

Downtown could falter without tax

Bend's downtown thrives because of its businesses, the Downtown Bend Business Association and the people who shop and visit downtown.

The Downtown Bend Business Association promotes downtown and cares for it. The DBBA does everything from the flower baskets to sidewalk cleaning to snow removal to holiday decorations to maintaining the banners, benches and bike racks and also marketing and advocacy for the downtown.

Much of that money comes from an economic improvement district. The district is an agreement between building owners, the downtown association and the city. It is paid by downtown businesses for the businesses. And it's about to expire.

This is one of those situations where some businesses actually say: Please tax us to make our community better.

The proposal is to renew it again for another three years. It would be 25 cents per square foot in the first year and go up by a penny each year. That might raise about \$250,000 each year. The tax only covers businesses in downtown Bend. There is more information about it at downtownbend.org.

There will be meetings about it, a public hearing and a council vote. There's also sort of a vote on it by the businesses that would

pay. We say "sort of" because according to state law "when written objections are received at the public hearing from owners of property upon which more than 33% of the total amount of assessments is levied" the assessment will not be made. If all goes according to plan, the economic improvement district would officially kick in on July 1. The problem for downtown is that even if the district passes it has not been enough to fund everything that needs to get done. The Downtown Bend Business Association has asked the city for additional funding — \$30,000 in COVID-19 relief. It's not clear if the city will contribute.

The key for now is, at least, passage of the renewal of the improvement district. Downtown property owners need to decide for themselves if they like it.

We would hate to see it fail, because it might be a terrible sign for downtown's future. Bend's downtown is the envy of many communities. But walk the streets now and it's easy to see exposed wires, broken pavement and much more that needs some tender loving care. Don't let Bend's downtown deteriorate. It won't stay great unless we fight to keep it great.

Walkout-proofing may get a walkout

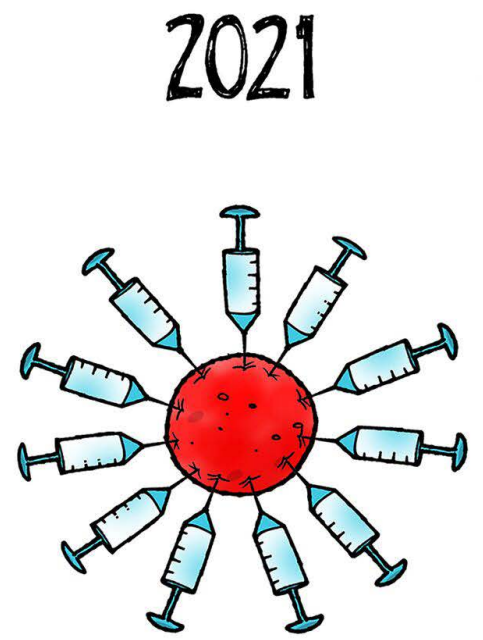
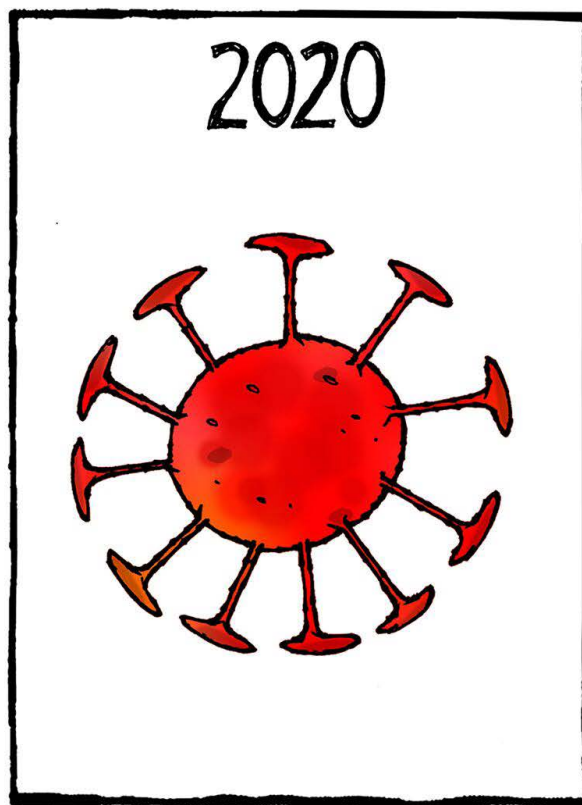
The changes Democrats want to make the Oregon Legislature walkout-proof may trigger another walkout.

The proposed changes include:

- Asking Oregonians to change the state constitution so the Legislature only needs a majority for a quorum instead of two-thirds of lawmakers present.
- Ask Oregonians to change the state constitution so lawmakers with 10 or more unexcused absences can't run for reelection
- And things like blocking legislators from getting pay or not allowing them to use political con-

tributions for unexcused absences.

As Oregon Public Broadcasting pointed out though, when Democrats wanted to talk about them in the Senate Rules Committee, some Republican committee members just didn't show up. And it is certainly a possibility that if Democrats try to move forward on these changes, Republicans will stage another walkout and bring this session, like the last session, to a crashing halt. But some of the changes could get on the ballot through the initiative process, no matter what Republican legislators do.



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What are China's leaders so afraid of?

BY FRED HIATT

The Washington Post

In a testy exchange kicking off the first high-level talks between Chinese Communist officials and the Biden administration, China's delegation warned the United States not to go all high-and-mighty.

"Many people within the United States actually have little confidence in the democracy of the United States," noted Yang Jiechi, director of the Chinese Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs, "and they have various views regarding the government of the United States."

To which we Americans might respond: Tell us something we don't know. "Various views" surely understates our contentions, and whose confidence in American democracy has not been shaken after the past four years?

Yet I couldn't help thinking: If China is so confident in the superiority of its own model — by contrast, "the leaders of China have the wide support of the Chinese people," Yang insisted — why do its leaders act so afraid?

Why would a popular government lock up a man such as Wang Bingzhang, for example?

Wang was a democracy advocate living in North America in 2002 when Chinese agents kidnapped him from a meeting in Vietnam. They detained him secretly for six months and then, in a closed one-day "trial," sentenced him to life in prison.

If China's Communist rulers are so

beloved, why are they afraid to let this 73-year-old man out of jail?

And I wondered: Why would such a beloved regime be so afraid of Zhang Zhan?

As The Washington Post's Lily Kuo reported, Zhang, a lawyer-turned-citizen-journalist, was sentenced in a closed-door trial at the end of December to four years in prison for the crime of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble."

Zhang had traveled in February 2020 to Wuhan, where she filmed overwhelmed hospitals as the city where the COVID-19 pandemic began struggled to cope with the virus. She was detained in May and has been force-fed as she conducts a hunger strike.

If China "has made decisive achievements and important strategic gains in fighting COVID-19," as Yang declared during Friday's summit, why would the Communist Party worry about Zhang's reports?

For that matter, what could China's Communist rulers have to fear from a slight, soft-spoken 24-year-old like Joshua Wong?

Wong was sentenced in December to 13 ½ months in prison for helping to organize and participating in a protest in Hong Kong in 2019.

No one disputes that the protest was peaceful. Wong's true crime was in wanting to put Yang's assertion of popularity to the test: Wong favors free and open elections, which the Communist Party has never been willing to risk in China and which now — despite having made

promises to the contrary — it has barred in Hong Kong, too.

That is why, when Yang was lecturing Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan about the popularity of his regime, the only source he could cite was unspecified "opinion polls."

Many Americans feared deeply for our democracy as President Donald Trump and his cronies chipped away at the rule of law and flouted the constitutional norms we had always counted on. Yang is right about that.

And who would disagree, as George Floyd's killer goes on trial in Minnesota and Asian women are gunned down in Georgia, that "the challenges facing the United States in human rights are deep-seated," as Yang put it.

Yet, last fall, Americans were able to organize and rally and vote, and we turned out one leader and installed another.

I can endorse Yang's criticism of U.S. human rights without being sent to prison for "picking quarrels and provoking trouble."

So I would say to Director Yang, you are right about America. If you are just as right about China, let Wang Bingzhang and Zhang Zhan and Joshua Wong out of prison.

Let them speak their minds.

Let your people organize and rally and vote.

Let us see how wide and deep your support really is.

■ Fred Hiatt is the editorial page editor of *The Post*.

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Making it harder to vote may not be good for Republicans

BY ROBERT GRIFFIN

Special to *The Washington Post*

In statehouses across the country, Republicans have introduced, filed or passed more than 250 bills that are trying to make it harder to vote. These have taken a variety of forms, including eliminating opportunities for voter registration, enacting stricter voter ID laws and limiting both early in-person voting and voting by mail.

One explanation for this push: Substantial numbers of Republicans say there was widespread fraud during the 2020 election. According to mid-January data from the Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape survey — a project I help manage — just 37% of Republicans were confident that the 2020 election was conducted fairly and accurately. These beliefs persist despite Republican state officials such as Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger flatly denying fraud claims. Even former President Donald Trump's director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency went so far as to call the 2020 election "the most secure in U.S. history." Still, state-level Republicans may be pursuing these legislative efforts because they share these beliefs and also want to respond to pressure from substantial portions of their po-

litical base.

The second, and probably more important, explanation is that Republicans say restrictions on voting, particularly by mail, will benefit them in future elections. But this may not be the case.

It is nearly an article of faith among Republicans that making voting harder will help them at the ballot box. Trump's characteristically brusque summary of this belief was that "you'd never have a Republican elected in this country again" if voting opportunities were expanded. In January, a Republican election official said that Georgia needed tougher laws to reduce turnout, "so we at least have a shot at winning." Asked to justify two Arizona voter restrictions before the Supreme Court this month, the lawyer for the state's Republican Party responded, simply, that easing them "puts us at a competitive disadvantage relative to Democrats."

The unfortunate dynamic of the 2020 election — in no small part because of Trump's own statements castigating mail voting throughout the campaign and encouraging his supporters to vote in person — was that Joe Biden's supporters were far more likely than Trump supporters to report that they voted by mail.

This unprecedented partisan gap in vote method appears to have persuaded Republicans that vote-by-mail boosted Democratic participation and cost them the election. In the tsunami of bills proposed since the election, nothing has been as consistent a target as vote-by-mail. Out of the 253 restrictive bills currently tracked by the Brennan Center, 125 include provisions restricting vote-by-mail.

And yet, recent research has shown that vote-by-mail does not offer any substantive advantage to either political party. One notable study analyzed voting patterns from 1996 through 2018 in California, Utah and Washington, three states that implemented universal vote-by-mail in many or all of their counties. The authors found that universal vote-by-mail did not significantly change either party's vote share. A similar study of these three states' vote-by-mail rollout came to the same conclusion.

What about the 2020 election, a cycle where there was a substantial increase in the number of Americans who voted by mail? At present, analysts say that the substantial increase in early voting and vote-by-mail primarily represented a swap: Voters who would have voted in person on Election Day decided to cast their bal-

lot using these alternative methods.

Consider this interesting study of voting patterns among voters in Texas and Indiana. In both states, voters 65 and older could vote by mail with fewer restrictions than those 64 and younger. This age cutoff created a natural experiment, in which otherwise similar populations had different levels of access to vote-by-mail. If greater access to vote-by-mail substantially benefited Democrats, we would see the effect here. In reality, the effect was so small as to be statistically indistinguishable from zero.

Zooming out from vote-by-mail, even the idea that a larger electorate naturally favors Democrats should be viewed with skepticism. The 2020 presidential race had the highest turnout in more than a century. And yet it was also an election in which Trump lost the electoral vote because of only 42,918 votes spread across three states, Republicans in the House actually picked up 14 seats, and state-level Republicans picked up trifecta governments in two additional states. Is this really what a natural Democratic advantage looks like?

In addition, it is easy enough to imagine a future where the Republican Party would generally benefit from higher turnout and easier ac-

cess to the ballot. Over the last several presidential elections, there has been a steadily growing education divide between the parties. College-educated voters have shifted toward the Democratic Party while noncollege voters have shifted toward the Republican Party. Should these trends continue, these lower-turnout noncollege voters are some of the very groups that could benefit from election laws that make voting easier. The nonpartisan group VoteRiders, for example, has suggested that Georgia's proposed photocopied ID requirement could burden rural and older voters, who lean Republican, just as it might burden groups who typically lean Democratic. The reality is that election laws are complicated and incentivize voter behavior in complex ways that are context dependent. This makes it very difficult to predict precisely who would benefit from a given reform — if anyone at all.

While the eventual fate of these Republican bills is uncertain, the evidence is fairly clear: There is no substantive justification for many of these efforts, and even the basic partisan logic behind them is tenuous.

■ Robert Griffin is a political scientist and research director of the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group.