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OUR VIEW

Redrawing electoral districts must be fair, open process

Democrats hold Oregon’s fate in their hands — at least for the near term.

The party has a three-fifths supermajority in the state Capitol this legislative session, gained through a fair election process that has edged in their favor over the past decade. They also have the governor’s seat, which means if Democrats are united behind a bill or budget, there’s little that can stop it from passing.

It’s not because of some conspiracy or an unequal playing field. Oregon voters simply lean left, when considered as a whole, and the state’s districts are a fairly accurate assessment of where the voters’ allegiances lie.

This accuracy is largely due to the fact that in 2011, the last time the boundaries were drawn for electoral districts, the Oregon House was

divided equally between Democrats and Republicans. That even split didn’t keep politics or contention out of the process, but did produce legislative maps that both parties could agree upon.

It was the first time since the 1950s that the legislature was able to complete the task on deadline without intervention by the secretary of state or courts.

As the 2020 census nears, new districts will be drawn. It is likely this will even include carving out a sixth U.S. House district for the state of Oregon.

It’s crucial that this process isn’t dominated by a single party, no matter how much that party’s ideologies and policies may be in favor right now.

We urge serious consideration of the plan to move the responsibility

from the legislature to a nonpartisan committee consisting of people from all corners of the state, who can attest to logical boundaries and balanced representation.

The unfairness of gerrymandering, as it has come to be known, is well documented in states around the country. The balance of a district can be tilted with some clever strokes of the pen, spreading already minority voters thinner and effectively eliminating their voice. It’s a tactic that has been employed successfully by both parties in an effort to solidify power.

And it’s bad for democratic representation. No matter a person’s political leanings, they must vote with the assurance that their ballot hasn’t been rigged into irrelevancy by their own representatives.

As the saying goes, voters should pick their lawmakers and not the

other way around.

Late Secretary of State Dennis Richardson was a champion of reform. A redistricting task force in 2017 recommended the job be handled by an independent commission in an open setting with clear criteria for the new boundaries. It would follow models in California and Washington.

It’s a critical task. Our population shifts and changes over time, and making sure that voters aren’t overlooked keeps our democracy functioning.

No party should have the upper hand when it comes to deciding voting districts for the next decade. That’s why we are in favor of amending Oregon’s constitution to create a nonpartisan redistricting commission to redraw legislative districts after each census.



YOUR VIEWS

Hermiston fee hikes should be refunded

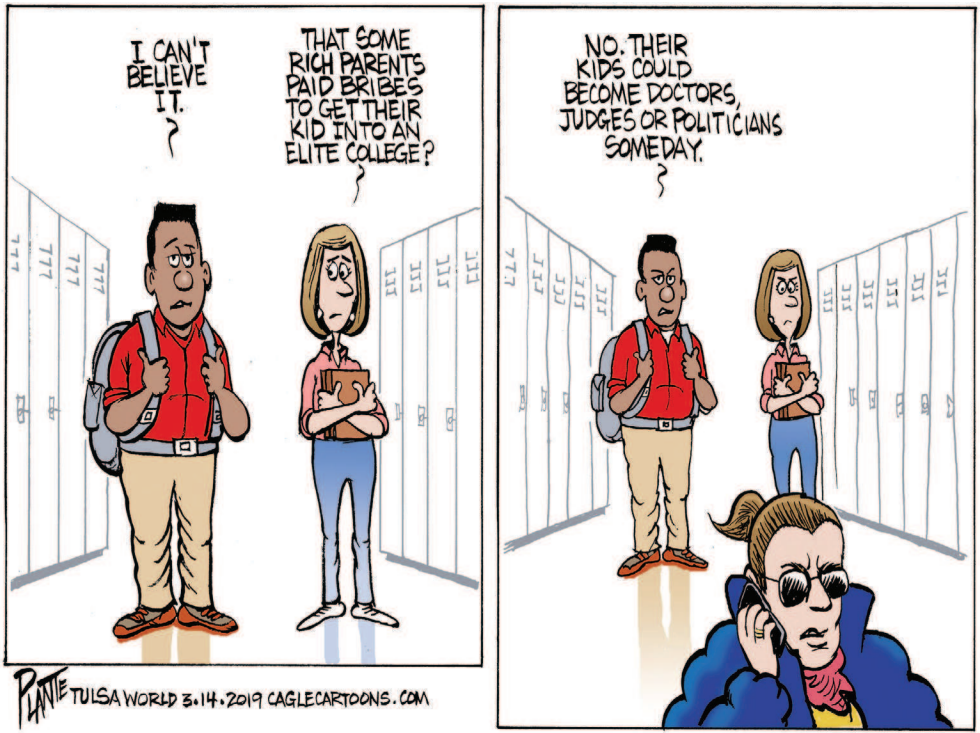
A century ago, any brazen leaders who had the audacity to raise fees a whopping 50 percent would have been tarred, feathered, and run out of town on a rail. So imagine our shock when we opened our Hermiston water/sewer bill on March 11, and discovered that our rates had skyrocketed a whopping 50.9 percent in one month! You’ve got to be kidding!

As retired senior citizens, whose retirement wages may (or may not) receive a modest wage increase of 2 percent per year, due to inflation, this crazy increase really blew our minds. Indeed, if someone raises fees above the inflation rate, we call it “greed.” If the rate is 25 times more than the inflation rate, we call it “criminal.” Actu-

ally, we know of a single mother in Hermiston who already uses bath water three times before draining the tub, yet in one city vote her bill increased 50 percent! Seriously?

We believe that when our city leaders make asinine mistakes, they deserve a chance to make it right. We suggest that they immediately go back to the drawing board, and refigure an increase that is closer to the inflation rate, and consider a credit refund as well. Failure to do so should result in removal from office. We don’t need a frivolous dictatorship, or oligarchy, in Hermiston. Life here should be “sweet” — not bitter, right? Moreover, we need leaders with integrity, who realize this fee hike is unacceptable, and are willing to fix it ASAP!

Jerald Carlson
Hermiston



Agnes McKeen lives in Klamath Falls. About three years ago, at 16, Agnes’ son Harrison took his own life.

“In losing Harrison I lost all direction for every ounce of love that a mother has for her child; I lost any idea of where to direct that love. Just because Harrison’s gone doesn’t mean my love for him went away,” she says.

“And I had to learn to love that which is not physically here. And now my son’s energy is woven into the fabric of the universe, and that’s where I directed my love. ... So now my love goes to the community.”

She expresses it by trying to help people prevent suicide and deal with the grief that comes in its wake.

You’ve probably seen the recent statistics about the suicide epidemic — that suicide rates overall have risen by over 30 percent this century; that teenage suicides are rising at roughly twice that rate; that every year 45,000 Americans kill themselves.

And yet we don’t talk about it much. It’s uncomfortable. Some people believe the falsehood that if we talk about suicide, it will plant the idea in the minds of vulnerable people. Many of us don’t know what to say or do.

A person may be at risk of committing suicide when he or she expresses hopelessness or self-loathing, when he or she starts joking about “after I’m gone,” starts giving away prized possessions, seems preoccupied with death, suddenly withdraws or suddenly appears calm after a period of depression, as if some decision has been made.

When you’re around somebody like that, don’t try to argue with her or him. Don’t say, “You have so much to live for!” Or, “Do you realize how much this will devastate the people around you?” If you gasp or act shocked you’ll burden the person with even more shame and guilt, pushing that person even harder to withdraw.

Sufferers will often lie about their plans. According to one study, 80 percent of suicide victims deny suicidal thoughts before killing themselves. The first thing to do, Agnes advises, is validate their feelings: “I can only imagine what you’re feeling right now.” Then ask directly: “Are you thinking about ending your life?” Remember, the person in front of you is only contemplating suicide because he thinks it is the only way to get out of the pain.

Your next job is to help them cope. People contemplating suicide are often in the grips of a temporary mood catastrophe, to which they unfortunately see a permanent solution. The pain is real but not forever. Most



DAVID BROOKS
COMMENT

people who attempt suicide and fail are later glad they failed. Get them to talk about the pain, so they can understand its contours. Ask them to record their thoughts in a journal. Over time most of them will see that there is a compulsive voice in their head telling them that they are worthless and that there is no hope, and that this voice is a lying voice.

The voice may be caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. Ask them to write down a life plan for those moments when the lying voice gets loudest: Whom will they call? Where will they go? Hang the contact information right on the wall. Don’t let such a person swear you to secrecy. You’re going to find more help. Try anti-suicide apps, like Tec-Tec, available through Apple or Amazon.

We also need to go broader. Suicide is a societal problem. It’s strongly associated with social isolation. Men die at higher rates than women, single people more than married people, rural people more than urban people, Native Americans and whites more than blacks or Latinos.

It’s also a values problem. Our individualistic culture means there are vast empty gaps in our social fabric where people suffer alone and invisibly. It’s also a guns

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problem. A lot of people die simply because at their lowest moment, there happened to be a gun around.

Agnes wrote to me that if you meet someone who has lost someone to suicide, there are better ways to begin a conversation. “SAY THEIR LOVED ONE’S NAME!” Share a memory. When you ask how the survivor is doing, don’t let her say, “It’s not about me.” Because it is, and about her recovery.

Agnes believes in professional help but says what’s really necessary is belonging and peer counseling, “people pouring their heart out, and it creates the mentality that, ‘if they can do it, I can do it.’ ... Give folks a feeling of hope that we can rise out of this and we can do it together.”

Her life has been messy, like a lot of lives, but Agnes has a hard-earned wisdom. “I woke back up after losing Harrison on Dec. 28, 2015. I was sitting on my front porch talking to Harrison like I still do. I said, ‘Gosh darn it, Harrison, didn’t you know how much I loved you!’ I felt him move through me. I could feel the warmth, like you get when you wrap your hands around a cup of coffee. And I heard him say, ‘Of course I know, Ma.’ I felt him.”

David Brooks is a columnist for the New York Times.