland metropolitan area in Oregon. And during the time I was governor I had the opportunity to move-- to expand on that rail going north and south and east and west, and so I was working on the funding and the planning for that with my transportation people and it is now one of-- I think one of the outstanding light rail line systems in the country. And when I was governor I had the opportunity to expand it even further so that was another piece that really mattered to me and it's still in place.

I think the third one that comes to mind for me is that I started something called the Oregon Housing Trust. It was a combination of public money and private money coming together in this trust to build affordable housing. And in the four years I was governor we built the most units of affordable housing that Oregon had ever built in a four-year period and that process continues today.

So I feel very fortunate to have a number of things that are still in place that I started, that I led on and they're still there; I think of them as a legacy.

The only thing I would add to this: I think there's another legacy; at least I like to think of it that way. In the four years I served as governor as well as all the other times I served in other public offices, nobody ever questioned my ethics or honesty. I think to have an ethical career that you can look back on and know that while I was governor nobody had to resign, nobody-- there was no scandals, there were no controversies of that kind, and everybody behaved in an ethical manner on my staff and in my agencies. I feel very proud of that and I think that's a legacy.

**John Weingart:** I heard you say very recently that of the seven elected offices you've held, being in the state legislature was the best so I wonder where being governor ranks on that list.

**Barbara Roberts:** Second. <laughs>

**John Weingart:** Second, okay, and what made it less good?

**Barbara Roberts:** Well, I think the difference is you're-- when you're the person at the top there's a great deal of isolation in that. You-- there's no end to your work. I mean you just work 24 hours a day; you're never off. You're governor all the time no matter where you are or what you're doing. When you're a legislator a legislative session comes to an end, you have lots of colleagues you love and care about and they're friends forever, but you go home and you go back to your community and you take up the job you had before you went to the legislature. I like that; I think that's a much healthier political office. I loved being governor and I would have loved to have done it another term if my husband hadn't died, but I think in terms of just the enjoyment of serving the legislature was more fun.

**John Weingart:** It was in January of your fourth year as governor that you announced you were not going to seek another term. Did that significantly weaken you in that final year or were there things you were able to do or not do because people knew you weren't running?

**Barbara Roberts:** Well, there's no question when you become a lame duck that you lose some of your power base, but we set an agenda up for that last 12 months and we put a list of things on it we wanted to accomplish and accomplished all but two of them. And they were big things like bringing the Klamath River in southern Oregon into the scenic-- federal scenic waterways and it got done in the very last month I served. So we took a number of things I wanted to accomplish in that last

year and we set out to get them done, and so people saw us working on an agenda all that time and I think that kept people from thinking of me as quite such a lame duck.

**John Weingart:** I would think there'd be some dynamic where people of the other party particularly wouldn't worry about you looking good because you're not running again.

**Barbara Roberts:** I think to some degree that's true, but my legislature didn't serve during that last year I was in office because it was an off year and they weren't-- we didn't have annual sessions so they weren't serving then. And I'd had such a difficult year, my husband had just died and that was the reason I didn't seek reelection. And he was a member of the state legislature - everyone knew him so I think there was some sense of protectiveness about me in that last year. People wanted me to have a good last year and they knew why I was not running and they wanted me to have a good last year, and I think a lot of legislators stepped up and helped me. And I spent time in legislative districts helping candidates who were running for election that year so I was politically active even though I wasn't running myself.

**John Weingart:** I want to ask you about your dealings with or interactions with other states' governors and with federal agencies while you were governor. Was either or both of those significant parts of your life?

**Barbara Roberts:** Well, I was really involved in the National Governors Association and in the Democratic Governors Association so I attended all those meetings and made a lot of friends and a lot of relationships. I worked closely with the governor of Washington State during that time and with Roy Romer in Colorado. There were some people that I-- that we had some common goals that we were working on and they were the people I could pick up the phone and call when I needed help. And so that really allowed me to work with a lot of governors. Because Bill Clinton had been a governor and I'd served with him as a governor, he was then President during part of my term as governor so I had that connection that came through the Governors Association.

In terms of the federal government, I had very heavy workings with the federal government and relationships during that time. The listing of the spotted owl as an endangered species just as I became governor was very controversial and very difficult. Timber was my state's largest industry and this was devastating communities and workers and closing mills and closing forests and I supported the Endangered Species Act and the listing, but it created a huge problem for me in my state. So I was working very closely with Vice President Gore and with President Clinton to try to get the Clinton Forest Plan done and to try to get monies into my state to help those communities and those workers retrain. So that was one big issue for me that I worked with the federal government.

Then the Oregon Health Plan, which was a forerunner to the difficulties now talking about the Obama healthcare plan, but we were putting that into place in Oregon way back then and in that process we had to get a bunch of federal waivers. So I was working with the federal government getting the waivers for the Oregon Health Plan; that put me into a lot of connection with the federal government.

And I mentioned earlier that I was working on the light rail lines. That meant I had to be back in Washington, D.C., raising the funding necessary to build those light rail lines and the transportation support that I needed back there so there were a number of issues.

I think the most interesting one was something called the Oregon Option, which was an experimental program that Vice President Gore was helping with, and it took the State of Oregon, the City of Portland, Oregon, and the county government in that same count-- in that same area and the three of them worked together with the federal government to look at the benchmarks in Oregon where we measured everything. And we said, "Okay, what's the outcome we want to happen here?" and we took a select number of things, a lot of them about food and families and children, and we decided what the outcome was we wanted. Then the federal government removed red tape so that we could see if we could do an outcome-based program like that. And so we worked with the federal government in doing that so it was an experiment for both the federal government and for us in Oregon. And it was fun to do because we were working with secretaries from several-- the cabinet member secretaries because we were working on children and education and food, and so we were working with agriculture one day and we were working with people in social services the next in various departments of the federal government. So I had a lot of opportunity to work with the federal government I think more than I might have had in ordinary times as a governor.

**John Weingart:** That last part was part of the Reinventing Government Initiative-

**Barbara Roberts:** Yes. Yes.

**John Weingart:** You mentioned that governors were active with the National Governors' Association and the Democratic Governors' Association. At that point in the early '90s, were there a large number of issues at the state level that seemed to have Democratic and Republican approaches that differed or were you able to learn and share information and policies with your Republican counterparts?

**Barbara Roberts:** We actually did a lot of sharing across party lines in that period of time. This doesn't mean it was always honey and roses, but for instance the Oregon Benchmarks program - which measured outcomes of the work we did in government and it measured outcomes of our state as a whole - when that was developed they took that program to the National Governors' Association and published a big document about it and made sure it was available to all the other governors in the states who wanted to try sort of measuring. This reinventing of government included a lot of outcome measures. And so we were the best example of a state that had really taken that on and I think that was one of the things.

We were doing a lot of what was called work force development, trying to look at how we trained workers, and most state governments had a whole group of things that were sort of worker training, education, job elements of various kinds, community colleges, trade schools, labor unions. And we decided that we would kind of put those all together and look at them as a whole and develop work force planning so that no matter what you did or where you were coming from-- from there was a work force option for you. Whether you were getting out of jail, whether you were coming off of welfare, whether you were graduating from high school, whether you were leaving community college didn't matter; we would find a way to do work force preparation for that worker. And as a result of that, that work force quality council thing that we developed also went to the National Governors' Association and a number of states took lessons and ideas from that.

So we did work across a lot of lines and the other one was education. Roy Romer at that point was chairing I think the Democratic Governors' Association then and he put that as a priority for him, and then the governors worked with the President and we tried to pull together ideas about education and education reform. It was something that a lot of governors regardless of party were really interested in.

**John Weingart:** This is sort of a variant of the legacy question, but were there accomplishments or issues you got involved with where it was pretty much as a direct result of something in your life - the light rail, to some extent that because you were bringing your interest from the legislature - but from interests from earlier parts of your life that had an impact on your agenda?

**Barbara Roberts:** One of the things I worked hard on for a long time was early childhood education, and during the time I was governor we more than doubled the state-funded Head Start. Part of the reason for me as I looked at Head Start was that even though I'd served on school boards and community college boards, Head Start really was for me the opportunity for success for children in education.

And as a grandmother-- which I was by then-- as a grandmother and as a person who had a special-needs child I knew how important early education was so I think my personal feelings about that really brought to the forefront my commitment to advancing Head Start and early childhood education in Oregon so that's one of the ones I always think of.

The other one was I mentioned the Oregon Housing Trust earlier. My interest in affordable housing was very strong because I had been-- as a single mom with two kids and low-income job I had been one of those people looking for affordable rentals a number of times in that period of my life. I knew how hard it was to find affordable-- clean, decent, safe affordable housing and I really wanted to see if we couldn't do a better job in Oregon. And as our economy changed in Oregon and we moved-- the timber industry kind of took a second place in our state and suddenly it was high tech or it was tourism, and the tourism jobs were basically lower-paying jobs as a rule and those were the people who couldn't find housing. So I watched

my economy change in my state and I also had this personal experience of knowing how hard it was to find a nice place that I-- in a good school district that I could move my two sons and feel like it was a neighborhood I could live in, and so I think that more than anything really focused me in the housing area. And we also saw as our economy changed how communities had more and more-- if you were a first-year teacher or a first-year law enforcement officer you didn't make very much money, but in many times your school district required or your city required that you live in the city where you worked and sometimes those were expensive housing and so that was part of what led me to that.

**John Weingart:** I want to wrap up and ask you whether there is advice you've either given or would like to give to new governors or if you were doing it again things you'd do a little differently as governor.

**Barbara Roberts:** Well, sometimes I think about how much a governor in their first term is working toward their second term. My advice is to take that first term as if you never intended to run for a second term; work that four years as hard as you can; do all of the good you can do; be the best you can be because you might not get that second term. And if you do it right in the first term it'll be easier to get the second term anyway, but sometimes I think you get really careful in that first term and don't want to have any failures and don't want to take any risks and I don't think that's good government; I don't think it's good governing.

The other one I learned painfully was that when you delegate authority as a governor you also delegate power, and I don't think I was careful enough every time I delegated power. People feel the power of the office and they're working for you and you delegate to them and some of them like the power too much. I think you have to be very careful when you delegate, that as you delegate responsibility you also delegate power and you need to keep a close eye on how that power is being used.

**John Weingart:** This would be people who are running an agency or something like that?

**Barbara Roberts:** It could be a chief of staff, could be a major policy person in your office who's feeling very powerful because they've just done some big policy stuff and they kind of begin to speak for you when you haven't really given them that permission to speak as if they are you. I think that's something nobody ever told me about, ever suggested to me that I'd watch for, and so it was a very good lesson for me and I experienced it, I corrected it, but in the meantime it didn't mean some damage didn't come from it so it was just something I never thought about until it happened.

**John Weingart:** Is there anything else you'd like to add and also as we move forward creating the Center on the American Governor are there things you think we should be doing and questions we should be asking here?

**Barbara Roberts:** Well, I think what governors do when they move out of the governorship - whether they run for the U.S. Senate or whether they teach at a college, whatever they do - I think that's an interesting piece of the puzzle and tells you a lot about governors as well. I think there's also a gender factor there. Most male governors when they leave office, many of them, and I think most is probably more accurate, are given an opportunity to serve on corporate boards and those are paid positions. Very few women governors as they leave office are offered that financial reward and that corporate board responsibility even though they may have served on hundreds of boards or dozens of boards of other kinds, and so I think the gender issue of what happens to governors after they leave office is worth looking at. I know of few male governors in my state who have not served on corporate boards for instance after they left the governorship, I know of very few women former governors who have, and so it's just an interesting factor of that post governorship that I think is worth looking at.

**John Weingart:** That's interesting. We had a nice thing that happened over the last 20 years in New Jersey. Former governors Brendan Byrne and Tom Kean, Democrat and Republican, have written a joint newspaper column every two weeks several decades now.

**Barbara Roberts:** Oh, that's great.

**John Weingart:** It goes back to the '90. They used to write it sometimes but now it's basically a joint interview with a reporter. It was in the paper today and today they were talking about the government shutdown and who would be responsible. Tom Kean's not the kind of Republican you find too much these days so they agree more often than you would think. It always seemed like a great form of continuing public service.

**Barbara Roberts:** Well, we have four former governors alive now and only one of those is a Republican. Victor Atiyeh was governor when I was elected Secretary of State and Governor part of the time that I was in the legislature, and he and I have become very comfortable with each other over the last number of years. We do a lot of things that other governors won't take time to do, former governor... We think it's good for the public to see the former governors, but he gave me two wonderful pieces of advice when I was leaving the governorship and one probably halfway through my term.

The one when I was halfway through my term was he said, "When you leave this office--" and he described it this way: "Once you've been the governor of Oregon the people own you forever," which I think is just charming and it is so true. Over the years, as I've traveled around my state, which I do a lot all the time, it's very personal, it's hugs and here, my granddaughter wants her picture taken with you, and it's signing autographs and it's just the familiarity of using my first name and oh, I see they just love to see me and they're so glad I'm in their part of the state, but the other one is the one I love.

Victor Atiyeh told me about a week before I left office-- he said, "When you arrive here for the inauguration of the new governor and the State Police bring you to the the capitol and you prepare to give your final address, you will enter the building as a peacock but you will go out as a feather duster." <laughs> He said, "You're just instantly not the governor." He said, "It's just the most amazing thing" and it's true.

**John Weingart:** I don't know if it's a common line, but what Brendan Byrne always said is he knew he wasn't governor anymore when he got in the back seat of a car and it didn't go anywhere.

**Barbara Roberts:** <laughs> There is something to that. Yeah, I had to have somebody come and pick me up 'cause I hadn't driven for so long; my car was in a different city <laughs>

**John Weingart:** You had a house when you were governor or a mansion or something?

**Barbara Roberts:** Yes, and I was only the second governor to be in the governor's residence; we had never had one before. And so when Neil Goldschmidt was governor, just before he became governor they started a fund to buy a really lovely home in Salem and remodel it and prepare it for a governor but Neil Goldschmidt moved into the governor's residence oh, about six months after he became governor. So he was the first resident there and I was the second, and so I have very emotional-- my husband died in that house - so I have a very emotional connection with the house.

When John Kitzhaber served his first two terms I was never in the house, he never invited me back in the house; he's not much of a social guy. And so when Ted Kulongoski got elected after that the first thing Ted and his wife, Mary, did was to call me and say, "We're going to move in Sunday and could you come for dinner on Thursday?" So I came to the house and they said, "You have an hour before dinner and the house is yours. You can move anyplace in the house you want, look at anything you want, open any closets. We don't care what you do; this house is yours for the next hour." And so I just wandered all over the house, down in the basement and up in the ballroom and into the room my husband died in, and so that happened before Ted left the house again; they invited me again to the house to allow me to go through. And now John's been back for almost another full term and I haven't been in the house again so it's really hard because I have such connection not only having lived there but that other connection is so strong. I didn't know-- I mean Frank's been dead 20 years next month but it's still such a strong connection, that house, and-- but Ted got that; I mean he just figured that out and he and Mary just made sure I got in there again.

**John Weingart:** Thank you so much for your time.

**Barbara Roberts:** You're welcome. Thank you, John.