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OUR VIEW

A plurality primary

Americans are nervously contemplating the rise of a vicious racist to the top of the GOP, not to mention the popularity of a 74-year-old Socialist who isn't even a member of the Democratic Party.

It's a strange time for American politics, and worth remarking about how we got here. Yet before we stress too much, maybe we can all take a deep breath and see that things aren't so strange in America — and that the country is not pulling apart in a mad dash to the extremes.

Think for a moment about how scientifically unsound the primary system is. It's a bad way to choose a party nominee — it's a bad way to choose anything, really.

The winner of each state contest is declared by plurality. That means a candidate only needs to receive a greater number of votes than any opponent in order to win. Donald Trump has won more states than all his opponents combined, but he won more than 40 percent of the votes only once — in Alabama.

Then think about how poor turnout is in the primary system, where outdated remnants of a bygone day, like a caucus, are still used to choose a candidate. Republicans are in the midst of a year of record turnout, yet in states that have already voted only 17 percent of all registered Republicans cast a ballot. For Democrats, only about 13 percent have done the same.

That means a minority of a minority is having an outsized influence, choosing candidates that may very well be outside the mainstream and would never appeal to a majority of voters.

The great statistician Bill James summed up the problem with plurality voting way back in 2001. He said that in a voting system with lots of choices, unique and extreme candidates will do better than candidates with overlap and similarities. But to James, there was an existential problem with that type of system declaring a winner.

"The larger point, it seems to me, is that a badly designed voting system will fail sometimes, no matter who votes," said James.

He was talking about baseball then, the game he helped revolutionize with mathematics, and specifically about how designated hitter Rafael Palmeiro won the Gold

Glove award despite being a terrible fielder. But James made it clear the fundamental problem transferred to politics.

"A voting structure like this is an open invitation to an eccentric outcome. If the United States were to use a system like this to elect the President, the absolutely certain result would be that, within a few elections, someone like David Duke, Donald Trump, or Warren Beatty would be elected President. If you can win an election with 15 percent of the vote, sooner or later somebody will. An unconstrained plurality vote gives an opening to someone or something who has a strong appeal to a limited number of people."

Yes, 15 years ago James predicted Donald Trump as a viable presidential hopeful.

And such crazy candidates have won primaries before, including avowed segregationist George Wallace on the Democratic side, or Strom Thurmond for the Republicans.

The only thing that separates Trump from those two is celebrity. Wallace and Thurmond won over voters in their home state and region, but could not gain traction on a national stage. Trump — with his billions and his television persona — can and has.

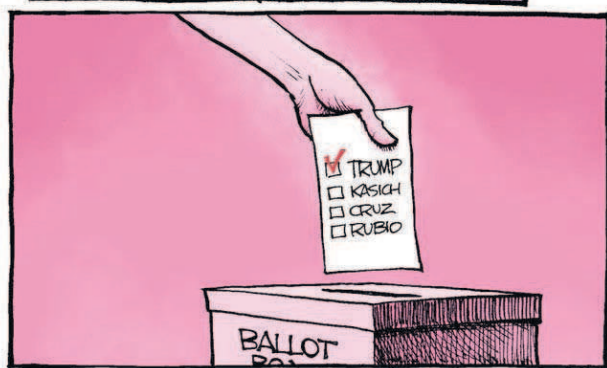
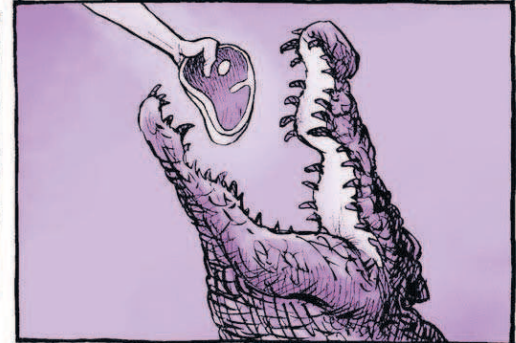
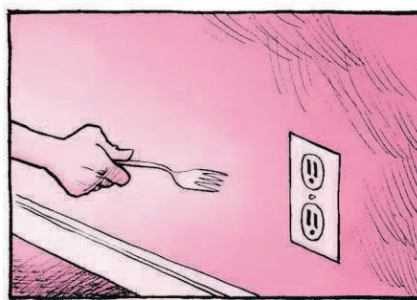
Maybe one way to look at 2016 is that it is just a down year. The supposedly stacked Republican stable of candidates has whittled down and few seem happy with the current choices. The Democrats now seem locked into a long battle of their own. Division is currently beating unity — which creates the kind of environment where pluralism can really wreck havoc.

Right now, a majority of Americans have an unfavorable opinion of the candidate in each party who has garnered the most delegates. And when the environment is that abnormal, competitions can have abnormal results.

Perhaps this is year is when James' prediction comes true — "a badly designed voting system will fail sometimes."

So perhaps it is time to worry — not that a majority of Americans wants to vote for a lunatic — but that a lunatic might win despite the fact that a majority of Americans oppose them.

A plurality primary is a bad way to choose a party nominee — it's a bad way to choose anything, really.



OTHER VIEWS

The shame culture

In 1987, Allan Bloom wrote a book called "The Closing of the American Mind." The core argument was that American campuses were awash in moral relativism. Subjective personal values had replaced universal moral principles. Nothing was either right or wrong. Amid a wave of rampant nonjudgmentalism, life was flatter and emptier.

Bloom's thesis was accurate at the time, but it's not accurate anymore. College campuses are today awash in moral judgment.

Many people carefully guard their words, afraid they might transgress one of the norms that have come into existence. Those accused of incorrect thought face ruinous consequences. When a moral crusade spreads across campus, many students feel compelled to post in support of it on Facebook within minutes. If they do not post, they will be noticed and condemned.

Some sort of moral system is coming into place. Some new criteria now exist, which people use to define correct and incorrect action. The big question is: What is the nature of this new moral system?

Last year, Andy Crouch published an essay in Christianity Today that takes us toward an answer.

Crouch starts with the distinction the anthropologist Ruth Benedict popularized, between a guilt culture and a shame culture. In a guilt culture you know you are good or bad by what your conscience feels. In a shame culture you know you are good or bad by what your community says about you, by whether it honors or excludes you. In a guilt culture people sometimes feel they do bad things; in a shame culture social exclusion makes people feel they are bad.

Crouch argues that the omnipresence of social media has created a new sort of shame culture. The world of Facebook, Instagram and the rest is a world of constant display and observation. The desire to be embraced and praised by the community is intense. People dread being exiled and condemned. Moral life is not built on the continuum of right and wrong; it's built on the continuum of inclusion and exclusion.

This creates a set of common behavior patterns. First, members of a group lavish one another with praise so that they themselves might be accepted and praised in turn.

Second, there are nonetheless enforcers within the group who build their personal power and reputation by policing the group and condemning those who break the group code. Social media can be vicious to those who don't fit in. Twitter can erupt in instant ridicule for anyone who stumbles.



DAVID BROOKS
Comment

Third, people are extremely anxious that their group might be condemned or denigrated. They demand instant respect and recognition for their group. They feel some moral wrong has been perpetrated when their group has been disrespected, and react with the most violent intensity.

Crouch describes how video gamers viciously went after journalists, mostly women, who had criticized the misogyny of their games. Campus controversies get so hot so fast because even a minor slight to a group is perceived as a basic identity threat.

The ultimate sin, Crouch argues, is to criticize a group, especially on moral grounds.

Talk of good and bad has to defer to talk about respect and recognition. Crouch writes, "Talk of right and wrong is troubling when it is accompanied by seeming indifference to the experience of shame that accompanies judgments of 'immorality.'"

He notes that this shame culture is different from the traditional shame cultures, the ones in Asia, for example. In traditional shame cultures the opposite of shame was honor or "face" — being known as a dignified and upstanding citizen. In the new shame culture,

the opposite of shame is celebrity — to be attention-grabbing and aggressively unique on some media platform.

On the positive side, this new shame culture might rebind the social and communal fabric. It might reverse, a bit, the individualistic, atomizing thrust of the past 50 years.

On the other hand, everybody is perpetually insecure in a moral system based on inclusion and exclusion. There are no permanent standards, just the shifting judgment of the crowd. It is a culture of oversensitivity, overreaction and frequent moral panics, during which everybody feels compelled to go along.

If we're going to avoid a constant state of anxiety, people's identities have to be based on standards of justice and virtue that are deeper and more permanent than the shifting fancy of the crowd. In an era of omnipresent social media, it's probably doubly important to discover and name your own personal True North, vision of an ultimate good, which is worth defending even at the cost of unpopularity and exclusion.

The guilt culture could be harsh, but at least you could hate the sin and still love the sinner. The modern shame culture allegedly values inclusion and tolerance, but it can be strangely unmerciful to those who disagree and to those who don't fit in.

David Brooks became a New York Times Op-Ed columnist in September 2003.

To avoid a constant state of anxiety, people's identities have to be based on standards of justice and virtue that are deeper and more permanent than the shifting fancy of the crowd.

YOUR VIEWS

Give thanks to America's farmers on National Ag Day

Most Americans are disconnected from the hard work on the farm. March was National Agriculture Day, so there's no better day to thank America's hard-working farmers and ranchers for a fridge full of food.

Although farmers make up only 2 percent of the U.S. population, they still manage to raise about 262 percent more food than they did back in 1950 — that means each farmer feeds about 155 people.

And farmers are not only producing, but more and more are taking the time to do so humanely. Every year, increasing numbers of farmers are turning to independent certification programs such as the American Humane Certified program, which ensures the welfare of farm animals with more than 200 scientifically based standards — covering everything from adequate space to air quality, food and water, and warmth — letting animals be animals.

On National Agriculture Day, let's give thanks to America's farmers who not only give us the most abundant, safe, and affordable food supply in the world, but who do so humanely, too.

Robin Ganzert, Ph.D., president and CEO
American Humane Association
Washington, D.C.

Kasich has the experience, temperament to be nominee

I would like to recommend presidential candidate Governor John Kasich of Ohio, who is moderate, fiscally responsible, knowledgeable about the Defense Department, and compassionate.

As a member of the U.S. House of Representatives before he was elected governor, Kasich served as chairperson of the House Budget Committee and succeeded in balancing the federal budget. He has vowed that, as president, balancing the federal budget will be his priority. As governor in Ohio he has reduced taxes by \$5 billion and erased the state's deficit. A resident of Ohio describes him as a "doer" more than a talker.

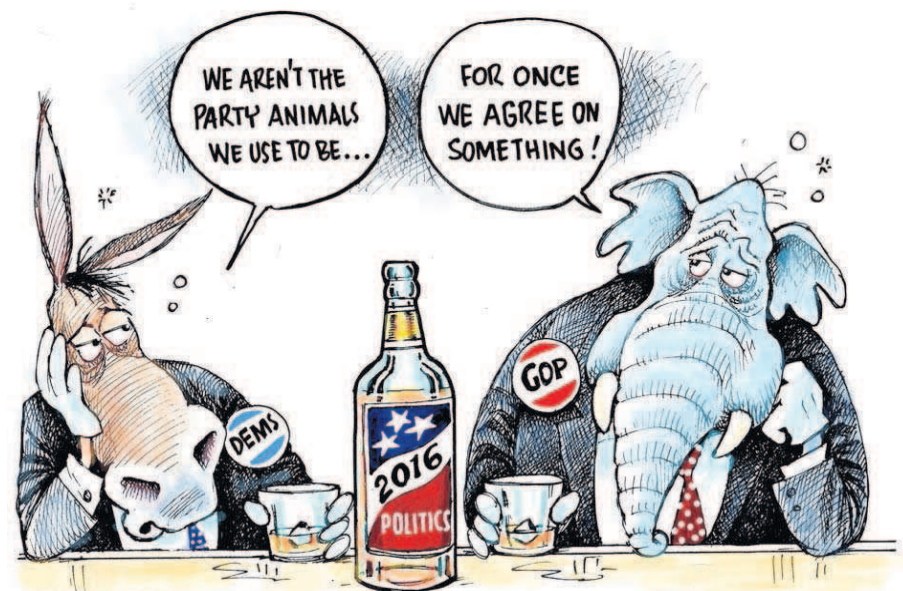
When he was in the nation's Congress, Kasich was a member of the House Armed Services Committee, so he is knowledgeable about the working of the Pentagon.

Perhaps most importantly, in temperament, Kasich seems sensible, balanced, and patient. He is also compassionate. I was very moved by his passion in describing the reduction in the recidivism rate in his state's prisons, so that the persons affected may embark on productive lives.

Finally, Kasich is pro-life, vital to generations of children.

Gregory Voss
Belleville, Ill.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.



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