



Opinion

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STAFF

EDITOR IN CHIEF,

PUBLISHER

Charles H. Washington

EDITOR

Larry J. Jackson, Sr.

BUSINESS MANAGER

Gary Ann Taylor

COPY EDITOR

Joy Ramos

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Shawn Strahan

4747 NE Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.

Portland, OR 97211

503-288-0033

Fax 503-288-0015

e-mail

news@portlandobserver.com

subscription@portlandobserver.com

ads@portlandobserver.com

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Politics as usual; Libertarians, Reformists and Greens, oh my!

BY LORRAINE-MICHELLE FAUST
OF THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

With the elections coming up in November many people are wondering who will be our next president. A lot of other people just don't care. Republicans and Democrats alike are wondering why so few Americans vote. People want to know why Americans are so indifferent when it comes to politics. Many people claim that they don't see much difference between the two main candidates. Even comedian Bill Maher refers to them as Bore and Gush. America's boredom has helped other political parties grow.

Although many American just don't notice, we have more than two political parties in the United States. This is quite normal. Most European countries have three, four or even five or more political parties. It makes some sense, too. How can so many

people in such a large country always be left to choose either left or right, apples or oranges? What if you like mangos, peaches or kiwis?

Slowly the idea of having more than two parties to choose from has been gaining a lot of attention. The Green Party, the Reform Party and the Libertarian Party are the largest growing political parties in the country. They could, in part, get disillusioned Americans to take more of an interest in the political system. The Green Party claims to be the fastest growing party in Oregon. Which makes sense because they ascribe to the same values that many people consider quintessentially Oregonian: environmental sustainability, civil rights and personable privacy and freedom.

The Green Party's 2000 presidential candidate is Ralph Nader. Some democrats fear Nader will attract votes away from Gore. If Nader wins 15

percent of the vote in Oregon the Pacific Green Party will be that much closer to gaining major party status. On the national level, if Nader can win 5 percent of the vote in the next Green presidential candidate in 2004 will receive nearly \$15 million in FEC funds. The National Reform Party has gotten a lot of publicity. With Pat Buchanan as their presidential candidate, the Reform Party want to re-establish trust in government. They support lobbying reform, limiting gifts public officials can accept, a new and smaller tax system, they are opposed to abortion and gay rights and want to get rid of the electoral college to allow a direct vote for president. Buchanan says, as president he would use "moral authority" to make all his presidential decisions.

Controversy has not left the Reform Party alone. This past week they held their National Convention in Long

Beach, Calif. The convention eventually split into two conventions because some Reformists oppose Pat Buchanan's nomination. The anti-Buchanan Reformists say Buchanan has taken over the party, and they support John Hagelin as their presidential nominee.

Governor Jesse Ventura of Minnesota was formerly in the Reform Party, but also left because he did not support Buchanan. He is now encouraging the Minnesota's Reform Party to disaffiliate from the National Reform Party and change its name to Independence Party of Minnesota. The Libertarian Party claims to be the third largest party in Oregon. They also say they are the fastest growing political party in the United States. Libertarians profess a commitment to freedom. They think that a free-market economy and free trade would make the country most prosperous. Libertarians disagree with

government interference with civil liberties. While they support giving crime victims more rights, they do not believe that some "victimless crimes" should be illegal. They support the legalization of drugs, the freedom to bare arms and the right to protect property and self-defense.

Harry Browne is the presidential candidate for the Libertarian Party. According to at Libertarian Party press release Browne has caught up with Buchanan in popularity polls. It also claims that Browne is taking conservative votes away from Bush. The Democrats and the Republicans may not be very afraid of these other parties, but they are growing. Maybe they will start to get nervous four years from now. They don't want to lose the power they have in this country, but maybe Americans need to take power. American's need to take back the most basic of our freedoms: the freedom of choice.

Privacy: if technology is a problem, technology is a solution

BY THOMAS D. TRAPASSO

More and more, it looks like protecting privacy is the number one challenge of the 21st century.

Granted, there may be more pressing problems that face us on the national and international stage, but this does not diminish the concerns we all have about our own and our families' privacy. With the growth of the Internet, cordless and wireless telephones, and databanks managed by insurance companies, e-commerce firms, and the government, we have good reason to worry about where and how our personal and financial information might be found.

What once was a dry topic discussed among civil libertarians and government attorneys has now reached our kitchen tables. Even high school students are now looking into privacy issues. This year's interscholastic high school debate topic calls for the "federal government [to] significantly increase protection of privacy." This attention reflects the real-world concerns that will keep policymakers busy for years to come.

In a recent Washington Post article, former Undersecretary of Commerce David Aaron wrote: "Privacy advocates, who used to be worried most about government privacy violations, are now more concerned about private-sector abuses." Recent regulations have addressed the problem of commercial web sites collecting information from children under the age of 13. A large majority of Americans hesitate to make purchases over the Web, afraid of compromising the security of their credit cards.

One major concern is medical privacy. Hospitals, clinics, and physicians' offices hold files with extraordinarily personal information that literally turns us inside-out. These files include notes about the drugs we take, our dietary habits, even our urination cycles. Embarrassing stuff, at least potentially. What's more important, such information falling into the wrong hands could affect our chances of employment, our ability to qualify for health or life insurance, and our credit ratings.

Medical, as well as financial information is our most sacred property. We should not give these up freely and certainly do not want to give them up to hackers and passers-by.

Wisely, Congress in 1996 addressed these concerns by passing the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), which

begins to take effect this month. Health care providers who fail to meet the new law's requirements will face thousands of dollars in fines or (potentially) millions of dollars in lawsuit settlements if they do not protect patient privacy. This little-known piece of legislation might affect us more positively than any law passed in the last decade.

Ironically, while the case of privacy problems is technological, the solution, too, stems from technology. While the task might look daunting, technological solutions to enhance communications and data privacy offer hospital administrators, clinic managers, and physicians across the country significant cost avoidance and a rescue from red tape.

Only a few years ago, patient records were kept on paper in a locked cabinet in a doctor's office, accessible only to the doctor and his trusted staff. Now they are routinely kept on computers and transmitted by fax or Internet.

Moreover, in an effort to cut costs, many physicians have outsourced their billing and record-keeping tasks to independent contractors. When we receive a bill today, it is quite likely that it comes from the basement of a stay-at-home mom, using her own computer, commercially available billing software, and an Internet connection to dozens of doctors' offices, seeking to make a few extra part-time dollars while still caring for her children.

This is what should concern us. Our bills and other records should be as private as a face-to-face conversation with our doctors in the confines of an examination room. While it is a good thing for doctors to reduce their costs, it is risky to do so if the price might be the violation of our privacy and a breach in the integrity of the doctor-patient relationship.

It is not so much that the doctors cannot trust the contractors who do their billing. Instead, we should focus on the lack of communications security found in the home-office environment. It is still too easy to "eavesdrop" on Internet transmissions.

No doctor—or, for that matter, no business of any kind—should contract out billing and record-keeping functions without first being assured that the contractor has installed basic Internet and communications security measures. This could be encryption software, or it could be any of a number of easily obtained hardware devices that protect the privacy of patients and physicians alike.

With the advent of HIPAA, health-care administrators will feel stronger pressure to enhance security and privacy. Even without the law, however, they should adopt new technologies to protect the bond between physician and patient. This will both reduce costs and renew trust, so that everyone wins.

Thomas D. Trapasso is president of I-data international, Inc., in Arlington, Virginia, which manufactures devices for printing and communications security.

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