

Opinion

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Good start on PERS reform

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

As things now stand the Oregon Public Employees Retirement System has an unfunded liability of well over \$20 billion and the bills are coming due. Yet the governor and the Legislature have yet to take serious steps to address the matter.

The governor hasn't ignored it completely, to be sure. Friday, deep into the legislative session, she introduced her plan to shield school districts from their PERS problems. She has some good ideas and attempts to spread out the costs. She even asks district employees to help pay some of the burden.

PERS's difficulties go far beyond K-12 education, however. They have an impact on state universities, cities, counties and tiny communities like Jordan Valley, population under 200, among others. Each one is having to dig deep to pay those pension bills, and that's a problem. College tuition rises, even as the need for a college education increases. School districts may have to lay off teachers, and cities and counties charge more for the services they provide.

A pair of ballot measures sponsored by former Democratic Gov. Ted Kulongoski and former Republican legislator Chris Telfer are in the works to take on the problems. The proposals do not change what's owed on PERS. What they do do, however, is require state employees to help pay the bills in the future by contributing a percentage of their salaries to their retirement programs. Also, one would give new employees the option of using a 401(k)-style plan to which they and employers each would contribute 6% of the employee's salary. The other requires lawmakers to study and make recommendations on a 401(k)-style plan.

The measures face an uphill battle, and Kulongoski and Telfer know it. They also know what's at stake. Remember just what's going on in Oregon's schools.

School districts expect their PERS payments during the 2021-23 biennium to jump by 5.4%. And, while Brown's early session goal was to give K-12 education an additional \$2 billion, even that new money likely wouldn't do much but fill in for money that must go to PERS.

If Oregon is to improve its schools and smaller taxing bodies are to continue providing services at costs the public can afford, something must be done about PERS. The Kulongoski-Telfer measures are a good start.



Choosing the right Democrat

Competition to nominate a Democrat for president is looking like a Rube Goldberg machine: tortured complexity in search of a simple outcome.

The one goal? Pick someone who can beat President Trump.

Easy, say hardcore Democrats. Anybody. And maybe that's so.

But recent head-to-head surveys (in polls of varying believability, for those who still believe in polls) show a muddled mix of findings.

Since the end of March, there are polls with Joe Biden, Cory Booker, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, Beto O'Rourke, Kirsten Gillibrand and fast-rising Pete Buttigieg all beating Trump.

There also are polls with Trump beating Booker, Sanders, Warren, Harris, O'Rourke, Gillibrand and Buttigieg. And tied with Biden, who isn't in but is expected after Easter.

(During that period, in polls compiled by Nate Silver's FiveThirtyEight, only one head-to-head featured Amy Klobuchar: losing to Trump by 7 points.)

So, either some polls are more suspect than others, polls are worthless at this stage — April 2015 polling, for example, had Florida Sen. Marco Rubio leading a GOP field of 14, which at the time didn't include Trump — or there's a whole lot of ifs, buts and maybes out there on a given day, week or month.

Plus, like a Goldberg machine (named for the late American cartoonist Goldberg, who drew humorous "inventions" of questionable value, such as a self-operating napkin), the race has lots of moving parts.

For the party, that's creating angst. Starting with how far left it should lean.

Its liberal-to-progressive wing is pulling for big, bold ideas. Free this,

JOHN BAER

universal that, a Green New Deal, and reparations for slavery.

And while the latter issue is always around, it's more in evidence this election cycle than any other in memory. And it's an example of divided commitment.

A new Huffington Post poll shows the issue splits Democrats almost evenly. Asked whether the government should make cash payments to black American descendants of slaves, 34 percent said it should, 37 percent said it should not.

(Although head-to-head polling on candidates at this point can be meaningless, polling on issues, in my view, is instructive.)

So, how tight an embrace of liberal issues is needed win the Democratic primary?

Good question. Who knows?

But these are issues Trump and Republicans are ready and willing to label as part of a costly socialist agenda to campaign against.

And if there are splits over ideology, there also are splits over age, maybe even gender.

The age thing first.

The Washington Post last week noted that although Biden and Sanders poll first and second in state and national surveys (which could easily still be a function of familiarity), their support differs across age groups.

A recent CNN Poll of Democratic and Democratic-leaning independent voters found the 76-year-old Biden with less support among younger voters, and the 77-year-old Sanders with less support among older voters.

The poll says those under 45 favor Sanders over Biden, 32 percent to 19 percent. And voters 45 and older favor Biden over Sanders, 36 percent to 8 percent.

Presumably, in a general election, most Democrats would vote for either. But the split could be important in picking a nominee.

And what about gender?

Even with six women currently running for president, after mid-terms in which female candidates enjoyed historic success, there still seem to be double standards in play.

Men lead in polls. And Kamala Harris, viewed as a top-tier candidate, is running third in California behind Biden and Sanders despite holding statewide office there as attorney general and U.S. senator for the last eight years.

National Democratic strategist Eddie Vale told The Hill last week that female candidates still deal with "a lot of latent sexism ... from how voters perceive them and how they're covered" by media.

When male candidates talk about substantive issues, he said, "they're seen as smart and new;" when female candidates do the same, "they're too bland or wonky to connect with voters." Looking at you, Elizabeth Warren.

How these moving parts involving ideology, age and gender are resolved determines a nominee, plus his or her strength going forward.

And the levers and pulleys and springs and sprockets pushing the race are beginning to engage. Goldberg would have enjoyed that.

John Baer is a columnist for the Philadelphia Daily News. Readers may email him at baerj@phillynews.com.

GUEST EDITORIAL

Editorial from The San Diego Union-Tribune:

The San Diego Union-Tribune Editorial Board has a long, consistent history of opposing overreach by presidents of both parties. When George W. Bush was in the Oval Office, we criticized his habit of appending "signing statements" to laws he signed that made clear there were parts of the laws he wouldn't enforce. When Barack Obama succeeded Bush, we criticized Obama's even more egregious habit of unilaterally rewriting portions of immigration law and two of the biggest bills passed this century by Congress — the No Child Left Behind education reform measure and the Affordable Care Act. In December 2016, when Obama issued far-reaching executive orders that sought to box in President-elect Donald Trump on major environmental issues, we warned that Obama's overreach "could enable all kinds of unilateral actions by Trump."

That's just what America has witnessed.

Trump has gone the farthest of any modern president in asserting executive power. Not only is he reportedly telling Border Patrol agents to ignore laws he doesn't like, he's diverting \$6.6 billion from the Pentagon and the Treasury Department to build a border wall despite the constitutional provision that Congress must approve major appropriations. Federal judges have blocked more than 60 of the president's sweeping orders, mainly because they ignore the 1946 federal law that requires that factual evidence must be presented to justify changing major government regulations. The main offense of several of the officials that Trump has pushed out of his administration appears to have been them telling the president that there are limits on his authority.

Yet to a stunning degree, Republicans accept Trump's abuses of power. It's time they realize that doing so could enable all kinds of unilateral actions by a future Democratic president.

Some examples:

President Bernie Sanders might order audits of anyone who made more than \$5 million a year but paid less than 10 percent in income taxes.

President Kamala Harris might refuse to spend money appropriated for the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

President Elizabeth Warren might seek to withhold federal health-care funds from states with restrictive abortion laws.

President Amy Klobuchar might defund the National Instant Criminal Background Check System that licensed firearms dealers must use before selling handguns and rifles, blocking most new sales.

President Cory Booker might begin to enforce the Green New Deal's goal of wiping out fossil fuels by canceling government permits that automakers and oil companies need to stay in business.

President Pete Buttigieg might divert mon-

ey appropriated to the Pentagon to increase Obamacare subsidies as a step toward health care for all.

Just as Republicans have cheered for some of Trump's executive orders for bypassing Congress and advancing conservative goals, many Democrats would cheer a president who used executive actions to take money from the very rich, increase abortion rights, limit apprehensions of unauthorized immigrants, block firearm sales, advance the climate-change fight and increase access to health care. Yet no American should welcome an ends-justify-the-means approach in which the checks and balances of the Constitution become collateral damage of the nation's partisan wars.

Gridlock on big issues when power is split in Washington is nothing new. But the view that presidents can act alone to get around this gridlock is new. It's an ominous abandonment of a crucial principle: The president is not above the law.

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