



Of a certain AGE

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Columnist

We can all do better

At long last, the cacophony of political ads is gone! The backbiting tone of many of those diatribes does more to turn me off of candidates than to consider supporting them.

After a conversation last week in which the other person said there is no excuse for someone in Oregon not voting because it is so easy with the ballots coming right to our homes, I considered my own personal history with voting and politics and for the first time in my life, saw the strong political thread through my life — of which I was not fully aware.

As a child, my first memory of a political campaign was the 1952 presidential contest with “I Like Ike” buttons everywhere and Eisenhower’s opponent Adlai Stevenson. My parents were Republicans and we had just gotten our

very first black-and-white Philco television set. We watched the inaugural televised political convention when the Republicans gathered in Chicago to select the Eisenhower/Nixon ticket.

I accompanied my parents every time they went to the polls to vote, until I was a teenager. I even remember the polling places: Sylvan Grade School, the Highway Department building, and neighborhood homes. Going to vote in those days seemed like a social occasion, and my parents knew most of the other voters.

I learned by example that voting was a civic duty no one would shirk. Maybe that sense of duty resides somewhere in my genes. My maternal great uncle, Leslie Scott, served as the Oregon State Treasurer from 1940-49. My maternal two-times great-aunt, Abigail Scott Duniway, led the women’s suffrage movement in Oregon for 40 years and cast the first Oregon vote in the election of 1912, after Oregon had defeated women’s suffrage five times.

My paternal great-uncle, Rufus Holman, served one term as a U.S. Senator from Oregon in the 1940s before losing to Wayne Morse. He had been the Oregon State Treasurer prior to that and served on the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners. Public service was a family value.

When I was a fifth-grader, the father of one of my oldest and dearest friends, Tad

McCall, ran for Oregon’s Third District seat in the U.S. House of Representatives against Edith Green and lost. I remember the excitement of election night at a neighbor’s house, watching the returns. I was secretly glad Tad wouldn’t be moving to Washington, D.C. His dad, Tom McCall, did go on to become Oregon’s Secretary of State and popular two-time governor.

As a sixth-grader, I played the role of women’s suffragette Susan B. Anthony in a grade school play. I had a bit of ham in me and loved performing in public. These many years later as I write about elections and voting, I am only now aware of the synchronicity of that role.

In grade school and high school I ran and campaigned for a number of student offices. It was always fun to make campaign posters and create campaign slogans. Fortunately, I got that out of my system early.

As a young mother in Bellevue, I worked at the local polls on election day to earn some pin money and get out to meet my neighbors.

Since returning to Oregon, I have come to really enjoy my voting obligation, with the opportunity to sit down at home with my mail-in ballot and my voter’s pamphlet and make informed decisions on each vote after considering all sides of an issue or the qualifications and positions of each candidate. All of their ads have no positive impact.

Despite my Republican roots, I have long considered myself an Independent, eschewing labels and stereotypes in favor of supporting the person or position that lines up with my values. It was frustrating to have to register as a member of a party in order to vote in a primary here in Oregon. I would much rather have a primary open to everyone and not need to choose from only one party’s candidates.

A prescribed part of our education in the 1950s and 1960s was the study of civics, where we learned all about the democratic process, how our government is meant to work, the course of a bill through the House and Senate, the electoral college, and the three distinct branches of the government, among much else.

I heard a distressing statistic this week that in a recent national poll, 10 percent of the people queried couldn’t name one branch of the government and 25 percent couldn’t name all three. The commentator was making the point that it appears the political polarity and incivility in our electoral process ramped up when schools stopped teaching civics. Citizens uneducated in how our country runs, he posited, are more prone to hold extreme views and exhibit intolerance for points

of view that differ from theirs.

True or not, it certainly appears that our political discourse is becoming more and more polarized, as candidates and politicians sling mud at one another, neither side listening to the other.

Being a child born in the 1940s and growing up believing children respect their elders, if you can’t say something nice say nothing at all, and good manners and civility are the accepted norm, I am appalled and disheartened by the current tone of our public discourse. More often than not, I am turning off or muting the TV rather than listening to the non-stop rude, crude hyperbole and outright lies crowding the network and cable channels.

I haven’t totally lost hope that we can turn the corner, but I also find myself glad I’m more toward the end of my journey and not a 30-something with decades ahead possibly filled with more of the same.

I hope Tuesday’s election will result in public servants actually serving those they represent and not just moneyed interests or their own drive for power. I don’t think I’m alone in also wanting public civility from our elected officials as well as the electorate.

We can all do better.



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