

gone so far as to mention universal health care. Though a lot of the citizens Merkley talks with say they hate the Affordable Care Act (ACA), it's usually an opinion based on misconceptions of how the health care reform act works, along with assumptions across partisan lines.

"I found that with the ACA, for example, people would ask me, 'Why are you supporting this government takeover and why aren't you listening to us?'" Merkley says. In these situations, he says, he makes a point to explain some of the main features of the ACA, such as the coverage of pre-existing conditions at the same price as anyone else and a website where you can easily compare plans.

"By the time I finished, people in the room were going, 'We knew we didn't like this Obamacare thing, but we're not sure why,'" Merkley says. "And I think it's widely understood and felt by people on both sides of the aisle that we have a system of health care that's way too complicated and that we need to have a system that's much simpler, where you have health care when you need it just by virtue of living here in the United States of America."

He adds: "Maybe there are progressives representing it, but those ideas — when they're presented as the reality of, 'Would you like that opportunity to be part of that?' — people say 'Yes' on both sides of the aisle."

Merkley has been working on legislation to eventually make health care available to all Americans.

In April, he sponsored a bill in Congress called the "Choose Medicare Act." It would establish Part E, meaning Medicare that is available for everyone, not only those 65 and over.

Regarding the Choose Medicare Act, Merkley says, "You can go to the exchange [health care marketplace], you can choose a public option, a Medicare policy that would not be subsidized."

The Choose Medicare Act would be available to individuals as well as employers as an option to offer to their employees.

In a press release on the act, Merkley says that it would put "consumers and businesses in the driver's seat on the pathway to universal health care."

The bill has been read twice in the Senate and has been referred to the Senate Committee on Finance, which may or may not release the bill to be voted on.

WHAT ARE THE CHANCES?

With Merkley considering a presidential run in 2020, those who have known him throughout his political career say it would not be a surprising move.

From the late '90s into the early 2000s, former Oregon Sen. Tony Corcoran was in the Oregon Senate, while Merkley was serving in the House. Corcoran writes the column "Hot Air Society" for this paper.

Corcoran says even early in Merkley's political career, the senator was highly motivated.

"I wasn't surprised that he ascended so quickly," he says. "I think that he's the Senate equivalent of Peter DeFazio in so many ways, in terms of people having respect for his position. He's not a flake, and he's consistent."

Corcoran says a presidential run requires a good amount of planning. If Merkley does run, it most likely will be pretty obvious in November.

"I wouldn't be surprised because, I mean, I think that that consideration occurs when a whole bunch of ducks line up in a row," Corcoran says. "It's early. You don't have this discussion earnestly until November."

He adds: "Once you throw your hat in the ring like that, it'll just be about keeping an eye on who encourages him and supports him and so forth."

And it seems Merkley has been doing some planning. In recent months he's visited Iowa and New Hampshire — popular early-primary states for presidential candidates to make names for themselves.

Merkley has gained national attention for his determined opposition to injustice, especially that of the Trump administration, as well as his creation and endorsement of Bernie Sanders-esque progressive legislation.

But he'll still have his work cut out for him against well-known Democratic darlings like senators Elizabeth Warren and Sanders, if either of them decides to run.

Jack Roberts, former Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries commissioner, one-time political columnist for *The Oregonian* and local Republican pundit, says Merkley

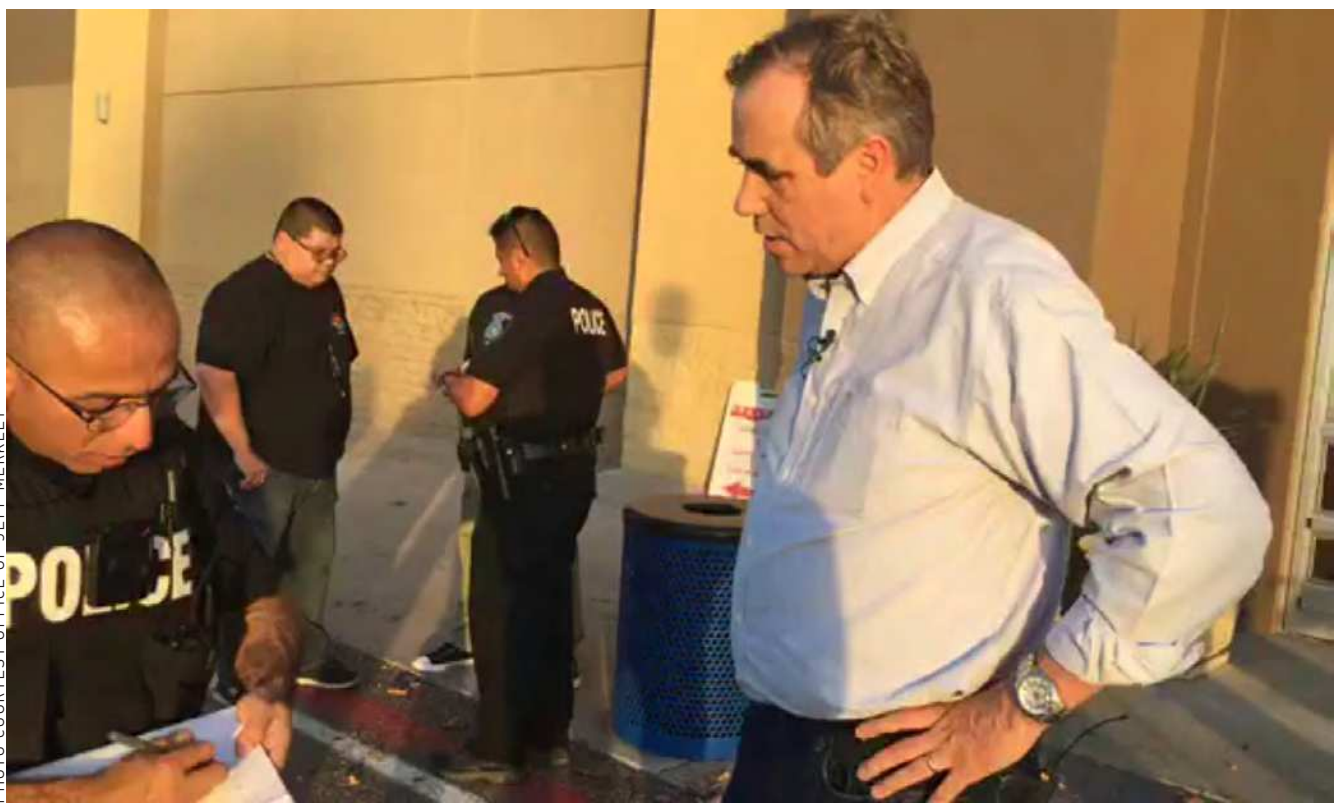


PHOTO COURTESY OFFICE OF JEFF MERKLEY

When he's not in Oregon, Merkley also does a lot of important national work — most notably, as of late, visiting a detention center in Brownsville, Texas, to reveal the visceral truths of immigrant parents and children's separation under the Trump administration's zero-tolerance policy.

winning in a presidential race might be kind of an outside chance, but still a possibility.

"I think it's a long shot, but looking ahead to 2020, there's no immediate frontrunner, so it's possible," he says. "In my lifetime, the only real outsider who has gone through and gotten the nomination and won has been Jimmy Carter, and that's been quite a while ago."

Roberts says some more well-known potential candidates like Sanders, or even potentially Joe Biden, may have better chances, but age is a factor that might be taken into account — since both of them would be in their late 70s in 2020. Merkley, however, will be 64 come the 2020 election. "Some of the best known and most promising potential candidates would also be the oldest presidents ever elected, breaking the record just set by Trump," Roberts says. "So I don't know how the voters as a whole feel about continuing to elect older people to serve."

A safer, more probable option for Merkley, Roberts says, might be running as a vice presidential candidate. Regardless, Roberts says, Merkley will have to weigh both those options as he is up for re-election in the U.S. Senate in 2020 and can only run in one of those races. According to the Oregon Constitution, "No person holding a lucrative office, or appointment under the United States or under this State, shall be eligible to a seat in the Legislative Assembly; nor shall any person hold more than one lucrative office at the same time."

Roberts says, "If he's on the ballot either as a president or vice presidential candidate, which I think frankly, I don't know if this is his intention, but I think of him more as a candidate for vice president, either way he wouldn't be able to stay in the Senate."

If he does take the plunge to run, Roberts says the biggest thing Merkley can do right now is gain more recognition and distinguish himself as a candidate.

"It's hard for me to say exactly how Merkley distinguishes himself from the rest of the field, but in a strange environment like we have today, anything's possible," Roberts says. "The first challenge is getting the nomination, and I don't think he'll be the only progressive Democrat running in the race."

He adds: "I think that's going to be the biggest challenge. What are you going to tell people that you have to offer that the other candidates don't?"

FOR THE GOOD OF THE PEOPLE

Merkley doesn't seem to be motivated so much by winning, per se, as he is by the idea of genuinely doing the right thing.

It's what propelled him into politics in the first place, from his work in developing countries and then in the nonprofit sphere — the feeling that the right things weren't getting done, so he would have to get in there and do them himself.

That, it seems, is what has always motivated Merkley, and he hopes that same desire for good is motivating everyday citizens right now in the current political climate. He says the biggest thing to do is to get involved and inspire others to do the same.

"Right now it's really important to reach out to your friends and family in other states and say to them, 'It's important you call your senator and weigh in,'" Merkley says. "It's important to be off the sidelines. That could mean getting engaged through volunteering for a nonprofit, getting engaged by writing letters to the editor."

He says this is the only way to truly make America, and the world, a better place.

"America is in big trouble. We're in a really dark place," he says. "And we basically have a government under assault from three powerful corrupting forces: one is dark money in campaigns, one is gerrymandering and one is voter suppression. And the only way to counter that is citizen engagement."

He adds: "Our vision of our Constitution is all about a government that would reflect the will of the people. Right now, through those forces, we have a system that produces laws for the powerful and the privileged, so if we're going to reclaim the vision that our nation was founded on, we have to be engaged."

Regardless of what Merkley decides come November, expect to hear his name pop up more and more in the coming months.

For example, he says, a book about his life and work might not be off the table. "There's still time left this year," Merkley says about publishing something in preparation for a presidential run. "I have noticed that virtually everybody running or thinking about running has a book."

Sitting in that Springfield Subway, he asked me and my colleague, *EW* staff writer Henry Houston, what the title and cover of his book should be. All the advice I had to give was to make sure to make the title something snappy and memorable. Henry suggested to Merkley that he and his dog, Sadie, be on the cover.

So, if next time you're walking by Smith Family Books and you see a book in the window with Merkley and an Airedale terrier on the front, you may want to pick it up. Because, who knows? The man might be our next president. ■