

# O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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## OUR VIEW

## No debating the need for debate

When Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in 1877, he wasn't thinking that the most iconic recordings of the next century — say Woody Guthrie, The Beatles and Miles Davis — would use his technology to bring art to a worldwide audience.

He thought no one would be interested in listening to recorded music when they could hear and see it live and in person. And he wasn't alone. John Philip Sousa warned decades later, when it became clear that the phonograph was a fine medium for music, that its popularity would erode the finer instincts of the ear and put professional musicians out of work.

"The nightingale's song is delightful because the nightingale herself gives it forth," he wrote.

Edison thought the phonograph was, however, a wonderful tool for recording, memorializing and distributing the great speeches and debates of the time. Of all times. He thought homes all over the world could use their phonograph to listen to experts talk about the important issues of the day, and that through teaching and critical thinking, the world would become a less ignorant place if the best arguments and arguers had widespread release.

Fortunately or unfortunately, it was music that took over the records and airwaves. And that pushed debate over public issues out of the home and into the universities and statehouses and think tanks of America.

Fast forward a hundred-some years and you get today's sorry state of debate. What was once an important part of the educational process is



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Lincoln at a debate with Stephen Douglas. This is a photo of the original work, part of a private collection temporarily on display at the Lincoln Boyhood Memorial.

disappearing.

Partisan gridlock, which of course has always been a problem in our nation, has become more corrosive. And political disagreements, never easy in polite company, have regressed to anonymous trolling and cursing in online forums. Even congressional testimony has become a vehicle for grandstanding from all sides, rather than sussing out important information or even getting the opposition to reveal errors in their thinking.

It's far too easy for an American citizen to firmly hold an opinion that they will never hear challenged in any meaningful way, much less have to factually and steadfastly defend themselves.

The inability to debate, and to witness good debate, has affected our political process and our personal decision-making skills. It has hindered media literacy — left us more vulnerable to scams and actual fake news. Television didn't help as the

prior generation's technological leap — it elevated vanity and aesthetic over fact and supporting detail.

Sam Leith, author of "You Talkin' to Me? Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama," told *The Guardian* in 2016 that "it's tempting to look at modern-day political debates and think what a long way we've come from the days of Cicero and Pericles. But it's worth remembering that the whole game is knowing your audience, and knowing the medium. Nowadays, the main audience for a debate won't be the people in earshot: the exchange is intended to be, as it were, overheard by hundreds of thousands of people on television and social media. So, of course, people don't make three-hour-long, perfectly turned speeches intended to be taken in whole: they semaphore emotion, repeat key words, pepper it with catchphrases and soundbites. And that's what works."

But many of us are starving for something more substantive. And our

politicians, those who should be at the forefront of putting ideas to the test, are not providing it.

Let's just take a few examples: In the governor's primary race Knute Buehler refused to debate his fellow GOP candidates. Now that he has earned the right to square off with Kate Brown, it is Brown who is turning down some debate requests. Nothing is yet scheduled between current U.S. Rep. Greg Walden and his challenger, Jamie McLeod-Skinner, but we hope to see many joint debates between the two in their spread-out constituency. We all remember the anarchy of the 2016 debates between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, which devolved into playground taunts.

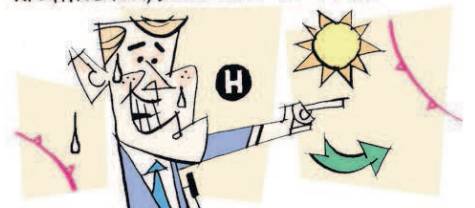
We need, more than ever, good debate and to hone our fact-finding abilities. We can use those skills to hold politicians, the news media and the loudmouth at the end of the bar to account. Those skills can help anyone pull their way through a thicket of facts, lies and slogans that have been set in their path by political parties, advertisers and enemies.

Globalization, technology and the steady creep of government power have made many issues more complicated and interconnected. Our real and digital worlds are blurring. Our First Amendment rights of free expression are under attack. Our government — and foreign governments — are getting better at manipulation and meddling.

To fight it, we must commit ourselves to the ancient tradition of debate, of talking and listening, of working to illuminate the truth rather than score political points, of moving toward justice rather than distraction.

### FUTURE FORECASTS

ALONG WITH THE RECORD-BREAKING HEAT EXPECT HISTORIC SANDSTORMS, MASSIVE FIRES AS A WARMING-DENIAL SYSTEM FLOODS WASHINGTON, D.C. WITH COLD CASH.



CHANGE DENIERS, COASTAL FLOODING REFUGEES AND HEAT REFUGEES HEADING NORTH SHOULD EXPECT RECORD-BREAKING HEAT.



AS DROUGHT CONDITIONS WORSEN AND OUR POWER GRIDS COLLAPSE THOUSANDS DIE IN HISTORIC HEAT WAVES



THIS JUST IN: CANADA IS BUILDING A WALL.



### YOUR VIEWS

#### Defeat of Bounds was partisan, not principled

I spit my coffee Tuesday reading the editorial "Out of Bounds," regarding the purely partisan blackballing of judicial nominee Ryan Bounds. The editor speaks of time-honored norms regarding blue slips. May I remind anyone who cares that Democrats, when they were in the majority in 2013, eliminated the filibuster for all but Supreme Court nominees? Unlike the blue slip, which is a courtesy, they changed a basic Senate rule through procedural sleight of hand. Some called it the nuclear option and I agree. I challenge

anyone to tell me with a straight face Bounds and Eastern Oregon were denied representation based on anything but a repudiation of the president for political gain.

"Can't we all just be civil and work together" is something the minority says, and that went out the door when the Dems nuked the Senate. This partisan attack on democracy and representation by the left side of this state is nothing new. We on the east side have little to no influence in Salem. It's sad even our newspaper sides with the west.

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### OTHER VIEWS

## Democratic Party loses plot

There's a lot of discussion about how far left the Democratic Party should go these days. Is it destroying its electoral chances when its members call for a single-payer health plan or abolishing ICE?

That's an important question, but the most important question is what story is the Democratic Party telling? As Alasdair MacIntyre argued many years ago, you can't know what to do unless you know what story you are a part of. Story is more important than policies.

We post-Cold War Americans haven't really settled on what story we are a part of. We'll flock to anybody who can tell us a story that feels true.

The story President Donald Trump tells is that we good-hearted, decent people of Middle America have been betrayed by stupid elites who screw us and have been threatened by foreigners who are out to get us. That story resonated with many people. You can get a lot of facts wrong if you get your story right.

Back in the 1980s, the Democrats told two different stories. One was the compassion story associated with Mario Cuomo and Ted Kennedy: Too many Americans are poor, marginalized and left behind. We must care for our brothers and sisters because we are all one family.

The other was the brainpower/meritocracy story associated with Gary Hart and later the New Democrats: Americans are masters at innovation. We must use our best minds to come up with innovative plans to solve our problems and head into a new technological century.

I don't hear those two stories much anymore. The Democrats are emphasizing fighting grit these days, not compassion or technocratic expertise.

Today's Democrats tell two other stories. The first is the traditional socialist story associated with Bernie Sanders: The United States is rived by class conflict. Bankers and oligarchs are exploiting the middles. We

need a fighter who will go out and battle concentrated economic power.

The second is the multicultural story: U.S. history has been marked by systems of oppression. Those who have been oppressed — women, African-Americans, Latinos — need to stand together and fight for justice.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has risen to prominence blending these two languages into one: racial

justice socialism. "I can't name a single issue with roots in race that doesn't have economic implications," she declares, "and I cannot think of a single economic issue that doesn't have racial implications. The idea that we have to separate them is a con."

Racial justice socialism seems to be the story of the contemporary left. This story effectively paints Trump as the villain on all fronts, and Democrats do face the distinct problem of how to run against a bully like Trump. But is it good politics for the entire Democratic Party to embrace it?

Well, we should humbly admit we're in virgin territory at a time when all the tectonic plates are shifting.

But we do know that no national Democrat has ever fully embraced this story successfully. In fact, Democrats like Bill Clinton and Barack Obama went to great lengths to assure people they were not embracing this story.

They did because Americans trust business more than the state, so socialism has never played well. They did it because if you throw race into your economic arguments you end up turning off potential allies in swing states like Wisconsin, Iowa and Pennsylvania. They did it because if you throw economics into your race arguments you end up dividing your coalitions on those issues.

In brief, Democrats have stayed away from this narrative because the long hoped-for alliance between oppressed racial minorities and the oppressed white working class has never materialized, and it looks very far from materializing now.



DAVID BROOKS  
Comment