

## EDITORIAL

## Climate change, and the cost of keeping warm

With the coldest weather in more than half a year forecast to intrude on Baker City this week, residents who rely on natural gas to warm their homes and businesses got the financial equivalent of a slushball to the face.

The Oregon Public Utility Commission (PUC) approved a request from Cascade Natural Gas to boost rates by 25.1% for residential customers starting Nov. 1.

The increase is even larger for commercial customers (30.1%) and industrial customers (33.8%).

According to the PUC, this rate hike will not fatten the bottom line for Cascade Natural Gas, which has three main service areas in Oregon — Baker City, Central Oregon, including Bend, and parts of Umatilla and Morrow counties, including Pendleton.

The increases are part of what PUC calls a “Purchased Gas Adjustment” or PGA. The basic idea is that natural gas companies can request rate increases to cover higher prices for the gas they buy on the wholesale market.

Natural gas futures climbed to a 14-year high in August, up 70% since late June.

The PUC also approved PGAs for Oregon’s two other natural gas providers — Avista (18.4% increase for residential customers) and NW Natural (14.4% increase for residential customers).

Mark Hanson, a spokesman for Cascade Natural Gas, cited several factors that contributed to rising prices for natural gas and this year’s unusually large rate hikes.

Some factors were in effect unavoidable. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine this past winter and the continuing war, for instance, prompted sanctions against Russia from U.S. and Europe. Russia responded by reducing gas imports to Europe, resulting in greater demand from Europe for liquefied natural gas imports from the U.S. The rising demand itself pushes prices higher, but it also has contributed to natural gas inventories dipping, a situation that industry experts say also tends to inflate prices.

A PUC report also cited a June 8, 2022, fire at America’s second-largest liquefied natural gas export facility near Galveston, Texas, as a price factor.

But the bigger bills that will arrive in Baker City mail boxes and inboxes this winter — about \$15 more per month for a typical residential customer, according to PUC — can’t be blamed solely on a war and a fire.

America’s campaign to curb climate change also bears some of the responsibility.

Another significant source of the rising demand for natural gas is producing electricity. With many coal-fired power plants closing because burning coal produces larger amounts of carbon dioxide than other fuels — Oregon’s last coal-burning plant, in Boardman, shut down two years ago — natural gas has been tapped to supply the lost megawatts. Hanson said the demand for natural gas to produce electricity reached record highs during this past sizzling summer.

Unfortunately, America’s illogical disdain for nuclear energy means the country inevitably had to turn to natural gas to supplant coal.

The outlook is somewhat more promising. Hanson said natural gas production should continue to increase, and by next year it could catch up with demand, potentially pushing prices down in 2023.

Ultimately, this coming winter, when frigid Baker City mornings will no doubt prompt some residents to weigh the expense against the comfort of an extra degree or two on the thermostat, will serve as a reminder that combating climate change, worthwhile endeavor that it is, sometimes comes with an immediate cost.

For information about bill payment assistance options, newly available utility discount programs, and the Budget Pay Program that equalizes bill payments across winter and summer months, contact Cascade Natural at 888-522-1130 or view information online at [www.cngc.com/customer-service/low-income-assistance-programs/](http://www.cngc.com/customer-service/low-income-assistance-programs/).

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor

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## OTHER VIEWS

## Biden claims he signed a bill on student loan amnesty

EDITORIAL FROM THE LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

President Joe Biden in August unveiled the vote-buying scheme known as student loan forgiveness. Two months later he has forgotten the particulars.

During an on-camera interview released Sunday, Oct. 30 with the left-wing group NowThisNews, the president begins talking about his loan amnesty plan.

He tells the activists that they “probably are aware, I just signed a law” on student debt relief that Republicans are challenging in court. He goes on to say that “it’s passed. I got it passed by a vote or two, and it’s in effect.”

As blunders go, this one is vintage Biden. His economic agenda has been a model of confusion, and the incoherence now spills over into the president’s student loan policy.

In fact, Biden signed no such law because Congress passed no such law, which is why his ac-

tions are now being challenged in court. Rather than go through the legislative branch, the president did an end-around, relying on a 20-year old law that gives the secretary of education certain powers to rewrite loan terms during national emergencies. It’s worth noting that Biden declared the pandemic to be “over” well before the forgiveness plan went into effect.

The president’s unilateral move — which would eliminate \$10,000 of debt for most borrowers — faces several legal obstacles, including a lawsuit by six states. Last week, a federal judge

ruled that the states did not have standing to sue, but he acknowledged that the case raised “important and significant” issues.

A day later, the Eighth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals stayed the lower court’s ruling until further review and ordered the administration to take no more action on the plan until the legal case is decided.

The White House responded by downplaying the stay. It is “important to note,” an administration statement said, “that the order does not reverse the trial court’s dismissal of the case, or suggest that the case has

merit. It merely prevents debt from being discharged until the court makes a decision. We will continue to move full speed ahead in our preparations in compliance with this order.”

Putting aside the legal debate, Biden’s \$400 billion giveaway is an affront to those who met their obligations, those who paid their way through college and those who never enrolled at all. It sends precisely the wrong message regarding the importance of personal responsibility and does nothing to reform the very loan programs that brought us to this point in the first place, ensuring a repeat in the years to come. In short, like most of the president’s agenda, it’s a mess.

From a legal perspective, Biden’s actions on student loans raise important constitutional questions involving presidential authority and the separation of powers. These are issues that merit adjudication, a process highly likely to produce an outcome that the administration won’t embrace.

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## COLUMN

## 10 common myths about American politics

BY MICHAEL REISCH

The media frequently justify their election coverage with claims that a vital democracy needs a well-informed public. Unfortunately, their coverage often repeats long-standing myths about politics that undermine this worthwhile goal.

Here are 10 of the most glaring myths:

**1. Candidate quality counts most with voters.**

In this age of celebrity, name recognition rather than substantive accomplishment matters. There is no other explanation for the electoral success of Donald Trump, the candidacies of Kari Lake, J.D. Vance and Mehmet Oz, and the contemplation of future candidacies by Kanye West and Dwayne Johnson. Many voters embrace celebrity to acquire vicarious status or because a celebrity voices their long-held beliefs.

**2. Voters prefer candidates who display bipartisanship.**

Prospective voters often express chagrin about politicians’ failure to “just get along.” Yet, they largely vote for candidates in primary elections who reflect the most polarized positions. Candidates respond accordingly, even after they win.

**3. Voters prefer positive messages from candidates.**

Voters also frequently bemoan attack ads that combine half-truths about opponents with scary images and ominous music. Studies reveal, however, that most voters respond more to negative ads than positive ones.

**4. Voters pay attention to candidates’ records on the issues.**

Candidates’ websites post detailed positions on a wide range of issues, but scant evidence exists that voters examine these websites carefully. In fact, voters hardly notice

shifts in candidates’ positions except on the few issues they already cared about.

**5. Voters care about the future.**

Some candidates address long-term problems, such as the national debt, the fate of Social Security and Medicare, and the future of the Earth. Voters focus on short-term concerns, however, like gasoline prices or entrenched issues like abortion. To some extent, this reflects how the media cover the issues.

**6. Voters assess candidates using similar criteria.**

Although they claim to prefer candidates whose moral rectitude reflects a commitment to “family values,” voters all over the political spectrum are remarkably forgiving of their preferred candidates even when they violate these norms. For example, feminists supported Bill Clinton; evangelicals still back Donald Trump. Less popular politicians, however, often suffer the voters’ wrath for less egregious transgressions.

**7. Voters who identify as independent are better informed and less partisan.**

Given the increasing importance of primaries in determining who ultimately wins political office, declaring oneself an “independent” is increasingly no more than a form of virtue signaling. States without “open primaries” render independents politically irrelevant, yet both parties moderate previous positions to attract their votes. Independents are just as partisan as other voters. They only differ in the combination of issues about which they are partisan.

**8. There is such a thing as the women’s vote, the Black vote, the Jewish vote, etc.**

The media frequently report how a particular group’s votes will split among candidates, and pay inordinate attention to per-

ceived shifts in these blocs’ voting patterns. Following an election, they twist themselves into analytic pretzels explaining why so many women voted for Donald Trump; non-college educated white men voted for Barack Obama, but not Hillary Clinton; and why Latinos embrace conservative positions on abortion and immigration. The myth that identity equates with ideology has been disproved so often it is no longer a surprise.

**9. Debates influence election outcomes.**

Since the Kennedy-Nixon debates, the assumption that these events influence the outcome of close elections remains a sacred truth of American politics. Campaigns spend considerable time rehearsing rhetorical zingers for their candidate to inject at an opportune moment. In some cases, they deliberately set the bar so low for their candidate that anything short of incoherence is a “victory” (see Herschel Walker). Debates, however, now have less impact on elections than viewers do on “Dancing with the Stars,” especially when they occur after early voting begins.

**10. Not voting sends a powerful political message.**

Deliberately choosing not to vote out of apathy, cynicism or the belief that voting makes no difference is just another version of virtue signaling. It is particularly tragic that groups most likely not to vote — people who are young, lower income, and less educated — are those most affected by election outcomes. Although some campaigns engage in registration and “get out the vote” efforts, they largely target likely voters and tailor their messages accordingly.

■ Michael Reisch has conducted and consulted on political campaigns at the local, state, and national level and written and taught about politics and social action at six major universities.

## CONTACT YOUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

**President Joe Biden:** The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C. 20500; 202-456-1111; to send comments, go to [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

**U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley:** D.C. office: 313 Hart Senate Office Building, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-3753; fax 202-228-3997. Portland office: One World Trade Center, 121 S.W. Salmon St. Suite 1250, Portland, OR 97204; 503-326-3386; fax 503-326-2900. Baker City office, 1705 Main St., Suite 504, 541-278-1129; merkley.senate.gov.

**U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden:** D.C. office: 221 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-5244; fax 202-228-2717. La Grande office: 105 Fir St., No. 210, La Grande, OR 97850; 541-962-7691; fax, 541-963-0885; wyden.senate.gov.

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**Oregon Gov. Kate Brown:** 254 State Capitol, Salem, OR 97310; 503-378-3111; [www.governor.oregon.gov](http://www.governor.oregon.gov).

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**Oregon Legislature:** Legislative documents and information are available online at [www.leg.state.or.us](http://www.leg.state.or.us).

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**Baker City Hall:** 1655 First Street, P.O. Box 650, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-6541; fax 541-524-2049. City Council meets the second and fourth Tuesdays at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers.

Councilors Jason Spriet, Kerry McQuisten, Shane Alderson, Joanna Dixon, Kenyon Damschen, Johnny Waggoner Sr. and Dean Guyer.

**Baker City administration:** 541-523-6541. Jonathan Cannon, city manager; Ty Duby, police chief; David Blair, fire chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.

**Baker County Commission:** Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.