

OPINION

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GUEST COLUMN

A most interesting governor’s race

Thanks to state Sen. Betsy Johnson and journalist Nicholas Kristof, Oregon is on the verge of the most interesting governor’s race in decades.

Both are Democrats, although Johnson plans to shed that party and run as an independent in 2022. What differentiates them from others, and makes their candidacies so intriguing, is both seem to have a sense of purpose. They are not simply seeking the next rung on the political ladder.



DICK HUGHES

Each has roots in rural Oregon. Both worry about the future of our state and grasp the need to bring Oregonians together. Both are pragmatists, instead of being tied to political ideology. Indeed, the independent-minded Johnson frequently is accused of being a Democrat in name only. Kristof, who has all-but-announced his candidacy, was considered a liberal leaning columnist yet not someone who could be pigeonholed.

Each is giving up good gigs to run. Kristof has resigned from the New York Times, relinquishing his column with its global reach. Johnson, of Scappoose, is not seeking reelection to the Senate, where she is co-chair of the Legislature’s budget-writing committee and one of the most influential people in state government.

And each faces long odds of becoming governor.

At the moment, most Oregonians have more pressing issues on their mind than the 2022 gubernatorial election — their household economic situation, their children’s schooling, their health amid the pandemic. For potential candidates, however, the next few weeks are crucial. They must jump in by early December to have sufficient time to raise the \$5 million to \$10 million that political analyst Jim Moore says will be needed for an effective campaign.

To help make sense of how the governor’s race is unfolding, this week I turned to Moore, a political science professor at Pacific University.

“It’s nice to have unusual candidates instead of the same-old, same-old,” Moore said. “This is the most wide-open race in 20 years, and that one 20 years ago was so fun. The three Democrats and three Republicans went around the state together and had open forums and things. We’re not going to see that this time, but that was a good one.”

Despite covering that 2002 race as a journalist, I even have trouble recalling all those candidates. As a refresher, the Democrats were Ted Kulongoski, former Supreme Court justice and attorney general; Jim Hill, former state treasurer; and Bev Stein, who chaired the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners. The Republicans were former legislator Kevin Mannix; Jack Roberts, state labor



Dave Killen/The Oregonian

State Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, has spent years on budget committees.

commissioner; and Ron Saxton, businessman and former chair of the Portland School Board.

Kulongoski defeated Mannix and Libertarian Tom Cox in the general election. It was redemption for Kulongoski, whom Gov. Vic Atiyeh trounced in the 1982 gubernatorial election.

It also was a lesson in how an impressive resume by itself is inadequate to woo voters. Oregonians want to feel a connection with the candidates, or at least with their party.

Because Gov. Kate Brown is term-limited from running again, the 2022 field is wide open.

The leading Democrats at this point would be House Speaker Tina Kotek, of Portland, and State Treasurer Tobias Read, of Beaverton. Read is term-limited, so it’s up or out for him. Kotek could run for the Legislature again, but she already is the longest-serving House speaker in Oregon history, and other representatives are expected to challenge for that position.

The best-known Republican probably is Salem oncologist Bud Pierce, who unsuccessfully ran against Brown in 2016. Sandy Mayor Stan Pulliam also is making noise with his fundraising so far.

No candidate has yet hit \$1 million. And in a wide-open election, money likely will determine the outcome.

“Raising money is crucial because basically everyone has to introduce themselves to the electorate, even the statewide Democrats and people like Bud Pierce, and especially people like Nick Kristof and Betsy Johnson and

even Tina Kotek,” Moore said.

In our polarized state and nation, party affiliation and ideology have an outsized effect on voters’ choices. Oregonians today are far less inclined to cross party lines in the way that Democratic Gov. John Kitzhaber sometimes picked up Republican votes and that Republican Dennis Richardson was elected secretary of state with the backing of some Democrats.

The conventional thinking remains that our next governor will be a Portland-area Democrat, powered into office by the public employee unions and their allies. It is almost impossible for an independent or third-party candidate to win. Yet if anyone can, it’s Johnson.

Kotek likely fended off some potential Democratic candidates by being the first to announce her candidacy. Johnson’s candidacy has a similar effect, claiming the middle-of-the-road position.

Her hope rests on the party primaries next May — that Democrats and Republicans each will nominate candidates at the extreme edges, making Oregonians more willing to consider a moderate alternative.

“Her problem is, does she look forward or does she harken back to, ‘I’m a Democrat or a moderate Republican the way things used to be,’ which is not really probably going to generate that many votes,” Moore said. “She’s got to look forward and do more than what she did on her declaration statement, which was those liberal Democrats will just keep going and spending us into the

ground and those Trumpist Republicans are nuts.

“She’s got to have more than that.” As for Kristof, he must overcome the carpetbagger label. He technically might meet the Oregon residency requirement, but opponents likely would challenge that in court.

More difficult is defining his capabilities to serve as governor and convincing voters that he has remained a true Oregonian while a globe-trotting, Pulitzer Prize-winning, New York-based journalist.

He grew up outside Yamhill and now lives there. His forming a campaign committee is the latest indication that he’s going to run.

Kristof has written thoughtfully about the problems afflicting rural and urban communities in Oregon and elsewhere. But his messages are contained in newspaper columns and books, nothing that easily fits on a bumper sticker or is easily explained as a policy initiative.

I keep thinking back to a casual conversation I had with a friend this summer. The social, legal and political turmoil in Portland had devastated that city’s reputation and knocked out Mayor Ted Wheeler as a potential gubernatorial candidate. I wondered whether those well-documented problems had altered Oregon’s traditional political dynamics.

“Can anyone from the Portland area win the governorship?” I pondered.

My friend responded, “Can anyone not from Portland win?”

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.

GUEST COLUMN

Fed up with poor quality jobs

Many workers have had enough with poor quality jobs.

A record number of workers quit their jobs this past August, according to figures recently released by the U.S. Department of Labor. Some 4.3 million Americans said goodbye to their employer, eclipsing the previous record of 4 million set in April of this year.



JUAN CARLOS ORDÓÑEZ

Meanwhile, all across the country, workers fed up with their working conditions are going on strike or threatening to do so. “Never in a decade of covering organized labor have I seen this sort of wave of labor uprisings bold enough to smash into mainstream consciousness,” a labor reporter recently wrote.

Oregon is no stranger to Striketober. Earlier this month, workers at Kaiser Permanente voted to authorize a strike and health care workers at the McKenzie-Willamette Medical Center in Springfield carried out a two-day strike. And in September, a national strike of Nabisco workers that began in Portland came to an end after workers won a better deal.

While future research may explain what exactly ignited this upsurge, some of the likely causes are not hard to discern. The pandemic may have reset attitudes toward work, having revealed that many poorly



Rachael Flores

A sign of the times outside of a Burger King in Nebraska.

paid jobs are, in fact, essential. Workers now have the option to look for better jobs, because the economic recovery following the initial crash has led to a tight labor market. And it likely hasn’t gone unnoticed by workers that the fortunes of the rich have ballooned during the pandemic.

Ultimately, the current mood reflects a deep dissatisfaction with the pre-pandemic

status quo, one where workers lacked power and poor quality jobs abounded. As we examined in detail recently, on the eve of the pandemic, at a time when Oregon enjoyed one of the strongest job markets on record, more than half of all jobs in the state paid too little to support a family.

For a family of two or more to afford basic necessities, a job needed to pay

above \$20 per hour in 2019. Yet, about 55% of all jobs in Oregon that year failed to provide a survival level wage. A full third of all jobs in the state paid less than \$15 an hour.

Low pay is only part of the problem. Workers toiling in low-wage jobs often contend with additional challenges, such as skimpy or no benefits like health insurance. Sometimes, the job doesn’t provide enough hours of work — it’s only a part-time job. And sometimes, workers must contend with unpredictable work schedules that can wreak havoc on family life and prohibit taking a second job.

The prevalence of poor-quality jobs helps explain why economic insecurity is so widespread, why so many Oregon families struggle to make ends meet.

There is a lot that Oregon lawmakers can do to help fix what ails the labor market. Our report lays out a series of recommendations Oregon lawmakers can implement to address the problem of poor quality jobs, ranging from improving workers’ ability to negotiate for better pay and working conditions, boosting worker incomes, and making basic needs more affordable.

Workers are fed up with poor quality jobs and are doing something about it. So too should Oregon lawmakers.

Juan Carlos Ordóñez is the communications director of the Oregon Center for Public Policy.