

COMPARING MULTNOMAH COUNTY'S District Attorney Candidates

A People's Report Card and Voter Guide from Oregon DA for the People



Irene Kalonji and Sylvia Dollarson of Pacific Northwest Family Circle are arm and arm leaning into each other warmly. They both look into the camera. Irene wears a hat with the acronym P.O.S.T. (Protect Our Stolen Treasures) and a shirt with the words "Death Requires Responsibility". Both wear a variety of pins including a Irene with a photograph of Christopher Kalonji and Sylvia with Moose Hayes "Quanice." Photo credit: Kendall Kendall

This voter guide includes a brief summary on the powers of the district attorney (DA) and the [Oregon DA for the People](#) campaign. Here, we grade the public statements and policy proposals of both Multnomah County district attorney candidates Ethan Knight and Mike Schmidt. Across the United States, there is a growing movement to demand that district attorneys (DAs) work to end mass incarceration. We outline a set of Oregon-specific policies in the [People's Platform](#) for doing this. Before voting in the crucial **May 19, 2020 DA election**, we hope you'll research the candidates, learn about the issues, and [join our movement](#).

Disclaimer: The role of this campaign is to hold the DA accountable to the demands of the people no matter who is elected. So, we are not endorsing either candidate.

Summary of our Report Card

Multnomah County deserves a DA who gives more than lip service to addressing the harm caused by our crisis of mass incarceration. While the candidates often use similar language, their policies are very different. In this report card, we focus on policies that harm vulnerable community members or reinforce the power of a violent system.

If we come off as tough graders, it's because we know that the status quo fails to protect our community and keep us safe.

[Jump to the full report card](#)

Topic	Ethan Knight	Mike Schmidt
Overall Grade	D	B
Responding to the COVID-19 crisis	F	A-
Decline to prosecute mental health	D	D
Decriminalize homelessness	D+	B
Decriminalize drug use	D	C-
Decriminalize sex work	F	C-
Acknowledge racism in current systems	D-	B+
Oppose non-unanimous juries	A	A
Denounce Gun Violence Reduction Team	F	F
Increase data analysis and transparency	D	A
Uphold the Brady Rule	F	A
Enforce police "do not call" list	F	A
Oppose plea deals	F	B
End cash bail	B	A
Abolish the death penalty	F	A
Oppose Measure 11	F	B



Two young children squat on the ground with pens and paper. They're making protest signs. Photo credit: Kendall Kendall



People are chalking justice messages in the middle of the street. A toddler squats intently towards the ground with a piece of chalk in their hand. Three people are actively chalking in the midground. Two people look on in the background. Photo credit: Kendall Kendall

Who is the DA?

If you don't know who the district attorney is or what they do, you're not alone. **But your vote in Multnomah County's district attorney election on May 19th will be one of the most important you cast this year.** [The DA is the most powerful position in the local criminal legal system.](#) As top prosecutor in the county, DAs decide who gets charged with a crime and who doesn't, and how severe the charges will be.

DAs influence every stage of the legal process, like bail, plea deals, and the grand jury. They decide when—and whether—evidence will be turned over to defense attorneys. Each DA shapes the culture of prosecution in their county by setting policies that all prosecutors in their office must follow. Tough-on-crime DAs are maintaining the daily violence of the racist, unjust criminal legal system.

District Attorneys have the power to hold police officers accountable for misconduct. But because DAs rely on police to bring them cases to prosecute. This means they rarely charge or fully prosecute police officers accused of racial profiling, corruption, brutality or murder. Despite their vast influence, DAs themselves can't be prosecuted for their conduct when handling cases. District attorneys often run unopposed, and outgoing DAs will often choose someone just like them to run. **But because the District Attorney is an elected position, we have the power to demand better.**

In cities like Philadelphia, San Francisco, Boston, and New York, movements are reducing the violence of the criminal legal system by electing district attorney candidates willing to work with the community—and then holding them accountable to the demands of the community once they reach office.



Donna Hayes, the grandmother of teenage Loved One Moose Hayes "Quanice" is speaking into a megaphone. Philip J. Wolfe is wearing a t-shirt with the word "Resistencia" with a flag inside of a backward R. Philip is looking towards Donna while signing in American Sign Language. A crowd of people, some with signs are in the background. Photo credit: Kendall Kendall



Three people are actively chalking the names of loved ones killed by police with hearts drawn around them on the sidewalk. Photo credit: Kendall Kendall

Now, Multnomah County voters can join the movement.

The [Oregon DA for the People](#) campaign works to decrease the harm that the criminal legal system has on communities of color and other marginalized groups like [Pacific Northwest Family Circle](#) (PNWFC). This is a group that supports the justice struggle of families whose loved ones were killed or injured by police officers. The campaign started with the leadership of PNWFC, and the support of Showing Up for Racial Justice Portland (SURJ PDX). We have since grown into [a powerful coalition of community organizations](#). The demands are supported by over 500 community members. Together, we are shifting the landscape of the Oregon legal system while building towards [a world without prisons](#).

The [People's Platform](#) includes specific demands for Multnomah County's next district attorney. Each demand emerged through the feedback and experience of those who have faced the violence of our criminal legal system firsthand. These include people from Black, Brown, Indigenous, and immigrant communities; families whose loved ones were killed by police; people who are currently and formerly incarcerated; people who use illegal drugs; sex workers; and people experiencing homelessness. In place of the current status quo, we are building community power to self-determine what safety and healing look like.

This May, voters will choose between two candidates in Multnomah County's District Attorney election: Ethan Knight and Mike Schmidt.

Comparing their policies, platforms, and rhetoric is key to make an informed choice in the election this May. It will also help us prepare for the long-term work of holding our next DA accountable to the people they are elected to serve. We know that the work doesn't end with an election. The vote you cast this May can help keep our community safe by reducing the daily harm caused by the legal system.



Irene Kalonji, Co-Founder of PNWFC is smiling warmly and hugging a supporter who wears buttons on their backpack picturing loved ones lost to police violence. Photo credit: Kendall Kendall

Grading the Candidates

This DA candidate voter guide and report card draws on statements made by the candidates on their websites, through social media, at the Oregon DA for the People community-led [candidate forum](#), and in a recent [virtual debate](#). We have met separately with both candidates as well.

We questioned them in writing on their policies relevant to our People’s Platform. While both candidates initially promised to answer, Ethan Knight did not. Mr. Knight also missed a candidate forum hosted by Advancing Collective Equity on December 1st. We note in our report card where the public lacks information on his positions as a result.

Grading Guide

A Highest Grade	B	C	D	F Lowest Grade
Candidate supports all or the majority of the platform demands on this topic, with very specific plans for how to implement them.	Candidate supports some of the platform demands on this topic, with some specific plans for how to implement them.	Candidate makes general statements in support of the platform demands on this topic, but uses vague language without specific policy commitments.	Candidate calls for some minor changes to the status quo but is not aligned with the platform demands on this topic.	Candidate supports status quo policies that harm communities; or, candidate has not taken a clear position on this topic, claiming a need for further study or more information even when provided with additional resources.

Report Card

RESPONDING TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Ethan Knight

Grade: F

Ethan Knight thinks that citations and suspending trials is the best solution. He'd delay rather than decline to prosecute crimes. He does not support prisoner releases and supports the policies of the current DA.

Mike Schmidt

Grade: A-

Mike Schmidt says we must stop prosecuting low-level crimes for the rest of the crisis. We should release as many people as possible who "do not pose a risk to society." He has worked with community organizers to support prisoner release efforts.

DECLINE TO PROSECUTE MENTAL HEALTH

Prisons and jails are being used to cage people with mental health conditions instead of providing them care in their communities. We want a DA who will always decline to prosecute individuals with mental health conditions. They should support funding for trauma-informed, community-based treatment and diversion programs that function outside of the criminal legal system.

Ethan Knight

Grade: D

Ethan Knight advocates for the criminal legal system to continue serving as an access point for critical social services, rather than making services accessible prior to arrest or law enforcement.

Mike Schmidt

Grade: D

Mike Schmidt acknowledges that the criminal legal system is not the answer for mental health care, but still advocates for increased funding for services that are only available through contact with the criminal legal system. He has not supported re-allocating funds for community-based care that doesn't rely on contact with the criminal legal system.

DECRIMINALIZE HOUSELESSNESS, SEX WORK, AND DRUG USE

Criminalizing drug use, sex work, and houselessness harms our most marginalized neighbors and criminalizes their means of survival. We want a DA who acknowledges the harm that the “War on Drugs” and “tough on crime” policies have had on communities of color and poor and working class communities. We want a DA who will always decline to prosecute crimes of survival.

Ethan Knight

Decriminalize houselessness (D+)

While Ethan Knight claims that houselessness is “[the biggest challenge facing our community](#),” his policies do not decriminalize houselessness. He has emphasized his desire to “leverage the point of contact” that comes after arrest—using those arrests to funnel people into treatment programs within the legal system, especially through drug courts and mental health courts. Knight has called to [reduce the fines and fees](#) administered by the criminal legal system. But he refuses to decline to prosecute the low-level offenses that result in those fines and fees. He has made no public comment on “sweeps” of tent encampments.

Decriminalize drug use (D)

Knight says, “It is critical that we expand mental health services and addiction treatment in conjunction with the criminal justice system, something Multnomah County and the state legislature have failed to adequately do,” but he does not offer specific policies beyond his support for drug courts.

Decriminalize sex work (F)

Knight’s response at our Candidate Forum conflated sex work with sex trafficking. He has called for an emphasis on prosecuting those who buy sex rather than those who sell it, which still puts sex workers at risk. He says, “[The District Attorney’s Office must follow the laws as they are written, so prosecutors are forced to use laws that may criminalize sex work while addressing trafficking](#).” However, this is inaccurate: separate statutes exist for trafficking of persons and for the commercial exchange of sexual services, and prosecutors have discretion regarding which charges to pursue.

Mike Schmidt

Decriminalize houselessness (B)

Mike Schmidt supports establishing “[problem-solving courts for houseless defendants who are facing minor charges](#),” as an alternative to incarceration. He calls for both reducing fines and fees and for an end to “stop the harsh practice of suspending licenses and otherwise punishing people” who can’t pay those fees. While Schmidt did not agree to decline to prosecute all low-level offenses, he has committed to “rework the office policy manual around [these] charges.” He has stated that sweeps of tent encampments are “terrible policy,” and that he would push to have them ended.

Decriminalize drug use (C-)

Schmidt explicitly acknowledges the harm caused by the war on drugs. He says that “heavy penalties for low level, non-violent drug offenses” would be “a big step backwards.” But he does not offer specific policies beyond his support for drug courts.

Decriminalize sex work (C-)

Schmidt’s platform states that he “will focus on prosecuting sex traffickers and finding public health-driven alternatives to pointless incarceration of those voluntarily engaged in sex work.” However, in his response to our questionnaire, he would not commit to fully declining to prosecute sex work or to pushing the legislature for full decriminalization. He told us he is still seeking “the right balance of laws ... to protect the safety of vulnerable sex workers, and put an end to sex trafficking.”

STOP TARGETING BLACK, BROWN, INDIGENOUS, & IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Immigrant communities are disproportionately affected at every step in the system. They are more likely to be stopped by police, detained pretrial, charged with more serious crimes, and sentenced more harshly. We want a DA who will commit to ending the disproportionate harm caused to communities of color by the criminal legal system.

Ethan Knight

Acknowledge racism in current systems (D-)

Ethan Knight says he recognizes that injustices exist within our current system, but does not acknowledge that the criminal legal system is inherently racist. He does not mention or acknowledge racial bias when he speaks about the behavior of the police.

Oppose non-unanimous juries (A)

Knight called for an end to non-unanimous juries. He says that it is “rooted in racism and anti-semitism.” *(A recent Supreme Court decision ended the use of non-unanimous juries. We will now push for retroactive release of anyone convicted by a non-unanimous jury.)*

Denounce the Gun Violence Reduction Team (F)

Knight is unwilling to denounce the Gun Violence Reduction Team (formerly the Gang Enforcement Team) despite the team’s history of racist policing.

Increase data analysis and transparency (D)

Knight has not spoken about increasing use of data to reduce racial bias in the system, nor to increase public availability of this data. He does speak frequently about the importance of transparency and giving community members “a seat at the table” but without specific commitments about how to do so.

Mike Schmidt

Acknowledge racism in current systems (B+)

Mike Schmidt acknowledges that “many of our criminal laws and practices are rooted in prejudice, bigotry, and racism.” He will decline to prosecute cases based in racial profiling. He has committed to convening a community oversight committee to conduct an overview of all policies and training procedures in the DA’s office.

Oppose non-unanimous juries (A)

Schmidt called for an end to non-unanimous juries. He calls the practice “a product of racism and xenophobia.” *(A recent Supreme Court decision ended the use of non-unanimous juries. We will now push for retroactive release of anyone convicted by a non-unanimous jury.)*

Denounce the Gun Violence Reduction Team (F)

Schmidt is unwilling to denounce the Gun Violence Reduction Team (formerly the Gang Enforcement Team) despite the team’s history of racist policing.

Increase data analysis and transparency (A)

Schmidt says he “[will provide aggregated data to the public on an ongoing basis about the office’s sentencing decisions—including racial and ethnic information—through an internet dashboard.](#)” He has committed to tracking the rate of cases diverted from the criminal legal system as a measure of success, and to convening a committee of impacted community members to seek restorative justice alternatives to incarceration.

HOLD POLICE AND PROSECUTORS ACCOUNTABLE

The system of policing in the United States has carried out a long history of enacting violence and racism against community members with veritable impunity. We want a DA who supports the complete transformation of a system that targets and endangers communities rather than keeping them safe. DAs must hold police officers accountable for brutality, murder, and misconduct and must demand transparency and ethical behavior from their prosecutors.

Ethan Knight

Uphold the Brady Rule (F)

The Brady Rule states that prosecutors must turn over any evidence that might exonerate the defendant in a criminal case. Ethan Knight has not made any statements about ethical handling of evidence.

Enforce police “do not call list” (F)

Knight has not committed to maintaining a public list of officers accused of bias and misconduct.

Mike Schmidt

Uphold the Brady Rule (A)

The Brady Rule states that prosecutors must turn over any evidence that might exonerate the defendant in a criminal case. Mike Schmidt has said he will direct his prosecutors to always provide all evidence to the defense, no matter what.

Enforce police “do not call list” (A)

Schmidt has committed to maintaining and releasing a public list of police officers accused of bias and misconduct and says “we will not call them on cases, because we know we can no longer trust their testimony.” He has committed to decline to prosecute cases brought by officers on this list, and to use an independent organization to determine what constitutes “bias and misconduct.”

COMMIT TO ENDING MASS INCARCERATION

Prosecutors are a primary driver of mass incarceration in Oregon and across the United States by pushing plea deals and supporting mandatory minimum sentencing. A DA's success is measured by their number of convictions and guilty pleas. We want a DA who prioritizes decarceration and who supports the reallocation of funds to community-based programs to address root causes of why people are criminalized and ultimately may become incarcerated.

Ethan Knight

Oppose plea deals (F)

Ethan Knight denies that plea deals are used coercively.

End cash bail (B)

Knight has recently changed his position to support the end of cash bail. However, he has not acknowledged the bias possible in risk assessment tools that would replace bail for pre-trial decisions.

Abolish the death penalty (F)

Knight has stated that he will follow the law as it is written around the death penalty.

Mike Schmidt

Oppose plea deals (B)

Mike Schmidt has not committed to declining to prosecute Measure 11 crimes altogether, but says charges should not be set for "purposes of getting somebody into a coercive situation where the charges are so stacked against them the DA can resolve the case." He is also willing to allow the public to review the charges the DA office makes.

End cash bail (A)

Schmidt has committed to advocate for an end to the use of cash bail. Though he has not released a detailed plan for what system would replace cash bail, he has shown increasing awareness of the need to carefully vet potential risk tools for racial bias. He has also committed "to creating a list of crimes and circumstances that my office would presumptively decline to ask for someone to be held on bail as a stop gap measure until the laws can be changed."

Abolish the death penalty (A)

Schmidt has confirmed he will never seek the death penalty.

TREAT KIDS LIKE KIDS

Traumatic interactions with the criminal legal system and law enforcement hinder the development of kids and youth and harm their futures. We want a DA who is committed to ending the school to prison pipeline by supporting the repeal of Measure 11, discouraging the presence of law enforcement officers at schools, and always declining to prosecute youth for misdemeanors and school-based arrests.

Ethan Knight

Oppose Measure 11 (F)

Ethan Knight believes that Measure 11 is acceptable and does not believe in its repeal. He has said, "if the question is will we continue to charge Measure 11 in certain cases like rape, sex abuse one, and robbery one, I think the answer is yes."

Mike Schmidt

Oppose Measure 11 (B)

While Mike Schmidt has repeatedly said he supports the repeal of Measure 11, he also has not committed to using his power as DA to decline to prosecute Measure 11 charges altogether.

Links to Additional Information

[Oregon DA for the People - Full Platform](#)

[Stories from Impacted Community Members](#)

[Community-led DA Candidates Forum video, including a transcript and closed captions.](#)

(Kirsten Naito has since withdrawn her candidacy for DA.)