

Opinion

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Keep the state away from kicker

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

Oregon taxpayers may have heard they would be getting a big, fat kicker check on their 2019 taxes. The tax credit would be worth about \$180 for people making between \$35,000 and \$36,000 and more for people making more.

But what happens when Oregon lawmakers face the prospect of returning money to taxpayers? The Legislature's unofficial maxim — thou shalt not give taxpayers their money back — blazes brightly enough to make the Capitol dome glow.

There's a proposal this session to essentially do away with the kicker. And there's a proposal to shrink the 2019 kicker check. Both should be rejected.

Oregon's kicker law is one of the few controls on state spending. When the state underestimates how much personal income tax revenue it will receive by 2 percent or more, money gets kicked back to taxpayers. Any personal income tax revenue that is above the original two-year fiscal projection is sent back.

The possible change for the 2019 kicker check comes from House Bill 2975. It looks innocuous enough. There's no mention of the kicker anywhere in the bill. The operative language is: "Sections 24, 25, 26, 27 and 29, chapter 725, Oregon Laws 2017, are repealed."

When the bill came up in the Legislature's Joint Ways and Means Committee, Sen. Fred Girod, R-Stayton, described it as a routine matter "to support a rebalance of the 2017-2019 approved budget." Nobody on the committee, including Rep. Mike McLane, R-Powell Butte, asked any questions. It easily passed out of committee and onto the House floor with a recommendation for the House to pass it.

But what the bill would do is reduce the overall size of the kicker by about \$108 million from an original total of about \$750 million. The bill transfers that \$108 million out of the general fund budget for 2017-19. It was originally added in to help with state expenses. The change would make every kicker check proportionally smaller.

After the bill passed out of committee, McLane learned — thanks to Rep. Dan Rayfield, D-Corvallis — that the bill would, in fact, have an effect on the kicker. McLane pointed out on the House floor that at least \$28 million of the \$108 million being moved out by HB 2975 is derived from income taxes paid by Oregon taxpayers. It should be part of the kicker. The rest of the money could arguably be moved out. It was not directly related to personal income taxes. For instance, more than \$40 million came from legal settlements won by the state.

Despite McLane's argument, the House's Democratic majority passed the bill on to the Senate over Republican objections. The Senate should reject this unfair taking of the kicker.

GUEST EDITORIAL

House Democrats need to prepare a 2020 budget

Editorial from Bloomberg News:

The process of funding the U.S. government begins when the president submits a budget request to Congress in February. Then everything falls apart.

At least, that's the way things have been going, year after year. In a more rational world, Congress would prepare a budget resolution of its own, as the law requires. The details would be worked out in committees, and compromise between House and Senate versions would be achieved. Then Congress would use the final resolution to arrive at appropriations for each federal department and agency bills that the president would sign into law by the Oct. 1 start of the new fiscal year.

But Congress has taken to sidestepping that crucial first budget resolution, and then dodging specific appropriations bills as well. When

House Republicans were in charge last year, they failed to bring a budget to the floor, avoiding endorsing either the yawning deficit their recent tax bill had created or the unpopular program cuts that they contend are necessary to narrow it. Now Democrats are looking to duck their responsibility on the budget rather than risk a public fight over Medicare expansion, funding to address climate change and other controversial issues.

The lack of a congressional budget resolution doesn't mean that Congress will accept the president's budget. Far from it. Instead, party leaders jury-rig appropriations bills, now adding up to close to \$5 trillion per year, without the benefit of orderly public hearings. Frequently, the spending bills are not done until after Oct. 1. The government is kept open via temporary spending bills known as continuing resolutions.

As a consequence, federal departments and contractors incur a costly loss of predictability and often higher expenses. And, of course, federal shutdowns happen with embarrassing frequency.

To their (partial) credit, Republicans last year managed to pass a handful of appropriations bills by the start of the fiscal year. But they left the rest of the government to be funded by continuing resolutions — with a lengthy and damaging shutdown in between resolutions. The madness ended only with an omnibus spending package signed into law in February.

Various fixes for this broken process have been proposed. Republican Senator David Perdue of Georgia has suggested, for instance, to raise the Senate vote threshold for final passage of a budget resolution from 51 votes to 60

on the theory that it would promote bipartisanship. But any reform that requires elusive bipartisanship may end up encouraging more legislative inertia, not less.

Consider the fate of the Joint Select Committee on Budget and Appropriations Process Reform. A bipartisan, bicameral special committee appointed by Congress last year with the aim of reforming the budget process, the committee disbanded in November without much to show for the effort.

The best solution is simple, if challenging. Congress should stop skirting its constitutional responsibility and set tax and spending levels for the federal government on time. To demonstrate what competent government looks like, and to show what their legislative priorities are heading into a presidential election, House Democrats should prepare a 2020 budget.



Trump a symbol for hate groups

TRUDY RUBIN

The mass murderer of 51 worshippers in New Zealand mosques last week issued a manifesto in which he asked himself this question: "Were you a supporter of Donald Trump?"

His answer: "As a symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose? Sure. As a policy maker and leader? Dear god no."

In other words, there was no linear connection between Trump and the New Zealand massacre, nor can he be directly blamed for the carnage. Yet Trump has become an important symbol for white nationalists and bigots in America, and for autocrats worldwide.

The New Zealand tragedy is only the latest illustration.

The United States, which inspired would-be democrats abroad for decades, is now led by a president who inspires anti-democratic movements. Look no further than his response to the New Zealand tragedy for the latest illustration of this dangerous trend. When asked if he viewed white nationalism as a rising global threat, Trump replied: "I don't really. I think it's a small group of people ..."

The president studiously ignores statistics from respected U.S. groups that track extremism. According to the New York-based Anti-Defamation League (ADL), there was a 182 percent increase in white supremacist propaganda incidents in the last year, with 1,187 cases reported, compared with 421 in 2017. At least 91 white supremacist rallies were held in 2018, up from 76 the previous year.

The ADL also says that in the U.S. in 2018, "every single extremist killing — from Pittsburgh to Parkland — had a link to right-wing extremism." There were 50 such murders.

Add to that, the Southern Poverty Law Center, a diligent tracker of far-right extremists, says the U.S. had more hate groups last year than at any time in the last two decades, with "a 30 percent increase with Trump's campaign and presidency."

Get the trend?

Yet rather than denounce far-right bigotry after the New Zealand slaughter, Trump tweeted a storm of support for Judge Jeanine Pirro, who was briefly suspended by Fox News for anti-Muslim slurs. He retweeted kooky far-right Trumpsters who promote the crazy QAnon conspiracy theory detailing a secret plot by an alleged "deep state" against him.

Just before New Zealand, he told far-right Breitbart News that he had "the support of the police, the support of the military, the support of the Bikers for Trump," to play it tough against his opponents if he need be, and "then it would be very bad, very bad."

His fact-free tweets about "stolen elections" hint at future incitement to violence should he lose in 2020. A further yellow light to violent extremists.

Of course, we have become inured to this behavior from a president who famously insisted some neo-Nazis at the torch-lit parade in Charlottesville, Va., were "fine people." No need to reprise his support of the "birther" lies about President Barack Obama, or his racist comments about immigrants.

But experts on extremism warn against downplaying the impact of the president's words in egging on extremists.

"It modifies what is considered permissible," says Harvard's Steven Levitsky, co-author of *How Democracies Die*. "Trump is defining deviancy down, and things thought unimaginable are suddenly imaginable. A congressman body-slams a reporter, and this is praised by the U.S. president. That shapes opinion."

Warns the ADL's deputy national director, Kenneth Jacobson: "For a long time, the view was that (right-wing extremists) were a few extreme kooks. It's not clear their numbers are growing substantially, but there is the growing sense that this is their moment and

they may be able to act things out."

Rather than stem the tides of far-right extremism, Trump drives them higher like a bright new moon.

The president has also become a lodestar for anti-democratic leaders and movements in Europe, Latin America, and Asia. We've gotten used to his fulsome praise for Russia's Vladimir Putin, China's Xi Jinping, and North Korea's Kim Jong Un, accompanied by consistent nastiness to democratic allies.

Trump is clearly far more comfortable schmoozing with a clone like Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, an open admirer of his country's past military dictators, than with democrats like Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

The damage done by Trump's autocrat envy to America's image and influence cannot be overestimated. "We prided ourselves in the '50s and '60s as a model for democracy," says Levitsky. "If there are ugly folks in the White House, that can have the opposite effect."

The anti-democratic example Trump sets worldwide is glaring. Example: his constant denigration of responsible media as "fake news" and the "real enemy of the people." That term has been adopted by autocrats to persecute press critics, from Poland to the Philippines to Moscow (where many journalists have been murdered). Just this week, Trump said he was "very proud" to hear Bolsonaro use the term fake news.

Such language has consequences. It inspires strongmen who jail or murder journalists. Think Jamal Khashoggi.

So when the New Zealand killer cites the U.S. president as a symbol for white supremacists, pay attention. This is how low the presidency has sunk under Trump.

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