

GOV. VIC ATIYEH

Atiyeh recalls a more civil era in politics

By James Sinks
The Bulletin

PORTLAND — When the letter arrived, it wasn't the subject matter that was so surprising.

It was the tone.

In a career in Oregon politics that spanned four decades, culminating with two terms as governor, Vic Atiyeh had received his share of complaints.

But in his early years, the letters were polite.

They would say something like: I respect your opinions and you must have a good reason, but I don't happen to agree with you on that vote, Atiyeh recalled.

But as time went by, the letters — and people — were changing. It became acceptable to be mean, and those once-respectful letters oozed vitriol.

"It said 'You dumb SOB, I'll never vote for you and I'll see that you are never elected again,'" he said, shaking his head, sitting in his second-floor Portland office, where the walls are covered in memorabilia from his half-lifetime in government and the nameplate still reads "Governor Atiyeh."

Atiyeh, now 83, thinks the Watergate scandal is partly to blame for the evolving public perception of elected figures. He also blames partisan talk radio and a shifting media emphasis away from covering the nuts and bolts of government to focusing instead on exposing politicians.

But most of all, he says electors bear the responsibility in what has happened to the state.

Electors pass ballot measures that hamstring government. They choose partisan leaders with scant experience and then



Rob Kerr / The Bulletin

Former Gov. Vic Atiyeh sits in his office in Portland. Atiyeh, whose 40-year political career included terms as a state representative, senator and governor, holds voters responsible for what he sees as an increase in partisan politics.

wonder why leaders can't make decisions. And electors are swayed by negative and baseless ads.

"The elector is responsible for what we see today in politics," he said.

Atiyeh, whose family is in the rug business in Portland, was elected to the Legislature in 1958 and served in the assembly until 1978, when he became governor by defeating incumbent Bob Straub.

His tenure in the center office is remembered most for his reac-

tion to the state's economic free fall in the early 1980s, when rising interest rates sent the timber industry into the toilet. The state's unemployment rate topped 12.5 percent.

In a series of special sessions, the Legislature and Atiyeh agreed to a series of budget cuts and — to help keep vital programs running — a three-year income tax hike.

Voters did not reject that tax hike, unlike a similar tax package proposed by lawmakers in 2003. The defeat in Measure 30,

which went to voters in January 2004, was telling, he says.

It said the trust is gone.

He tries to not be cynical, but he just doesn't see things getting better. At least, not until the electorate takes a hard look at their government and the initiatives and learns who is making empty promises.

But in the May primary election, fewer than two in five voters bothered to vote.

"There are 17,520 hours every two years," he said. "Can't people give just one to democracy?"