

OUR VIEW

# Should voting be mandatory?

Most Americans who were eligible to vote voted in the 2020 presidential election. Some 67%.

That's pretty good. But in election after election many people don't vote. Voters tend to skew white, wealthier, older and to people with more education. A democracy, a republic, is supposed to be ruled by its people, but it's often not the case. Some voices are left out. They don't choose who rules them or what ballot measures pass.

It is not hard to vote in Oregon. Vote by mail is convenient. Republican and Democratic election officials have declared it a good system. And registration can now happen when people get their driver's licenses.

What if it was not only not hard to vote, but mandatory to vote? If it was the law that people must be registered to vote and participate?

It's not a new idea. It's the law in Australia and in some other countries. But it is an argument revived and expanded upon in a new book, "100% Democracy: The Case for Universal Voting." It's by E.J. Dionne Jr., a Washington Post columnist, and Miles Rapoport, a senior fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School and former Connecticut secretary of state. It's fair to call both of them liberals. So is this just a strategy to get more liberal people voting? It would seem to do that. Is their argument going to have broad appeal? It doesn't now. How would it work? That requires more explanation.

They say it would be better if the country didn't continue to fight over who had the right to vote. It should be a fundamental right and not abridged. It should be a fundamental civic duty.

They say it is a problem for government when the people who vote are not fully representative of the population. It raises questions about the legitimacy of elections. Of course, they don't argue that universal voting will fix everything in the political culture. They think it's one lever to pull to help improve the political culture.

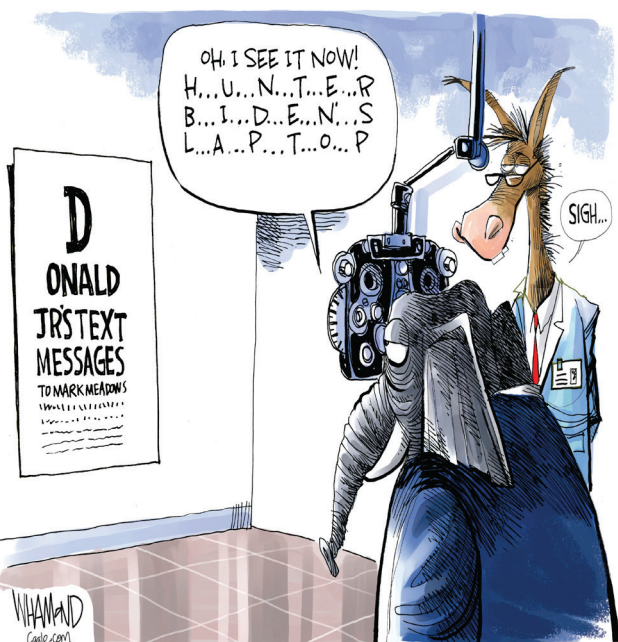
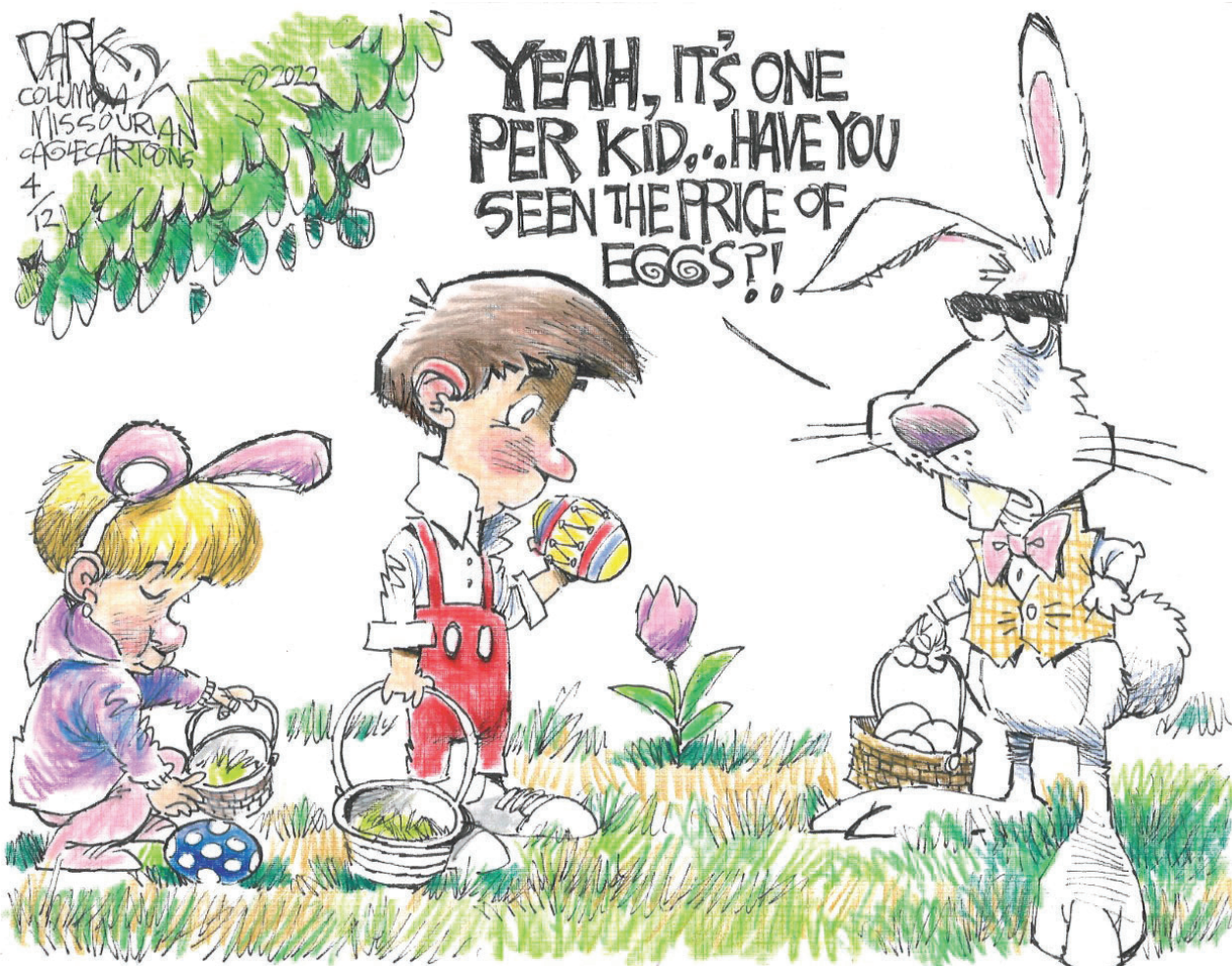
They say under universal voting, candidates would have less reason to appeal to their base. Candidates would have to appeal to everyone. They believe the idea would be found constitutional. They believe it could be implemented at the federal, state and local level.

They propose a small, civil fine of not more than \$20 for people who don't vote. The authors of the book say few Americans right now would support the policy. Maybe 25%, according to a poll.

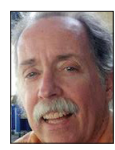
The book is very much a response to what they call Republican efforts to roll back access to voting. And if you remember in 2015, when President Obama proposed universal voting, critics jumped all over it. One of the best lines was a recycled one from William F. Buckley Jr.: Liberals don't care what you do so long as it's compulsory. Critics say it will strike most Americans as unAmerican or authoritarian to make voting mandatory. The authors' response is to compare it to the civic duty in jury duty and to say they should allow people to conscientiously object or to return blank ballots.

Another critique is that forcing people to vote may mean the country would have more uninformed voters voting. Their response: That is a critique of any democracy, not just universal voting. And the authors hope if participating in voting was required, more people would spend more time educating themselves about the candidates and the issues.

We are not sure we have done the arguments in the book justice. You should read it yourself, if you are interested. But whether you lean in support or against, people are going to keep pushing for the policy. Best to understand the arguments.



# Fire is a necessary but difficult friend



**NORM CIMON**  
OTHER VIEWS

Thanks to David Mildrexler for his March 17 column on the tremendous importance of large trees for water storage, for healthy soils, for capturing and storing carbon and much more.

We toured the Mount Emily Recreation Area prior to the most recent logging. While the majority of the trees marked for cutting were of smaller diameter, we saw a few large trees that had that blue paint. In taking on responsibility for MERA, the county has also taken on the difficult task of balancing the economics of management and of growing those large trees.

I wrote in The Observer about that problem at the time the decision to buy the land was made, praising the forester who had allowed for those larger pine, but concerned about what cutting any of them would mean for the future forest. It's a conundrum

that has no easy answer.

Removing smaller pine releases adjacent trees and allows them to grow more quickly. That's a good start toward the next stand of big pine. But regular light fires were the way that happened in the past. Mature ponderosa have a bark that is inches thick and able to withstand all but the most catastrophic blazes. That detail is, however, where the devil lives.

We have suppressed fire for more than a hundred years. During that time settlers naturally moved into those forests as they were cut. Grass, brush and tree seedlings moved in at the same time. The density of vegetation is probably as high as it was prior to firefighting, but instead of large fire-resistant pines, now our forests are dense with burnable fuel.

The road back to more open forest stands, and to the acceptance of light fire, is both a logistical and a cultural problem. The people who live in those forests will have to be very mindful to clear away the overgrown vegetation, and county managers will have to be on top of any cutting that

goes on, given the potential for big fires and the removal of large trees.

And all of us need to understand where we live: There isn't an ecosystem in the Western U.S. that isn't dependent on fire in one way or another. That includes the Coast Range, where big stand-replacement fires don't happen but every few hundred years, but they do happen.

Land use planning has taken Oregon on a different trajectory than states such as Idaho where sprawl has obliterated the boundary between wildlands and the urban hodgepodge that's resulted. Boise is the poster child for that chaos. Here in our home state, we need to take the next step and absorb the lessons of the past. Fire is a necessary but difficult friend. We need to respect it for the good it can do, but understand how destructive it can be if we aren't vigilant. There is no other way if we want to live in the real West, the one with magnificent forests of big pine.

■ Norm Cimon, of La Grande, is a member of Oregon Rural Action, a nonprofit, but his column represents his opinion only.

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