



Westlund can't win, but he can spoil the race for governor

Oregon's political pundits are calling this a three-way race for governor. If that's the case, put Ben Westlund on the bottom of your tri-fecta ticket, because he's a sure thing to finish third.

Westlund has been getting a lot of attention from the media for his defection from the Republican Party and his announcement that he will run for governor as an independent.

But this is a two-way race between Democrat Ted Kulongoski and Republican Ron Saxton. If Westlund gets in, he'll create a photo finish between those two. But Westlund himself won't even be in the picture.

I respect Ben Westlund. But he's no Jesse Ventura, the professional wrestler who muscled his way to an upset win of the Minnesota governorship as the Reform Party candidate in 1998. Westlund doesn't have that kind of name recognition, nor does he have even a minor party to support him. And, as a Republican who recently abandoned his party, Westlund is not likely to pick up many votes from that party's rank and file.

This means that Westlund will have to compete for votes from unaffiliated voters and disaffected Democrats, which is hardly a prescription for success when you have a polarizing candidate like Saxton in the race.

Saxton is running to the far right on issues of importance to most union members, Democrats and independents who work for a living and worry about their families' well-being. He opposes continuing the voter-approved cost-of-living adjustments to our minimum wage. He'd leave workers to fend for themselves with little or no help from government, opposing limits on usurious payday loans and questioning

whether there's any role for government "to deliver or pay for health care." And, for workers rattled by recent attacks on retirement benefits in the public and private sectors, Saxton's proposal for public employees won't be reassuring: He'd fire all of them if that's what it takes to terminate the pensions that the Oregon Supreme Court ruled are protected by the state constitution.

(Memo to public employees: Kulongoski cut Public Employees Retirement System benefits, but fought to keep a solid defined-benefit pension plan intact for new hires; Westlund voted for the PERS cuts and for even steeper cuts for new hires; and Saxton wants to blow up the PERS system for current employees and new hires alike. There are real differences among these candidates, even on a grudge issue like PERS.)

Westlund can try to run between Saxton and Kulongoski on working family issues. But, on many of those issues, he'll be slogging over squishy ground. What's the point of defending cost-of-living adjustments to the minimum wage, which Westlund promised to do last session, when he also backed the restaurant association's demand for a reduced minimum wage for tipped workers? That's not the kind of principled stand that voters want from an "independent" candidate.

Westlund gets credit, as does Kulongoski, for opposing the artificial spending limits endorsed by Saxton that would create more budget crises for our schools. But Kulongoski comes to the race with bragging rights for securing the revenue dividends we're now getting from a rebounding economy. This gives Kulongoski the resources to be the man with a plan for improving our schools, expanding college aid to middle-class families and stabilizing

the Oregon Health Plan, which should provide the edge he needs to outflank Saxton...unless Westlund gets in the way.

Westlund can run, but he can't win. Based on voter registration and turnout patterns, the votes cast for governor this fall will come almost equally from Democrats (40 percent) and Republicans (40 percent) with the balance from unaffiliated and minor-party voters (20 percent). Saxton and Kulongoski will win large majorities of their parties' rank and file. So Westlund will have to build his campaign on the voters who are unaffiliated or disaffected, who tend to wander all over the political track. It will be difficult for Westlund to secure the large majorities among these voters that Saxton and Kulongoski can deliver from their parties' registrants. And, even if he could, there aren't enough votes there to make up the difference.

Remember Ross Perot's impressive showing in Oregon's 1992 presidential election? He got 24 percent of the vote — a solid third place finish.

Westlund can't win, but he can affect the outcome of this race, more likely by pulling votes from Kulongoski than from Saxton, if only because Republicans are more lock-step loyal to their candidates.

If he runs, Westlund could end up rewarding the extremists in his former party who want workers to live with smaller paychecks, buy their own health insurance and pay for their own retirement benefits. That would be an ironic legacy for a politician who is campaigning against "extreme partisanship."

Tim Nesbitt is a former president of the Oregon AFL-CIO.

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