Oregon Daily Emerald

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COMMENTARY

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Low voter turnout in ASUO election is fault of its staff

The Emerald Editorial Board blamed the wrong people for low voter turnout in the ASUO student elections. The blame for student apathy should lie with the ASUO and its staff. Each year, Executive candidates get elected on campaign promises that they cannot fulfill. They promise to "fight at the state level to prevent further tuition increases," as this year's winners did on their campaign Web site, but ASUO leaders have no direct power over tuition levels. Lobbying the state legislature is a noble idea, but if student lobbies were remotely effective then we students wouldn't face hundreds of dollars in increases each year. I've also been hearing the same line about city-wide housing standards from candidates for the last three years, and Adam and Mena's "sketchy scheduling" platform might make the annual list of broken promises in 2005.

GUEST COMMENTARY

The best I expect from the ASUO is a weak effort such as Nilda Brooklyn and Joy Nair's "Doin' it in the Dark" campaign to reduce the energy fee. With candidates basing their campaigns on issues controlled by Dave Frohnmayer's office and the Oregon legislature, why should we care to vote? If we want controls on tuition, then we would do better by participating in city- or state-level elections where our representatives have a significant voice.

Candidates do continually make one promise they could keep: Listening to voices across campus about student issues. But our elected officials fail there as well. The ASUO and its affiliates form an insular clique that interacts with the general student body only during campaigns. The groups with whom the ASUO makes direct contact — ASUO-funded groups and clubs form the voting base and control the government. These constituents are often special-interest lobbies such as political action groups or cultural and ethnic unions that do not represent the wider interests of University students. The result is a government cut off from the student body and officials who have no incentive to change, as essentially all officials are elected from within this clique. Thus, the campaign promise to hear student voices disintegrates into the traditional pattern of hearing small campus lobbies.

No one exemplifies this insular attitude better than our prior Executives. During her campaign last year, Maddy Melton personally assured me that she and Eddy Morales would listen to voices on campus. They responded by eliminating their public faces. They refused to speak with campus media, an egregious offense for elected officials, and, as the Oregon Commentator reported, they regularly made themselves unavailable during scheduled office hours. I feel that Maddy and Eddy stole my vote with that hollow promise, and I imagine many other non-ASUO insiders whom they convinced to vote felt less than inspired when the election popped up on DuckWeb this year.

To increase voter turnout, Adam and Mena should make themselves ubiquitous on campus by conversing with media and regular students. If students outside the ASUO clique don't drop by the Executive office, then the Executive should seek them out to get their input. Adam and Mena should also forget their outrageous campaign promises and concentrate on issues within their power, such as student services and the incidental fee. If students see their candidates around campus and feel as if they are fulfilling their campaign promises, then voter turnout will rise significantly.

Zach Mull is a senior studying journalism.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Remember student's passion for planet

In memory of Patrick E. Allison, who graduated from the University in 2003 with a major in English: Patrick was struck and killed by a train in Davis, Calif. Apart from being a student, Patrick was a forest defender who spent countless days and hours saving Fall Creek, Winberry Creek and the Umpqua wildlands. Apparently, this was his way of trying to make the world a better place for us and all life on the planet.

He had attained the knowledge of not only academia but what really mattered, the love and continuation of all life. He also learned that the survival of natural ecosystems around the world appeared bleak.

The knowledge that our modern culture is continuing to kill the living planet (and each other) at an ever quickening and seemingly callous pace may have sent him ever the edge of hopelessness. Most of us can maintain a state of denial to continue our struggle and hope for a just world but maybe Patrick couldn't. His presence will be sorely missed.

Thank you Patrick for giving your heart, soul and life for what you truly believed in. We will continue the struggle for a just world in your memory. Viva Cascadia!

Shannon Wilson
Eugene

Aaron Sullivan Illustrator

Affirmative actions

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The Supreme Court drew the admiration and ire of activists, politicians, university administrators, students, jurisprudence fetishists and policy wonks a year ago this week, when it ruled on two cases challenging the University of Michigan's affirmative action policies.

The Court scrapped Michigan's plainly unfair undergraduate admissions system, which awarded a potent, automatic 20 points — on a 150-point scale — to "underrepresented minority" applicants that Chief Justice William Rehnquist observed "has the effect of making 'the factor of race … decisive' for virtually every minimally qualified underrepresented minority applicant."

The Court, however, also permitted the school's more ethically and constitutionally murky law school admissions policy (which allows officials to consider race qualitatively as one factor among many), narrowing and clarifying what applications of affirmative action it would tolerate in its most important ruling on the subject in 25 years.

While the Court's chimeric rulings have, at least superficially, better defined for universities how they can apply affirmative action to their admission processes, for many conservatives the split on the rulings has left affirmative action as an even less tractable monster than before. Left-of-center Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg dissented in the undergraduate case, Gratz v. Bollinger, arguing, "If honesty is the best policy, surely Michigan's accurately described, fully disclosed college affirmative action program is preferable to achieving similar numbers through winks, nods and disguises." That is, the structural evils we know are better than those we don't.

If these "achieved numbers" are indeed a foregone conclusion, as the law school ruling allows them to be, shouldn't we favor the constitutional honesty of submitting to the spirit of equal protection over the evidently moot "honesty" of the openly unfair admission processes that Ginsburg defends?

Curt Levey, the Director of Legal Affairs at the Center for Individual Rights, which objected to the embattled Michigan admission policies, sees at least a subtle triumph in the Court rulings. Affirmative action in college admissions is "[higher]-maintenance and riskier than before," Levey asserted to the Associated Press, suggesting that many colleges are now looking more seriously at race-neutral alternatives.

But that's insofar difficult to prove. Like Michigan's undergraduate program, Ohio State University and the University of Massachusetts relied on a point system that handed minority applicants an automatic bonus. These quantitative systems allowed the schools to make speedy decisions (however fair) about applications. But the ruling in Gratz mandated new systems: Despite steep budget cuts, Massachusetts tapped retired faculty and recent graduates to help sift through applications; Ohio State hired 10 new readers; and Michigan allotted an additional $1.8 million to new staff and an application redesign.

But ignoring these fiscal reallocations as an ancillary point, the difference in the post-secondary educational landscape between this year and last is much more subtle than might be expected from a landmark Supreme Court decision.

"I've been struck by the irony that, in the year since Michigan … some institutions have retreated from affirmative action even though we won the case," explained Ted Shaw, president of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. "They have not taken full advantage of what happened."

Whatever Shaw means by "taking full advantage," and however equitable it would be, the Michigan rulings were evidently far from a total victory for leftists, too, whose affirmative action system seems in many ways more a rusting, half-broken contraption than a sleek social justice machine.

So, for now, activists on both sides are somewhat disingenuously declaring victory, but are still visibly discontent by the split Michigan decisions. The split, though, is ultimately an unsatisfying, albeit temporary, settlement.

And this compromise is uncomfortable because it *is* a compromise: This is an explicitly constitutional issue, but applying (or interpreting) the Constitution isn't a matter of give-and-take negotiation, it's a matter of exercising (or defining) fundamental principle.

But if conservatives and leftists both want to change affirmative action to cultivate equality, why the above disagreement? The answer lies in language, and digs to the philosophical core of both political veins: When they say "equality," conservatives and leftists mean different things.

Leftists mean by "equality" that of manufacturing economic and professional opportunity, even at the cost of treating individuals differently based on characteristics such as race. Former Justice Harry Blackmun applied this reasoning to affirmative action, arguing, partially correctly, "In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way."

But those who approach this issue conservatively (as I do) mean by "equal" treatment that, when an individual interacts with the government, factors not directly relevant to the situation are ignored (for example, because being white says nothing about actual academic competence, whiteness should guarantee neither acceptance nor exclusion to any spot in any public university). Justice Clarence Thomas outlined this principle more eloquently in Adarand Constructors v. Mineta: "Government cannot make us equal; it can only recognize, respect and protect us as equal before the law."

In the context of affirmative action, at least, no one has found a solution — perhaps because none exists — that fully satisfies both definitions and thus prescribes a course that leads to the implied goal of each.

Only time will tell. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor predicted after Michigan that in another 25 years racial preferences will no longer be "necessary." O'Connor's optimism might not be guarded, but hers is a goal upon which conservatives and leftists can easily agree.

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