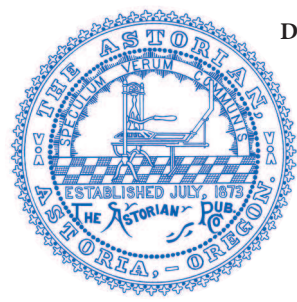


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OUR VIEW

Prosecutors wield enormous power and warrant scrutiny

The American Civil Liberties Union's national campaign to raise awareness about the importance of elected district attorneys and entice more candidates to run for these jobs has excited considerable backlash from incumbents, including Clatsop County District Attorney Joshua Marquis.

Marquis made several valid points in his guest column Friday in *The Daily Astorian*, but underplayed the importance of county prosecutors in the justice system. Police, juries and judges all are key at certain procedural points in protecting society from lawbreakers. But prosecutors wield enormous power in determining who deserves a break, who gets the proverbial book thrown at them, and every shade of justice in between.

Smart district attorneys deliver appropriately nuanced interventions for first offenders, increasingly severe and less merciful penalties for those who repeat their mistakes, and full out "throw away the key" prosecutions for those who are viewed as irredeemable. Most of these important decisions are essentially invisible to the public. But they ripple up and down the chain of justice, strongly influencing who police choose to arrest, and who judges and juries see inside courtrooms.

A majority of elected district attorneys and their staffs perform acceptably well in an overloaded system that highly reflects problems faced in their communities. In our area, although Clatsop and Pacific counties have each experienced bad prosecutors in recent decades, both now are fortunate to have dedicated and competent ones in Marquis here and Mark McClain in South Bend, Washington. Citizens have frustrations about property crime driven by drug addictions, sentences influenced by jail overcrowding and other criminal-justice issues. But there is little or no sense in our area that prosecutors are lazy, overwhelmed, incompetent, biased or corrupt.

The same cannot be said of every county in the nation. The ACLU is not wrong in asserting there are district attorneys who, at a minimum, should face vigorous competition in elections. Democracy benefits when voters have genuine choices on ballots. This applies to all elective offices. Most county officers of all types — not just prosecutors — tend not to face serious opponents. Sometimes, this is a function of pay. An attorney in private practice can make much more than a district attorney or a judge, and face far less agonizing day-to-day decisions.

Usually, voters tend to stick with established incumbents unless there is some compelling reason not to. But we would be better served if every election was a well-informed referendum on how well our various levels of government are functioning. Contested races are key to this goal.

Beyond issues of competency and honesty, the ACLU's campaign is partly premised on the degree to which some district attorneys intervene in the political system in support of or opposition to laws and citizen initiatives. Tough-on-crime ballot measures in Oregon and elsewhere can appear appealing to voters, yet have a disproportionate impact on people disadvantaged because of their ethnicity or other circumstances.

Marquis and other politically engaged prosecutors are passionate advocates on behalf of causes like victims' rights — positions shared by most constituents, judging by election results. However, it's unsurprising that the ACLU, which often defends unpopular causes grounded in an expansive view of the Bill of Rights, would push back against prosecutors who wade into political and social matters. Annoying and yet admirable, the ACLU is a valuable watchdog on behalf of constitutional liberties for all.

We are fortunate to have dedicated and competent ones in Marquis and McClain.

LETTERS WELCOME

Letters should be exclusive to *The Daily Astorian*.

Letters should be fewer than 350 words and must include the writer's name, address and phone numbers. You will be contacted to confirm authorship.

All letters are subject to editing for space, grammar and, on occasion, factual accuracy. Only two letters per writer are printed each month.

Letters written in response to other letter writers should address the issue at hand and, rather than

mentioning the writer by name, should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil and people should be referred to in a respectful manner.

Submissions may be sent in any of these ways:

E-mail to editor@dailyastorian.com; online at www.dailyastorian.com; delivered to the Astorian offices at 949 Exchange St. and 1555 N. Roosevelt in Seaside or by mail to Letters to the Editor, P.O. Box 210, Astoria, OR 97103.



The economy isn't broken



AP Photo/Alan Diaz

After years of sluggish growth, typical U.S. household incomes finally topped pre-recession levels in 2016 and reached an all-time high, according to information released by the Census Bureau last week.

By DAVID BROOKS
New York Times News Service

Middle-class wage stagnation is the biggest economic fact driving American politics. Over the past many years, so the common argument goes, capitalism has developed structural flaws. Economic gains

are not being shared fairly with the middle class. Wages have become decoupled from productivity. Even when the economy grows, everything goes to the rich.

This account of reality, which I've certainly repeated, explains why the Democratic Party has moved from the Bill Clinton neoliberal center to the Bernie Sanders left. It explains why the Republicans have moved from the pro-market Mitt Romney right to the populist Donald Trump right.

On both left and right, movements have arisen to fix capitalism's supposed structural flaws, either by radically interfering in the marketplace (Bernie) or by clamping down on global competition (Trump).

But what if there are no structural flaws? What if the market is working more or less as it's supposed to?

That's certainly the evidence from the last two years. Over this time, the benefits of economic growth have been shared more widely.

In 2015, median household incomes rose 5.2 percent. That was the fastest surge in percentage terms since the Census Bureau began keeping records in the 1960s. Women living alone saw their incomes rise 8.7 percent. Median incomes for Hispanics rose 6.1 percent. Immigrants' incomes, excluding naturalized citizens, jumped more than 10 percent.

The news was especially good for the poor. The share of overall income that went to the poorest fifth increased 3 percent, while the share that went to the affluent groups did not change. In that year, the poverty rate fell 1.2 percentage points, the steepest decline since 1999.

The numbers for 2016 have just been released by the Census Bureau, and the trends are pretty much the same. Median household income rose another 3.2 percent, after inflation, to its highest level ever. The

poverty rate fell some more. The share of national income going to labor is now rising, while the share going to capital is falling.

In a well-functioning economy, workers are rewarded for their productivity. As output, jobs and hours worked rise, so does income. Over the past two years, that seems to be exactly what's happening.

The evidence from the past two years strongly supports those who have argued all along that income has not decoupled from productivity. A wide range of economists, including Martin Feldstein, Stephen Rose, Edward Lazear, Joao Paulo Pessoa, John Van Reenen, Richard Anderson of the St. Louis Fed and a team from Goldman Sachs, have produced studies showing wages tracking very predictably with productivity.

Right now moderates are in retreat. The populist extremes are on the march. But the fact is they are basing their economic and political agendas on a story that is fundamentally untrue.

If anything, as Neil Irwin of *The Times*' Upshot has noted, wages are a little higher than you'd expect from looking at the productivity and inflation numbers alone.

The problem of the middle-class squeeze, in short, may not be with how the fruits of productivity are distributed, but the fact that there isn't much productivity growth at all. It's not that a rising tide doesn't lift all boats; it's that the tide is not rising fast enough.

For those interested, Shawn Sprague has a good summary of the data at the Labor Department's "Beyond the Numbers." He shows

conclusively that during this recovery we've endured a historically low labor productivity growth rate of 1.1 percent. By some estimates if productivity increases had kept pace with the mid-20th-century norm, 1 median incomes would be \$40,000 higher than they are today.

If productivity itself is the problem, not distribution, radically different politics is demanded than we're seeing today. If productivity is the problem, we need more dynamism, not less, more openness, not less, more growth-oriented policies, not more dirigiste and redistributive ones.

There are a few things government can do to help boost productivity: Increase market competition with more antitrust enforcement and fewer licensing regulations; admit more skilled immigrants; invest more in human capital; deregulate urban land usage back to the 2008 levels; introduce more market incentives into the low productivity sectors, like health care and education; fund more research into promising technologies like new energy storage systems.

Today politics is polarizing to the populist left and the populist right. But if productivity is the problem, what we actually need is a resurgence of the moderates. The moderate-left policies of Barack Obama must have had something to do with the middle-income gains of the last two years. Moderate Democrats can plausibly argue that government should not be interfering in the markets, but it should be addressing the inequalities that are the result of deeper social forces. There is still a yawning gap dividing the median Asian-American household, which makes \$81,000 a year; the median white household, which makes \$65,000; and the median African-American household, which makes \$39,490.

Moderate Republicans can argue that while government should be active in boosting human capital, and in helping rural America, most of what's needed is more dynamic capitalism — more trade, more immigration, more free competition, fewer regulatory burdens, more growth.

Right now moderates are in retreat. The populist extremes are on the march. But the fact is they are basing their economic and political agendas on a story that is fundamentally untrue.