

# O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

CHRISTOPHER RUSH  
PublisherKATHRYN B. BROWN  
OwnerANDREW CUTLER  
EditorWYATT HAUPT JR.  
News EditorJADE McDOWELL  
Hermiston Editor

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## OUR VIEW

# SB 870 should be decided by Oregon voters

There is great irony in a legislative proposal to embrace the National Popular Vote, which would change how Oregon helps elect our nation's president.

Senate Bill 870 would require that Oregon's votes in the Electoral College be cast for whoever wins the national popular vote for president, regardless of the election outcome in Oregon. The bill's backers say they believe in "one person, one vote." However, they are adamant against letting voters make that change through a ballot measure; instead, they insist the Legislature do so.

The bill passed the Senate on 17-12 vote and passed out of the House Rules Committee on Wednesday on a party-line vote with no discussion. It has not yet been scheduled for action on the Senate floor.

The Oregon House passed similar bills 2009, 2013 and 2015, only to see the legislation disappear in the Senate. Last time, supporters of National Popular Vote refused to accept a compromise offered by Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, to send the proposal to voters.

This year, advocates started in the Senate, where the increased number of liberal Democratic senators ensured passage of SB 870.

Our nation's founders created a process in which electors — now referred to as the Electoral College, a term that does not appear in the Constitution — choose the president and vice president. This arrangement was an 18th century compromise between Congress' electing the president and having the people do so. It also gave a greater voice to smaller states, although advocates of National Popular Vote say that no longer applies.

The Electoral College has proved



AP Photo/Andrew Selsky

**Senate Bill 870, which would require that Oregon's votes in the Electoral College be cast for whoever wins the national popular vote for president, regardless of the election outcome in Oregon, recently passed the Senate on 17-12 vote and passed out of the House Rules Committee on Wednesday on a party-line vote with no discussion.**

controversial, to say the least. Through the centuries, more than 700 proposals have been introduced in Congress to reform or eliminate the Electoral College. The impetus stems in large part from five presidents — including two of the past three — losing the popular vote but winning the presidency via the Electoral College.

That is how Republicans Donald Trump and George W. Bush came to occupy the White House instead of Democrats Hillary Clinton in 2016 and Al Gore in 2000. The other three, in case you're wondering, are presidents Benjamin Harrison (1888), Rutherford B. Hayes (1876) and John Quincy Adams (1824).

State Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, recalled that recent history in urging her fellow senators, unsuccessfully, to send the issue to voters.

"There are two words not mentioned in Senate Bill 870: Donald

Trump. In my opinion, he's the reason the National Popular Vote has caught on so aggressively of late," Johnson said. "If we're going to end an historic institution, let it be prompted by something loftier than dislike for one particular president.

"Let regular voters make that decision, not the Legislature."

Johnson, Courtney and Senate Majority Leader Ginny Burdick, D-Portland, voted against the bill. Two Republicans voted for it — Brian Boquist of Dallas and Chuck Thomsen of Hood River.

SB 870 would add Oregon to the 14 states, plus the District of Columbia, that have adopted the "Interstate Compact for Agreement Among the States to Elect the President by National Popular Vote."

If Oregon joined, participating jurisdictions would have a collective total of 196 electoral votes. The com-

act will become legally binding once enough more states have joined to reach an Electoral College majority — 270 votes.

The Electoral College comprises 538 electors. Each state has as many electors as it does U.S. senators and members of the U.S. House of Representatives, giving Oregon seven electors. And under the 23rd Amendment to the Constitution, the District of Columbia is allocated three electors.

Like most other states, Oregon has required its electors to cast their Electoral College ballots for whichever presidential candidate wins the popular vote in their own state, regardless of what happened nationally.

Feelings run strong on both sides of the issue. Advocates of National Popular Vote consider the Electoral College an anachronism from an era in which the white male elite made all the decisions. They contend the current system disenfranchises members of political minorities — for example, Republicans in Oregon, Democrats in Idaho — because such states are predictably blue or red in presidential races.

Opponents warn that Americans should be very wary of tinkering with the U.S. Constitution, even in a roundabout way. They say the change would make it even less likely that presidential candidates would personally campaign in Oregon or other small states.

In any case, this is an issue that deserves to be decided by Oregon's 2,783,496 registered voters, not 90 legislators.

If lawmakers believe Oregon should join Washington, California and 13 other jurisdictions in the National Popular Vote movement, then put the measure on the 2020 statewide primary election ballot.

## OTHER VIEWS

### Fix PERS now, not in the future

Albany Democrat-Herald

We suppose we should be grateful that the Oregon Legislature has even acknowledged the slow-motion crisis that is the Public Employees Retirement System. The problem is that the action the Legislature is primed to take this session — in the form of Senate Bill 1049 — is basically the same strategy it's used for decades: kicking the can down the road.

Even state Sen. Sara Gelsler of Corvallis, who is gaining a reputation this session for unusually blunt talk, recognized the problem: She was one of five Democrats who voted against the bill, which passed on a 16-12 vote. (The mid-valley's other senator, Republican Fred Girod of Stayton, was one of three Republicans who voted for it; he called it "the hardest vote of our lives.")

To be fair, there is a hard part of Senate Bill 1049, and it's going to be hard for members of the House of Representatives when they take up the measure: The bill proposes redirecting a portion of the retirement contributions employees currently make to a supplemental 401(k)-like savings plan. Under the provisions of the bill, some of those contributions — 2.5% of pay for employees hired before Aug. 28, 2003, and 0.75% for employees hired after — would go into an account that would support pension benefits.

By reducing the amount of money going into the supplementary retirement accounts, the plan would reduce employees' overall retirement benefits by 1 to 2 percent of pay, according to *The Oregonian's* Ted Sickinger, whose reporting on PERS continues to be essential.

That might not seem like a lot, but as Sickinger noted, many public employees say they're underpaid today, and there's some merit to that argument. And public employee unions are bitterly opposed to these provisions in Senate Bill 1049, so voting for it did require some political courage on the part of senators.

But here's the problem with the bill: It doesn't put much of a dent in the \$27 billion unfunded liability currently stalking the state's pension system. And, in fact, some 75% of its cost savings (estimated at about \$1.2 billion to \$1.8 billion in the 2021-23 budget cycle) come from extending the minimum payment schedule on the deficit by eight to 10 years.

Gelsler didn't mince words: "We are pushing this cost off to future legislatures, to other Oregonians hoping that at some point in the future we will come back and find something that is politically feasible," she said during debate on the measure. "That doesn't make sense to me because that is how we got to this place right now."

If the bill passes the House, and is signed by Gov. Kate Brown, taxpayers won't pay off the PERS deficit until the 2041-43 budget cycle, as opposed to paying it off by 2035.

But that relies on a pair of questionable assumptions. First, it assumes that the system continues to generate its average rates of return on investments, but that's an area in which the system has struggled in the past. (To be fair, it often has been saddled with unrealistic rates of returns in an attempt to make the books look a little better.)

The second assumption is even more questionable: A prolonged economic downturn could play havoc with these plans. And one thing is for sure: Our extended economic expansion will not endure forever. In fact, some economists (including some who work for the state) say it could come as early as next year. We can't say when the downturn will occur. But you can be sure it will come.

Part of the reasoning behind Senate Bill 1049 is to help ensure that the revenue headed to Oregon's K-12 school districts thanks to a new tax on businesses won't be swallowed up by increasing PERS premiums. The bill will help prevent that. But legislators are fooling themselves if they think this is the last word on PERS reform.

## OTHER VIEWS

### The welfare state must be fixed

Ella is a British woman who grew up in a broken home and was abused by her stepdad. Her eldest son got thrown out of school and ended up sitting around the house drinking. By the time her daughter was 16, she was pregnant and had an eating disorder. Ella, in her mid-30s, had never had a real job. Life was a series of endless crises — temper tantrums, broken washing machines, her son banging his head against the walls.

Every time the family came into contact with the authorities, another caseworker was brought in. An astonishing 73 professionals spread across 20 different agencies and departments got involved with this family. Nobody had ever sat down with them to devise a comprehensive way forward.

In her book, "Radical Help," British social entrepreneur Hilary Cottam tracks how one of the social workers in Ella's case spent his days. Roughly 74% of his time was spent on administrative matters. Only 14% of his time was actually spent with the family he was meant to be serving. The administrative system around Ella and her family costs roughly 250,000 pounds (\$317,000) per year.

Cottam asked the government workers involved in Ella's case if they could recall a time when they'd transformed a family so it no longer needed government help. They couldn't think of one.

I met Cottam in London last week and she made the point that welfare systems are often designed to manage needs, but they are not designed to build capabilities so that families can stand on their own.

Moreover, most Western systems were not designed to confront the kind of poverty prevalent today. When these systems were put in place in the 1950s and '60s, unemployment was more often a temporary thing that happened between the time you got laid off from a big employer and

the time you got hired by a new one. Now, economic insecurity is often a permanent state, as people patch together different jobs to make ends meet. Health issues for people in the welfare system are often chronic — obesity, diabetes, many forms of mental illness.

Our legacy welfare structures are ill suited to today's poverty. Cottam has spent the past decade or so helping local authorities across Britain build new welfare programs. Her programs start by shifting power to the former "recipients" of services and building social networks around the families to help them achieve their goals.

For example, Ella was asked if she would like to lead a "life team" that would help her family turn around. She agreed. She was given the power to select the people for the team.

Members of the team spent 80% of their time with the family and 20% on administration. Ella and the team worked to stabilize her most immediate issue — negotiating eviction notices. Then the team worked to improve family dynamics so there wasn't so much violence and screaming.

After a family is stable, the team and family work on building skills and telling stories of success. By 18 months, many of the families involved in the Life Team program no longer need the team. Ella got her first office job and assumed more responsibility for her family. Her kids were back in mainstream schooling.

The old welfare programs were designed for people enmeshed in thick communities but who had suffered a temporary setback. Today many people lack precisely that web of thick relationship. The welfare state of the future has to build the social structures that people need to thrive.

David Brooks is a columnist for *The New York Times*.

DAVID BROOKS  
COMMENT