

OPINION

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GUEST COLUMN

A twist in the race for governor

The craziness known as Oregon politics took another twist last week. An Oregon-bred national journalist jumped into next year’s race for governor — maybe.

Nicholas Kristof grew up on a farm outside Yamhill before heading off to Harvard, a Rhodes scholarship and eventually two Pulitzer Prizes as a New York Times reporter and columnist.

Journalists seem mesmerized by Kristof’s potential candidacy, comparing it with Oregon’s legendary Gov. Tom McCall, who ascended from the newsroom. Of course, those were different times, and Republican McCall, besides

the exposure provided by his journalism career, had the political experience of a losing bid for Congress and being elected secretary of state before running for governor in 1966.

For the record, I’ve known Nick since he was a high school journalist at the McMinnville News-Register, where my professional career began. I’m not making an endorsement of him or any candidate. That is not my role as a columnist. Since Nick is a friend, it also would be a conflict of interest to speculate on whether he should run, whether he could win and whether he would be a good governor. I’ll leave that to others.

Mark Hester, a former Portland journalist turned communications consultant, wrote an insightful piece about Kristof on The Oregon Way blog.

“I have no interest in running for governor, but as a semiretired journalist who grew up on a farm and has lived in Oregon the past 25 years I do have some thoughts on traits that voters should expect from gubernatorial candidates and whether growing up on a farm or working as a journalist would help produce those traits,” Hester wrote.

Hester went on to list his desirable traits in a governor, adding: “In other words, success in executive office, especially elected office, often comes down to temperament and leadership. Where you grow up and your profession play a role in forming your temperament and forging leadership skills but so do a lot of other things.”

However, the political reality is that the No. 1 asset for becoming governor is electability.

In Oregon, that means A) being a Democrat, unless you’re the unusual candidate who is sufficiently conservative to win the Republican gubernatorial primary yet sufficiently centrist to appeal to a broad swath of independents, Democrats and Republicans at the general election; and B) have powerful financial and volunteer support, as is personified by Oregon’s public employee unions, unless



Nicholas Kristof is shown resting by a lake on the John Muir Trail in California.

Caroline Kristof

C) the chaos in Portland, plus burgeoning dissatisfaction with the state’s direction, opens the door for a savvy, centrist, well-financed independent candidate.

You’ll note that A and B seem contradictory. As for C, The Cook Political Report rates Oregon’s 2022 gubernatorial race as among the nine nationwide that are solidly in the Democratic win column.

If anyone had doubts about the impact of Oregon labor unions, those should have been dispelled by last year’s race for secretary of state. After former state Rep. Jennifer Williamson abruptly dropped out, state Sen. Shemia Fagan jumped in three months before the Democratic primary — and won, defeating more middle-of-the-road candidates. Fagan had an advantage that she already was a darling of Portland progressives, with her self-described reputation as a fighter and her raised-fist commitment to progressive causes. But she won because unions overwhelmingly backed her with their financial might and manpower.

Fagan, by the way, has said she would not run for governor in 2022. Speculation has centered on other well-known Democrats: Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum, State Treasurer Tobias Read, Labor Commissioner Val Hoyle, Multnomah County

Chair Deborah Kafoury, House Speaker Tina Kotek and union leader Melissa Unger.

A host of legislators and other officeholders also are quietly evaluating whether to stay put, leave politics or go for the governorship. A few lesser-known candidates, such as Yamhill County Commissioner Casey Kulla, already have formally declared their candidacy.

As a former state treasurer, Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler would have been a likely contender. Instead, the city’s turmoil has him facing a possible recall election.

For the most part, potential candidates have offered little clarity in recent days when asked about their ambitions. The typical answers — none of which tell us anything official — are that they’re focused on their current job or they’re evaluating their political future, or they have no comment. Barring an outright denial of interest, such answers suggest they’re conducting polling, checking potential support and determining whether there’s a viable path to make it through the Democratic primary and into the governorship. Candidates also spread unofficial word of their candidacy to lock up support and deter challengers.

Under the Oregon Constitution, a candidate for governor must be a U.S. citizen, at least age 30 and have resided in Oregon for the three years prior to being elected.

Eight Republicans have filed campaign committees. They include Salem oncologist Bud Pierce, the Republican nominee in 2016.

As for columnist Kristof, he’d planned to keep his political interest mum for now. Here’s what happened, as he described this week in his newsletter, which is going on hiatus:

“I had tried to keep this secret, but since I’ve spent a career trying to ferret out the secrets of others, maybe it’s karma that mine was reported. An Oregon newspaper, Willamette Week, correctly reported over the weekend that I’m considering running for governor of Oregon, and other news organizations including The Times have reported on this since.

“Here’s what happened. In June, I told my editor that I was thinking of a political run, and we agreed that to avoid any perceived conflict of interest, I would take a leave until I made a decision. If I decide to run, I will depart The Times. If I decide not to, I’ll return to the column.”

Dick Hughes has covered the Oregon political scene since 1976.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Outwitted

With the advent of the Delta variant, I’m wondering, could we’ve finally met a virus that has outwitted our stupidity?

DALE FLOWERS
Warrenton

Weeding

I write as a homeowner, coming to Seaside my entire life. I celebrate the centennial of the Prom, a main attraction of the area.

Before the festivities, I asked that weeding be done. This priority of caring would be welcome.

GRACE KEIGLEY
Mercer Island, Washington

Flying ebb

Green channel buoys
Knocked down by the current
Leave six knot wicked wakes.
Bulkers in the anchorage
Stretch out stud link anchor chain.
White horses on the spit
Buffalos on the bar
A fisherman wearing a cockeyed
Waterfront fuel dock cap
is found slumped in an idling car.
Heart attack?
A stroke?
Who knows?
The old highliner’s dead.
But others beg to differ
They say he caught the flying ebb.
(In memory of Scotty Parker).

GENO LEECH
Chinook, Washington

