

Economic insanity

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

The focus in recent months on the horse-race aspect of the presidential campaign is understandable enough. But now that one nominating race appears to be over and the other seems bound for a lengthy battle between two finalists, perhaps voters can find some time to actually think about the issues.

Here's a big one: how much control the government should have over the economy. Few people know that two of the three remaining Americans with a good chance of ending up as the next president are pushing for laws that would require the federal government to bully companies into changing what they pay workers who hold certain jobs - in the name of social justice.

Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., is the principal sponsor of the Paycheck Fairness Act. Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., is a co-sponsor of the Fair Pay Act. Both bills build off the premise that society's inherent sexism has led to its undervaluation of certain women-dominated professions relative to some male-dominated professions. The examples offered in a recent Wall Street Journal analysis of the two bills were mostly female paralegals versus mostly male truck drivers.

Clinton and Obama think federal bureaucrats, perhaps the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, should be tasked with evaluating which jobs should pay what and given the tools to end the sexist inequities they discover.

No, we are not making this up. It's 2008, not 1931, but a lot of people still have inexplicable faith in government central planning.

Too bad. The notion that the government should be given such power is both scary and ludicrous. Such direct government intervention in the free market is an invitation to disaster. Beyond that, the claim that the free market is somehow inherently sexist is easily refuted.

The last time the theory of "pay equity" was popular was in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and a primary example offered back then of an undervalued female-dominated profession was nursing. Why aren't nurses front and center this time? Because their pay has gone up considerably over the past quarter-century, thanks to much higher demand.

Clinton and Obama need to explain their thinking here. Yes, women earn on average less than men, sometimes even within the same professions. But the gap almost always disappears when the gender comparisons are of people with the same experience. It is a career-slowng fact that far more women take family raising breaks or work part time.

Finally, one doesn't have to look very far in the writings of "pay equity's" biggest academic popularizers to find an ugly element of elitism. The jobs described as being overvalued compared with some women-dominated white-collar professions are always blue-collar - construction workers, plumbers and, yes, truck drivers. Surely Clinton and Obama can find a better way than this of pandering to women who feel they are underpaid.

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