

EAST OREGONIAN

Founded October 16, 1875

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OUR VIEW

Measures affect legislation long before the ballot

Chicken and egg? Jailbird and warden? Dog wagging its tail, or vice versa?

We're struggling for a metaphor that describes the relationship between the Legislature and Oregon's powerful ballot measure system.

Perhaps it's the classic yin and yang.

Take, for example, this year's short session. Both the Senate and the House pushed through a hurried, imperfect minimum wage bill.

The governor has pledged to sign it. Even Republicans, who voted against the bill in large numbers, seemed willing to support some kind of wage hike this legislative session.

Why this fast action from a body known for being deliberative, partisan and at times obstructionist?

Well, it is because the specter of a minimum wage ballot measure is hovering on the horizon. If the Legislature didn't do something, goes the thinking, who knows what the voters would do? Perhaps the ballot measure would peg statewide wages at a hard \$15 an hour, everywhere from a downtown Portland skyscraper to the lonesome pastures outside Condon.

The inflexibility of ballot measure-induced legislation scares legislators and, to some extent, it scares us too.

Don't get us wrong — a newspaper would be crazy not to believe citizens and taxpayers deserve the loudest voice in government. If we didn't believe in democracy and an informed electorate, we'd have looked for a different career.

There are some issues that should be decided no other way than a majority vote. Gay marriage, for instance. Marijuana legalization. Those are simple, straightforward questions that most Oregonians are reasonably informed about and have an opinion on.

Both issues failed their first time on a statewide ballot, but as culture changed so too did the opinion of a majority of voters. While gay

marriage was made federally legal before Oregon voters had their say on the matter, we'd argue that both became legal at the right time for this state, in step with the people's wishes.

But where the ballot measure system can have negative, unintended consequences is with more complex issues, especially regarding the economy and criminal justice.

Tight local budgets are due in part to the compression put into law in 1990 by Measure 5 — something most voters could not have foreseen or understood. Compression has its benefits in some instances — keeping a cap on the steady rise of increasing taxes. But in other examples, especially in poor and rural areas, the compression law has had a detrimental effect on basic city services and public safety. But the inflexible language in the measure means completely different circumstances are forced to play by the same set of rules.

Measure 11, passed in 1994, established mandatory minimum sentencing for several crimes. It proved that Oregon would be tough on crime, but it also contributed to an ever-expanding prison population. Within six years the number of Oregon prisoners had increased by 41 percent, and it has continued to climb since then. It took away the ability of judges to adjust a sentence based on the specific circumstances of a case, which some could argue was the point of the measure. But look toward the Hammonds and other recent high-profile cases, and you can see where some flexibility can be beneficial.

You don't get that with a ballot measure. And while enacting law that way is part of our culture here in Oregon, we must realize the effects of that are both positive and negative. Which leaves many legislators feeling they have no choice but to respond to the rising yang with their own yin. Doesn't always work.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

OTHER VIEWS

Oregon students the worst at just showing up

The (Bend) Bulletin

Oregon is a national education leader in one of the most awful ways: absenteeism.

Some 94,000 students miss at least 10 percent of the school year.

Wonder why Oregon students don't do better when measured against their peers in other states? The school absenteeism epidemic is one reason.

The Oregonian reported that one study in Oregon found that students who miss 10 percent of kindergarten can lag on average "almost a year behind in reading by third grade and are unlikely to ever catch up." Students who miss so much school are also unlikely to graduate.

The Legislature has recently taken up the question of what to do about it. House Bill 4002 directs the Oregon Department of Education to come up with a plan by December.

The bill would require a process for

disclosing absenteeism at each school, best practices for schools to implement and track, a way to identify schools that need more help and what that help would be, and an estimate of the costs involved.

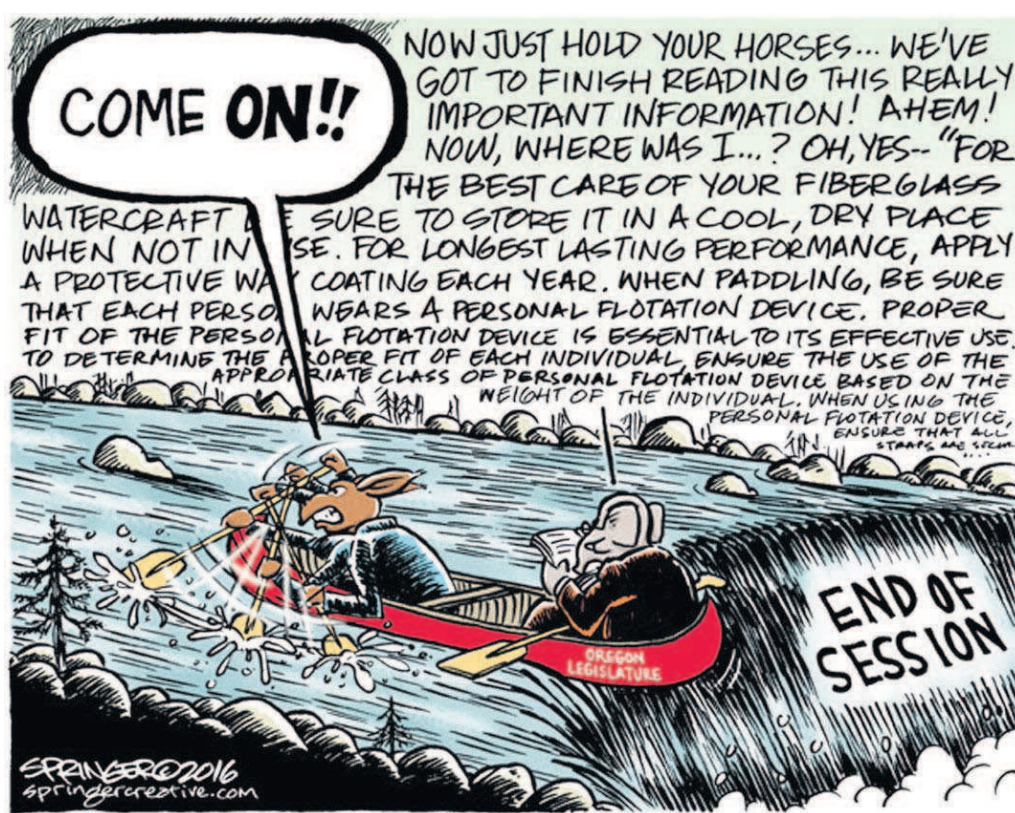
The bill is not without controversy. The key point of debate is: Can the Department of Education really make a difference?

The answer is: Let's hope so.

So many of the reasons children don't get to school are outside of school. They are in the home or lack a stable home.

School districts in Oregon and other states have found ways to make a difference. They don't let repeated absences go unnoticed. They talk to the students about it. They check in with them. They encourage them. They contact parents. And when all else fails, schools can even take families to court.

Other states do a much better job than Oregon of controlling absenteeism. Surely Oregon can do it, too.



OTHER VIEWS

America's stacked deck

It's a little bizarre this political season to see wealthy candidates in both parties denouncing our political system for representing mostly the interests of, well, wealthy people.

Bizarre, perhaps, and sometimes a tad hypocritical, but also accurate. America's political system is rigged. The deck is stacked against ordinary people. That's the frustration that has fueled, in very different ways, the anti-establishment campaigns of Donald Trump, Ted Cruz and Bernie Sanders in particular, and that is leading other candidates, like Hillary Clinton, to grab their pitchforks as well.

"Yes, the economy is rigged in favor of those at the top," Clinton declared in the Democratic debate last week.

One glimpse of the structural unfairness in America is this: A dumb rich kid is now more likely to graduate from college than a smart poor kid, according to Robert Putnam of Harvard University.

Another: The 20 wealthiest Americans, a group that would fit comfortably inside a luxury private jet bound for a private Caribbean island, are worth more than the poorer half of the American population, according to a recent report from the Institute for Policy Studies. Forbes' wealthiest 100 are worth as much as all 42 million African-Americans, the report says.

"Correctly, we suspect that the system is rigged, our government has become coin-operated and that we've been sidelined," Wendell Potter and Nick Penniman write in their eye-opening new book about money in politics, "Nation on the Take." They call for a "profound course correction," like those the United States has periodically undertaken before.

So it's healthy for American voters to be demanding change. But when societies face economic pain, they sometimes turn to reforms, and other times to scapegoats (like refugees this year). So the historic question for 2016 is which direction the popular revolt among American voters will ultimately take. A President Trump or President Cruz would build walls and waterboard suspected terrorists, a President Clinton or President Sanders would raise the minimum wage and invest in at-risk children.

It seems to me to make more sense to target solutions than scapegoats, but sense is often in short supply in politics. After a characteristically brilliant speech by Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic nominee for president in 1952 and 1956, a supporter is said to have bellowed, "Every thinking American will vote for you!"

Legend has it that Stevenson shouted back: "That's not enough. I need a majority!" In the solutions domain, a starting point



NICHOLAS KRISTOF
Comment

should be to reduce the influence of money in politics.

The pharmaceutical industry, for example, has used its lobbying heft — it spent \$272,000 in campaign donations per member of Congress last year, and it has more lobbyists than there are members of Congress — to bar the government from bargaining for drug prices in Medicare. That amounts to a \$50 billion annual gift to pharmaceutical companies.

The rise of inequality has complex roots, and some aren't easily solved. For example, the empowerment of women, coupled with the tendency of people to marry those like themselves, means that high-earning

men increasingly pair with high-earning women to form super-high-earning families.

Likewise, many Americans are wealthy in part because they worked hard, saved constantly and invested brilliantly. That's to be celebrated, but all this plays out on a tilted field that also affects outcomes, and social values.

Paul Piff, a social psychologist, has conducted experiments in which Monopoly games are rigged so that one player has more money to start with and is almost predestined to win. It turns out that the wealthy player lords it over others and even grabs more pretzels from the communal bowl.

In this election season, many Americans feel that they are living that rigged Monopoly game.

Two business school professors, Michael Norton and Dan Ariely, showed people charts of the distribution of wealth in egalitarian Sweden and in highly unequal America and asked them which kind of society they would prefer to live in, without saying which country each chart represented. Some 92 percent of Americans chose Sweden's distribution.

Likewise, the great philosopher John Rawls developed a thought experiment to judge the fairness of a society: Imagine that you will be placed in a society but don't know your station there. You're unsure if you'll be rich or poor, smart or dumb, black or white, male or female. In that case, many of us might choose Sweden as well, rather than risk ending up in the wrong ZIP code in the United States today.

So American voters are right to feel angry. Yet the challenge is not just to diagnose the problem but also to prescribe the right fixes and achieve them in this political environment.

So may the insurrection gain ground but be channeled not by punishing scapegoats, but by pursuing reforms that make the system work better for ordinary Americans.

Nicholas Kristof grew up on a sheep and cherry farm in Yamhill, Oregon. A columnist for The New York Times since 2001, he won the Pulitzer Prize two times.

YOUR VIEWS

Liberal spirit has replaced independent spirit in Oregon

As a native Oregonian born here in this state in the 1930s I personally had to make many adjustments politically to run a business in this state.

Agriculture has been my primary profession, running two businesses in the western part of the state, and I have been a Republican for 45 years. In 1998 I left the Republican Party, as I saw it dwindling into an empty shell of what it once was as I saw it. I took up the non-affiliated party until two months ago and registered back to the Republican Party again. From 2000 my wife and I ran the Windyhill Sheep Ranch in the Burnt River area in the town of Unity. That side of the state is all agriculture and mostly Republican, and at times I felt we were a white dot in a red sea.

After totally retiring from ranching and selling the ranch we relocated to Ione, a nice, quiet and clean town. Retiring gave me some time to think about an article I wrote for The Oregonian in 2010: "Why does Oregon come out so badly?"

Today's state officials seem to have gotten a lot worse in their thinking on how to solve issues that require understanding of how the

west side of the state thinks as to what the east side has to do to make a living from the land. Looking back to that article I can see no changes, but blockage of ideas to try to get this state back on the right track to prosperity.

The state seems to make the case by wasting millions of dollars from state employee funds to failed health care programs and liberalized programs that people seem to think they don't have to work as hard to get what they want. All of the people in Oregon have an independent spirit, but if you live on the eastern side of the state you are on your own. And when it comes to voting on a statewide issue that would benefit the eastern side, the majority of the vote come from the populated areas.

The tax structure in Oregon is one of the highest and does not encourage new development, but drives away the businesses that are already here and the ones that are entrenched have been made secure by such massive tax giveaways they could not even consider leaving.

Oregon is now a state with three parties — red, white, and blue. In the coming years it will be a test of time to see if liberalism works.

Ronald Blaine Folck
Ione