

Public campaign finance laws on the chopping block thanks to ruling

Written by Wauneta Breeze

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Capitol View

By Ed Howard

Opponents of U.S. Sen. Ben Nelson are making an issue of his keeping a comparatively low profile while Congress is taking a break.

Translation: Republicans wish the Democratic lawmaker would make more public appearances, in hopes that he would face noticeably animated complaints from some among his constituency.

They also hope that any unpleasantness would be the subject of headlines.

That's fair enough. A Senate race is big league politics. Your opponents throw curves, or they throw at your head.

Besides, if Nelson didn't face some tough-minded folk among the electorate, he would likely be unique among members of the Senate and the House.

Questions about funding Social Security and Medicare, and increasing numbers of questions about the preferential tax status of the wealthiest corporations and individuals, are being thrown at members of Congress all around the country.

And at some public appearances they are being thrown like rocks.

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Interestingly, there is the possibility that Nebraska and some other states might test the veracity of a longtime bit of popular wisdom concerning Social Security.

As far back as the 1960s the “popular wisdom” among politicians, political reporters and just about anyone you might talk to, was that Social Security represented the political “third rail.”

Subway trains run on electricity. The electricity runs through the third rail. Put your hands on the third rail and you die.

Only recently have there been serious-as-a-heart-attack discussions about ultimately reducing Social Security benefits of all kinds.

The increased level of discussion in Washington, however, has unarguably generated a discernible rumbling among the proletariat — whether pro or con.

Some of the rumbling has to do with the fact that only a few of the elected crowd have acknowledged or championed any of the simple steps that could easily solve any funding problems in the system.

So, what about that popular wisdom of more than half a century?

The former included the notion that the third rail of Social Security would become increasingly deadly, because there would be so many Baby Boomers in a hugely important political demographic: “Old geezers who can be counted upon to vote!”

It also included a presumption that if an incumbent said they would cut Social Security, an opponent would immediately start bouncing around like a bug in a skillet, screaming, “Not me! Not me!”

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The view from here: The popular wisdom being discussed was developed long ago, in a political and social galaxy far, far away.

Today's popular wisdom might be that the degree to which voters are likely to be annoyed or pleased with a candidate can be overwhelmingly influenced by the amount of interest group money and support they can collect.

And by the fact there might be other issues — social, economic and political — that could reduce the power in that third rail.

Of greater importance: In some races, including the 2012 Nebraska Senate campaign, both candidates might be on the side of cutting Social Security and / or Medicare benefits, although they aren't likely to say so in plain language.

(Wipe that surprised look off your face.)

Such realities might only be changed if some politicians hear a noise rising from the electorate — like the third rail being powered up — sufficient to convince them that they could still be headed for a nasty shock.

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