

OPINION

Editor
Clint Wolf
608-364-9225

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

Editorial

Reform primaries to lessen divisions

Real election reform could empower people by limiting radicals' influence.

Like the old saying goes, insisting on doing things the same way while expecting a different result is the definition of insanity.

So let's think about how primary elections are done in America.

Nearly everywhere, primary elections are defined by party affiliation. There are variations, from closed primaries to open primaries to partially open or closed and so on. The common element, though, is a stranglehold on the process by the two major American political parties.

If there's one political point the parties agree on, it's that elections should cater to the ideological structure to keep voters from straying off the partisan reservations.

A handful of states do it differently. In California and Washington primaries use a “top two” format, in which all candidates run on a common primary ballot and the top two vote-getters proceed to the general election. And, yes, that does mean it could be two Democrats or two Republicans. Or a candidate representing the Libertarian Party, Green Party or some other outfit could advance. Unlikely, perhaps, but possible.

Other states rely on a 50% or runoff concept, to assure general election candidates strive for majority appeal.

In a few weeks Wisconsin will hold its partisan primary election. Since chronic low turnout marks these as base-dominated votes, with gerrymandered legislative districts it's all but assured the most headline Democrat and Republican candidates will be nominated. That all but assures deeply polarized politics will continue. The process favors it.

The middle has not been so much hollowed out as it has been fenced out. Gerrymandering and traditional primary systems keep power in the hands of the party bases to the detriment of people who may hold more moderate views, the very people who conceivably could elect representatives willing to work together toward common interests.

Among partisans there has been plenty of talk about election reform, but the favored kind is engineered to lock in even more advantages. The people should favor election reforms of a different sort—to empower voters more than parties. Ask those running for office where they stand.

Choose openness, not pricing barriers

Using cost strategies to limit citizen access to records is bad governance.

There are many ways government can squeeze people in order to restrict their rights. One way is to scare people away over potential costs.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court—in yet another 4-3 ruling—sent a clear message on that point to government managers. The topic is open records. The barrier is real.

When a government body refuses or slow-walks a legal records request, citizens have the option to take the matter before a judge for resolution. The catch is that lawyers and court proceedings are expensive. Running up thousands of dollars in costs is likely. The saving grace for the people is a fee-shifting provision that has allowed a citizen who prevails substantially in a records case to have legal costs paid by a public body as, essentially, a penalty for not following the law.

The case at hand stemmed from a Waukesha dispute, in which the city refused to release requested documents in a timely fashion. The requester filed suit, but before the matter went before a judge the city released materials. Having already racked up significant costs the requester asked for a fee-shifting order, arguing that the release under legal challenge amounted to substantially prevailing in the case. The trial court said no. An appellate court said yes. Then the Supreme Court reversed. Without a court order, the requester is left with the bill.

Here's why that matters. How many citizens are willing to risk thousands of dollars if there's a good chance fee-shifting is effectively off the table? How many citizens can afford that just to see public documents? Is it reasonable to assume at least some government managers will recognize this for what it is, a way to scare off records requests by raising the financial stakes? Is an Open Records Law worth the paper it's printed on if any given citizen must be willing to risk piles of money? A contest between a common citizen and the resources of government is a mismatch.

By the way, as we've often pointed out, the press has no more right to records than any citizen. And the press is limited by financial risk, too.

This is a bad court precedent, posing real-world challenges to the concept of open government. It's a tool that enables government to act with bad faith over records that clearly should be open, by making requesters fear high costs. But it's also a choice for records custodians. Leave that tool where it belongs, in the throwaway bag. Choose openness. Citizens deserve it.

Society's barriers exist to be broken

Country folks sometimes can feel a little overwhelmed or even intimidated by the teeming urban world they mostly experience from their television screens.

I know, because I was born to a farm family in a rural part of Illinois. It took time to adjust to a crowded college campus filled with Chicago kids and later to the professional world as a journalist, gaining confidence to compete.

Now picture this scenario:

It's the 1930s and '40s. The Great Depression grips America and rural families struggle to survive. World War II challenges whether the free world can withstand the Axis Powers' onslaught. Anxieties run high. Opportunities are limited.

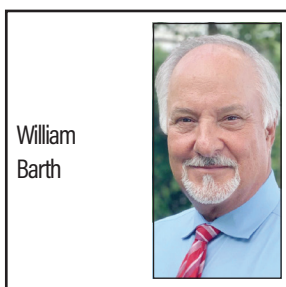
Now add this: You are a woman. Scarcely a quarter century beyond being barred from voting. For your gender, economic restrictions are common. Educational opportunities are limited. Professional positions? Those are for men.

Meet Wilma Vaught, from the tiny hamlet of Scotland, Illinois in Edgar County. My mother's high school classmate. My late uncle Jim Scott's onetime girlfriend.

It's not easy to explain how small Scotland is as a community. The population is under 100. It's unincorporated. Services and businesses are few.

When I was growing up Scotland still had a school—the gymnasium occupied an old quonset hut—but it soon consolidated with the next town over, Chrisman, for lack of sufficient enrollment. A couple decades earlier my mom graduated from that old school, and so did Wilma Vaught. As beginnings go, not the most auspicious.

A few days back, as is my retirement custom when home, I had the television news on in the background. A live shot was on air from the White House. President



William Barth

Biden was presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian award, to about a dozen people. They were being introduced. I heard the name Brig. Gen. Wilma L. Vaught.

She is in a wheelchair, at 92 years old. Her body appears frail. Her spirit, anything but. Her jaw set stoically, her eyes bright and focused on the Commander in Chief, a crisp salute exchanged.

Her story is astonishing, particularly for those of us who know where she came from. It's not an exaggeration to say her entire life has been defined by “firsts.”

She enlisted in the United States Air Force in 1957 and served until her retirement in 1985. At the time of her enlistment it wasn't a simple thing for women to enter the uniformed services, because of restricted numbers and limited job assignments. The Vietnam War required resources and resulted in opening more doors for women in the services. In 1968 she was sent to Vietnam, acting as a management analyst with the Military Assistance Command. She continued to move through various management postings and, in 1980, was promoted to Brigadier General, in charge of the U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command headquartered at Great Lakes Station, Illinois. She was the senior military representative for the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services and served as chair of the Committee of Women in the NATO Armed Forces.

The list of military

medals and awards is simply too long. Suffice to say that during the White House ceremony she was referred to as one of the most decorated female officers in American history.

I remember well the family stories about Gen. Vaught, and her visits back home. She might be seen up on a ladder painting the old house out in the country, across from the Friends Chapel where my mother's family attended church. She sometimes stopped by my mom and dad's house for a visit and chat. Ever the general, according to my father Ray Barth, she would tell him to go find something to do outside so she and mom could talk.

If anything, her profile only expanded with her retirement. From the archives of the Obama White House:

“Brig. Gen. Wilma Vaught was the driving force that built the \$22.5 million Women's Memorial at the gateway to Arlington National Cemetery. She is now the President of the Women in Military Service to America Memorial Foundation. The Memorial and its 33,000 sq. ft. education facility is the nation's only major memorial to pay tribute to America's 2.5 million women who have served. The Memorial stands as a place where America's servicewomen can take their rightful place in history and where their stories will be told for future generations. Because of Wilma Vaught, the American people and visitors from around the world can learn of the courage and bravery of tens of thousands of American women who, like her, have pioneered the future.”

Dad collects DVDs, and sent me one of Gen. Vaught appearing on the late conservative icon William F. Buckley's Firing Line television show. It aired about 30 years ago, a different

time in American politics when people with opposing views actually talked to each other in a civil manner. The debate question was whether women should be allowed in military combat roles. Trailblazer Vaught, of course, said yes, in any role for which a woman could meet the burden. Buckley, predictably, said no, that society should not put women at such risk. She directly debated Marine Col. John Ripley, and held her own nicely.

Not surprisingly, many of her debate opponents' points against women's ability to serve would be considered sexist and prejudicial today. In a very real way, the debate illustrates what the general was up against throughout her rise through the ranks.

At the White House, she recorded some thoughts about her career and a life well lived.

When she went into the military, “There were so many things that weren't as good as they should have been.”

Of her service legacy, she said, “I hope there will be people behind me who will also achieve these opportunities and understand that if we are to be better as a nation, to be better as a people, then we must do things not just for ourselves but for others and for our nation.”

It's a long way from Scotland to the White House, especially during an era where such things were unimaginable for a woman. Even more impressive, Gen. Vaught never forgot her roots and her friendship with my late mother.

There's a lesson for us all. No matter where you're born or what your circumstances may be, or your gender or ethnicity, dream big to do big. Barriers exist to be broken.

Bill Barth is the former Editor of the Beloit Daily News. Write to him at bbarth@beloitdailynews.com

Letters to the Editor

Zimmerman running for all the right reasons

It's a rare opportunity to be able to cast a vote for a candidate who is running for all of the right reasons.

It's been my pleasure to meet and get to know Maryann Zimmerman, Republican candidate for Wisconsin's 31st Assembly District. Maryann is an intelligent, confident, and personable woman who works diligently for the people she represents. I'm mostly impressed by her desire to do what's right—even when it means jumping in to help others in neighboring towns. Maryann does not shy away from a challenge.

Maryann Zimmerman holds a degree in Healthcare Administration and Business. She is a small business owner and lives with her husband and four children on a farmette in Whitewater Township.

Elected to the Whitewater School Board in 2021, Maryann led efforts to get students back to a normal learning environment. Her experience on the school board has helped her develop a compre-

hensive understanding of school funding and the many challenges Wisconsin schools face, and will serve her well at the state level.

Maryann Zimmerman is the leader we need for our 31st Assembly District. Her personality, work ethic, moral compass, honesty, and determination are what make her a successful leader. On August 9th, please join me in casting your vote for Maryann Zimmerman for Assembly.

DR. PIERRE CHARLES
Beloit

Fell is committed to the community

I have known Curt Fell for 10 years. We met when our sons were on the same baseball team. Together, we coached Beloit Bomber Baseball for 6 years and the youth football program for 5 years.

Curt has been a role model for youth in the Beloit community. He always displays a calm demeanor and shows respect towards all. Curt devoted many hours towards youth sports programs by also coaching basketball. His dedication to

public safety is also well known by the families he met through youth sports. Curt is trusted, reliable and fair.

He is a law enforcement leader with teamwork experience, impeccable character, and a strong commitment to our community. Please join me in voting Curt Fell for Rock County Sheriff on August 9th.

ROBERT HOENIG
Beloit

Too much power in too few hands

The Joint Committee for Review of Administrative Rules [JCRAR] is insisting that absentee ballot envelopes with missing witness address information must not be corrected by clerks. This endangers not only the right to vote but our ability to participate in our government.

A bill allowing clerks to fill in the missing address information on the ballot envelope would be a simple and convenient solution. This would resolve the problem and not require the clerk to re-mail the ballot back to the voter which in most cases will mean the ballot

will not be returned to the clerk in time to be counted.

The Joint Committee for Review of Administrative Rules, rather than road blocking voting, could author a bill which allows clerks to fix the clerical error on the ballot envelope. Simply giving clerks the ability to correct ballot envelope errors by changing the law takes the politics out of this issue and replaces it with commonsense.

Perhaps the JCRAR could become a committee that authors legislative fixes rather than a partisan committee that blocks agencies from easing the burdens people face. At the height of the COVID pandemic the 6 Republicans on the JCRAR limited health department protections to just 30 days essentially knee-capping efforts to keep Wisconsin safe.

Six legislators on a single committee should not have the power to restrict the ability of government agencies to serve the best interests of Wisconsinites.

JERRY HANSON
Elkhorn