

Elected officials should be voting, not abstaining

We want our elected officials to vote on the decisions before them. Not be out of town during meetings. Not abstain.

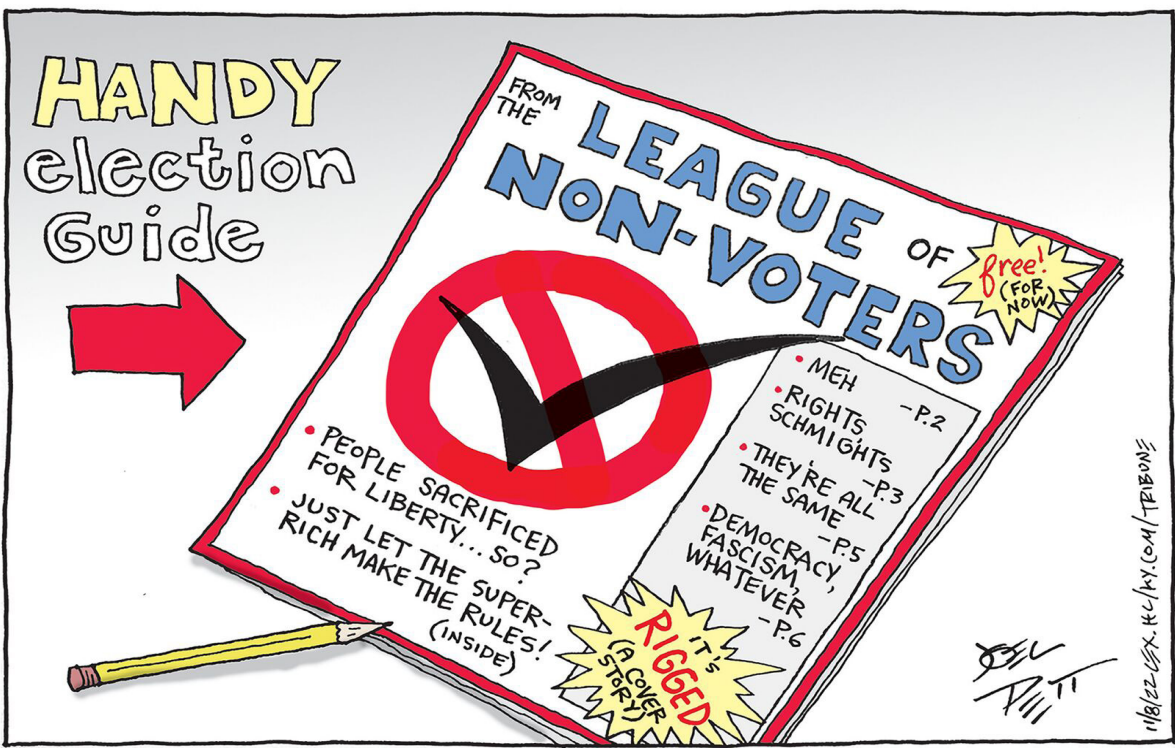
Vote yes or no. It seems so obvious. But a discussion by the Deschutes Public Library Board last week did make us start to wonder. The board got an opinion from its attorney, Carrie Connelly, on the matter, because the issue of abstentions has come up in library board votes. When is it OK to abstain? Is it legal? Or should board members be voting? We are far from legal experts, but Connelly suggested the board members should not abstain. “Members of boards, commissions, or councils are obviously appointed to make decisions. Absent compelling circumstances, for example, pecuniary conflict of interest problems, board members should not abstain from voting,” Oregon’s public records and meetings manual states. That’s backed by case law. In the 1970s, a developer in Oregon wanted to put a warehouse on a site after he failed to get permission to put a drive-in movie theater on it. Then the approval for the warehouse was denied. That was, in part, because two commissioners abstained.

OSU-Cascades grows; don’t let that be stopped

The enrollment story for higher education in most of the country is: decline. Undergraduate enrollment is going backward, though it seems to have slowed to the backward of before the pandemic, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. The two-year decline of undergraduates across the country was 4.2% since 2020. Not at Oregon State University — Cascades. Enrollment went up more than 16% for first year students over last year. The 2022 fall class was up to 204. It’s a newer campus so growth isn’t necessarily unexpected. But it does also mean this community’s university is getting things right. It’s an attractive campus. Attractive offerings. Talented faculty and staff. And surely the location next to great opportunities in the great outdoors and in Bend don’t hurt either. OSU-Cascades put out some interesting numbers last week. Most of the students in the new class are from Oregon, nearly 76%. Short of

a third are students of color, 28%. And overall the school has 74 students out of a total enrollment of 1,271 who are receiving veterans benefits. Alongside the efforts to keep building up the success OSU-Cascades, there have been efforts to put on the brakes. In 2017 then-House Speaker Tina Kotek justified the Legislature directing so little funding to OSU-Cascades because there was not enough consensus to invest in a brand new campus “out there.” Of course, much has happened since then to Kotek and the campus. But in 2021 state Rep. Paul Evans, D-Monmouth, did introduce a bill to squash OSU-Cascades — sever the relationship between OSU-Cascades and OSU and prohibit the school from ever offering anything above a master’s degree. Sure, the bill died. Evans was just re-elected, though. Perhaps he will try again. As much as students find OSU-Cascades attractive and as much as it is an asset to Central Oregon, there will be those who fight it.

“In judicial proceedings as in football, when a judge steps out, he can be replaced from the bench and the adjudication can be made; before a municipal governing body, as in rugby, however, there can be no substitution and the administrative adjudication may go unmade. Non-participation by a commissioner is therefore a drastic step,” the Oregon Court of Appeals ruled in 1978. Abstaining can be like voting no, as the Oregon Supreme Court recognized in a 1962 case. “... (A) refusal to vote may result in defeating the proposition because in such case affirmative action is required, and those who refuse to vote cannot be counted on the affirmative side...” the court ruled. There is, of course, the matter of conflicts of interest. What usually comes up, though, with limited exceptions, are potential conflicts of interest rather than actual conflicts of interest under Oregon law. And in the case of potential conflicts of interest, a member of a public body can actually fully participate in the discussions and vote. So yes. In most cases, elected officials should be voting yes or no. And not abstaining. That’s what we elect them to do.



Killing cougars may result in immigration of other cougars

BY ROBERT WIEGLUS I have studied large predators and their interactions with humans, prey, and livestock for over 35 years and have published over 35 peer reviewed scientific papers on predator/human interactions. I captured, radio-collared, and studied hundreds of cougars in Idaho, Washington, and southern British Columbia for 20 years (1998-2018)

GUEST COLUMN with my research partners: Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Idaho Department. of Fish and Game, and the British Columbia Ministry of Environment. Cougar sightings and cougar/human problems were increasing in eastern Washington, northern Idaho, and southern British Columbia, the same as is occurring here in Bend. We were tasked to determine the causes and possible remedies for these problems. We increased cougar hunting and mortalities in these areas expecting to see decreased cougar/human conflicts. Contrary to the expected results, cougar human conflicts increased with increased killing of cougars, leading us to believe that the cougar population was increasing despite increased hunting. We radio collared hundreds of cougars to see what was really happening. The results were astounding and completely counterintuitive. Increased remedial hunting of cougars resulted in increased immigration by young, mostly male cougars. For every older resident male killed, two or three young guys came to the funeral. No such immigration was observed in a lightly hunted cougar population where most older males were spared. High cougar mortality was compensated by high immigration of teenaged cougars with no net change in cougar density but did shift the sex ratio towards younger immigrant males. These younger inexperienced cougars caused the vast majority of cougar/human conflicts, whereas older resident cougars caused no problems and kept the young troublemakers out of the area, similar to a biological police force. Increased mortality of cougars actually caused increased immigration by young males and increased cougar/human conflicts. We recommended that cougar



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mortality of resident adults be curtailed and not exceed the natural maximum population growth rate of cougars of 12% to prevent such increased immigration and cougar/human conflicts. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife followed those recommendations and reduced cougar mortality statewide to 12% in each game management area. Cougar conflicts rapidly decreased and became unproblematic in areas where cougar mortalities were reduced. Our research was replicated and confirmed in other areas of the U.S. and Canada, for example cougar human conflicts are lowest in California where cougars are protected and much higher in states where cougars are heavily hunted. I suspect that the same things might be happening here in Bend. We may be on a treadmill, where killing resident cougars results in increased immigration by young immigrant cougars and increased sightings and problems, followed by increased killing of cougars, followed by increased immigration, etc. I urge us to consider killing fewer cougars in the area and maintaining a natural “biological fence” or a cadre of resident older resident cougar “police” to keep young troublemakers out of the area. The chances of being injured by an automobile in Bend is at least a million times greater than being injured by a cougar. ■ Robert Wieglus lives in Bend. He is the former director of the Large Carnivore Conservation Lab at Washington State University.

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We welcome your letters. Letters should be limited to one issue, contain no more than 250 words and include the writer’s phone number and address for verification. We edit letters for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We reject poetry, personal attacks, form letters, letters submitted elsewhere and those appropriate for other sections of The Bulletin. Writers are limited to one letter or guest column every 30 days.

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The dubious tradeoffs that economists love to cite

BY TYLER COWEN
Bloomberg

To learn how an economist really thinks, ask them which mainstream economic idea bugs them most. You’ll get a wide range of responses, from “too much belief in laissez-faire” to “not enough use of machine learning.” Here is my answer: the way the equity-efficiency trade-off is invoked in policy discussions. To win this competition for worst idea, the idea has to be in widespread use, it has to be embraced by many of the professional elite, and it ought to be flat-out wrong or misleading. You can’t just pick a bad idea that hasn’t caught on, such as modern monetary theory. The equity-efficiency trade-off, in its simplest form, argues that economists should consider both equity (how a policy affects various interested parties) and efficiency (how well a policy targets the party it is intended to affect) in making policy judgments.

So far so good. I start getting nervous, however, when I see equity given special status. After all, it most often is called “the equity-efficiency trade-off,” not “an equity-efficiency tradeoff,” and it is prominent in mainstream economics textbooks. By simply reiterating a concept, economists are trying to elevate their preferred value over a number of alternatives. They are trying to make economics more pluralistic with respect to values, but in reality they are making it more provincial. If you poll the American people on their most important values, you will get a diverse set of answers, depending on whom you ask and how the question is worded. Americans will cite values such as individualism, liberty, community, godliness, merit and, yes equity (as they should). Another answer — taking care of their elders, especially if they contributed to the nation in their earlier years — does not always show up in polls,

but seems to have a grip on many national policies and people’s minds. I hear frequently about the equity-efficiency trade-off, but much less about the trade-offs between efficiency and these other values. Mainstream economists seldom debate the value trade-offs between efficiency and individualism, for instance, though such conflicts were of central concern to many Americans during the pandemic. To cite another example, many economists have argued that the U.S. should cut Medicare expenditures and instead spend that money on Medicaid, and more generally on health care and aid for younger people. (An early version of the Affordable Care Act tried to do exactly that.) I agree with this argument, but still I see an obvious trade-off: The U.S. would be boosting efficiency — there is a higher return from spending on the young — but arguably taking something away from deserv-

ing old people. Yet I hardly ever hear economists discuss the “efficiency vs. desert for the elderly trade-off.” Of course voters talk about it a lot, albeit using simpler terminology. There is a large branch of economics, stemming from the research of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, focusing on normative trade-offs involving liberty. Yet Sen’s concept of liberty is so foreign to the American mindset it is hard to explain. For Sen, you have liberty only if you cannot make a reciprocal deal with another person — involving a corresponding commitment from the other person. Patrick Henry would roll over in his grave. For many American citizens, liberty means a right to free speech, or perhaps freedom from onerous regulation or excess taxes. Not for Sen and the extensive branch of social choice theory he birthed. Yet an entire branch of economics supposedly concerned with “liberty” went off in this direction with many

hundreds of journal articles, all missing the point. Surveys have shown that a strong majority of academic economists prefer Democrats. Yet most economists, including Democrats, should pay more attention to the values of ordinary Americans and less attention to the values of their own segment of the intelligentsia. That also would bring them closer to most Democratic Party voters, not to mention swing voters and many Republicans. Equity is just one value of many, and it is not self-evidently the value economists ought to be most concerned with elevating. Many economists consider it a sign of their humanity that they are willing to moderate efficiency for the sake of equity. They are not wrong. It would be more humane yet to dethrone the equity-efficiency trade-off from its central position in economic discourse. ■ Tyler Cowen is columnist for Bloomberg.