

# O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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## OUR VIEW

## Brown needs to tackle PERS reform

**K**ate Brown was re-elected as Oregon governor with 49.99 percent of the vote in the latest statewide results.

She should never forget that number. Neither should her Democratic colleagues in the Oregon Legislature. Even if her tally edges past 50 percent in the final results, voters did not seem very enthusiastic for her policies or her performance.

Oregon needs a new Kate Brown, one who will govern from the center instead of one who is seen as placating the public-employee unions and their allies, who not only helped keep her in office but also added to their Democratic majorities in the Legislature.

Brown has resolutely opposed significant changes in the Oregon Public Employees Retirement System, even though the pension system's \$22 billion unfunded liability is grabbing ever-larger pieces of city, county, school and state agency budgets. It remains confounding that the governor and unions are willing to sacrifice current jobs — and the public services those employees perform — to prop up pensions.

A number of worthwhile changes have

been proposed by state Sens. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, and Tim Knopp, R-Bend; League of Oregon Cities; Oregon School Boards Association; and other individuals and organizations. Meanwhile, the need for PERS reforms is an ongoing topic at the annual Oregon Leadership Summit because so little has been accomplished during Brown's tenure.

Yet Brown and her cohorts argue that the proposals would accomplish too little, would be unconstitutional and would break contracts. Not so.

Certainly, any changes could not be retroactive. The Oregon Supreme Court has been clear. But going forward, even small changes collectively could have a significant impact on PERS' stability. As to the legality of some proposals, only the courts can determine that; it is worth legislating those good ideas and putting them before the courts.

The current pension system pits job-seeking and current public employees against retirees and those close to retirements. That is insane, which is why everyone should have a stake in meaningful PERS reforms.



AP Photo/Don Ryan, File

**Oregon Gov. Kate Brown, left, poses for photos with supporters after a rally on Oct. 17 in Portland.**

Now that Brown no longer has to curry favor to gain re-election, she should strive to govern from the moderate center and represent all of Oregon, not just the urban population centers whose Democratic voters propelled her re-election.

She must set well-defined, achievable goals in key areas: improving mental health care for youth and adults, lengthening the school year and boosting graduation rates,

combating homelessness, developing affordable housing, strengthening foster care while reducing the need for it, expanding substance-abuse treatment and fighting the opioids epidemic, and expanding economic opportunity throughout rural Oregon.

Brown tends to have so many priorities that they become meaningless. To be an effective governor, that must change. PERS reform is the place to start.

## YOUR VIEWS



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

**A helicopter maneuvers into position for a water drop onto a fire that started near Weston on Aug. 9, 2017.**

## Keep helicopters on the front lines

Medford Mail Tribune

**W**ith firefighting resources spread thin around the West in a big fire year, luck and timing can make all the difference. If high-capacity helicopters happen to be here and available when a major lightning storm hammers Southern Oregon, that's good. If those helicopters already have been committed to big fires burning elsewhere, that's not so good.

So it only makes sense that local officials should explore ways to procure our own dedicated aircraft, so they're ready and waiting to be called on to attack fires before they have a chance to grow into conflagrations.

Jackson County commissioners are considering spending \$2 million to station two Type 1 helicopters here during fire season. Type 1 helicopters are capable of hauling and dropping up to 3,000 gallons of water or retardant at a time. By comparison, Type 2 choppers carry hundreds of gallons.

As luck and timing would have it, two Type 1 helicopters were standing by at the Ashland airport July 15 after working the Klamathon fire earlier in the month. So

when a lightning storm ignited 145 new fires, those aircraft were able to attack many of them right away.

Dave Larson, southwest district forester for the Oregon Department of Forestry, says there is no doubt that the presence of those aircraft meant fewer of those fires became big fires, but he wants a detailed study of the past 15 fire seasons before local officials lobby for state funding. It's possible that one Type 1 helicopter and three Type 2 choppers might be a more effective mix for initial attack.

That's a prudent step, but not if it means a delay in seeking funding. The 2019 Legislature convenes Jan. 22, and lawmakers will be adopting the next two-year state budget.

As a practical matter, \$2 million is not a great deal of money, considering ODF spent \$60 million fighting fires in this region this year. And it's a bargain if dedicated aircraft reduce overall firefighting costs by keeping fires small.

This area's legislative delegation should make it a priority to secure state funding. If necessary, the county should put up the money for the first year just to get the aircraft here in time for next summer's fire season.

## OTHER VIEWS

## Let the people vote

**T**he United States finally has the pro-democracy movement that it needs.

Last week, ballot initiatives to improve the functioning of democracy fared very well. In Florida — a state divided nearly equally between right and left — more than 64 percent of voters approved restoring the franchise to 1.4 million people with felony convictions. In Colorado, Michigan and Missouri, measures to reduce gerrymandering passed. In Maryland, Michigan and Nevada, measures to simplify voter registration passed. "In red states as well as blue states," Chiraag Bains of the think tank Demos says, "voters overwhelmingly sent the message: We're taking our democracy back."

Of course, there is still an enormous amount of work to do. Voting remains more difficult here than in almost any other affluent country. On Election Day, I had to wait in line for 45 minutes, even though I have a job that gives me the luxury of voting in the middle of the day.

And this country also suffers, unfortunately, from an anti-democracy movement: Leaders of the Republican Party — out of a fear of the popular will — keep trying to make voting harder. They have closed polling places, reduced voting hours and introduced bureaucratic hurdles.

Amid last week's mostly good news, Arkansas and North Carolina passed new voter-identification measures that are clearly intended to hold down African-American turnout. Most outrageously, top Republicans, including President Donald Trump and Sen. Marco Rubio, are arguing that Florida should not carefully count all of the votes from this year's election.

Overall, though, the election was an excellent one for American democracy. The battle has now been fully joined: Progressive activists have come to understand the importance of promoting and protecting democracy. Most citizens — across the political left, center and right — agree.

Before the midterms, the leaders of Indivisible, the big progressive grassroots group, conducted a national survey of its members — people who had marched, knocked on doors or otherwise gotten politically involved over the past two years. The survey included a list of issues, and asked which should be the Democrats' top priorities after the midterms. It included health care, gun safety, the environment, civil rights, reproductive rights, taxes, the courts, education and criminal justice reform. And there was a landslide winner. But it wasn't any of those issues, important as they are.

The winning issue was democracy. Some 69 percent of respondents named it in their top three priorities. Health care finished a distant second, at 48 percent. Then came the environment (43 percent), judicial nominations (32 percent) and civil

rights (29 percent).

"It comes from this general concern about democratic institutions not being reflective of the will of the people," Ezra Levin, a co-founder of Indivisible, told me. Leah Greenberg, also a co-founder, says, "We have to unrig the rules." Best of all, the success of the recent ballot initiatives shows that these attitudes exist among many centrists and

conservatives, too.

True, some pro-democracy changes are not realistic anytime soon. Trump and this Senate won't enact a new federal Voting Rights Act, nor will they grant the full rights of citizenship to the residents of Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. But many other changes are feasible.

At the state level, a wave of new governors and legislators will soon take office, and they can accomplish a lot. States that don't have automatic voter registration should adopt it. (Hey, Gov. Andrew Cuomo: Isn't New York supposed to be a progressive leader?) States that have not yet created nonpartisan offices to draw congressional districts should follow the examples of Colorado, Michigan and Missouri.

If governors and legislators won't act, citizen activists should, using ballot initiatives. Most of these measures will pass, in both blue states and red. Arizona, Florida and Ohio, among others, could hold initiatives to establish automatic registration, Stephen Wolf of Daily Kos has noted. Still other states could follow Florida's lead and re-enfranchise people with felony convictions.

This is also a moment to think ambitiously about a pro-democracy agenda. Any Democrat considering a 2020 run for president should be working on a democracy plan, much as any Democrat running in 2008 had a health care plan.

My own wish list includes universal voting by mail, which some parts of the West use — and which lifts turnout much more than automatic voter registration alone. I would also like to see more places lower the voting age to 16 for local elections, as a few Maryland cities have. If you're old enough to operate a lethal 2-ton vehicle, you're old enough to have a say in your community's future.

More democratic participation won't solve all of the country's problems. But it will solve some of them. The United States has low voter turnout for a reason: Our system — with workday elections, long voting lines and cumbersome registration rules — is designed to discourage mass participation. That same system once barred women, African-Americans and 18-year-olds, among others, from voting.

The system has changed before, and it can change again. It is already starting to.

David Leonhardt is a columnist for the New York Times.

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