

"The flaw in (the ethics bill) is that it severely undervalues election administration."

PAUL MALISCHKE, Guest Column

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Editorial page editor:
Scott Milfred
608-252-6110

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OUR OPINION

Retirement yields election justice

Wisconsin will benefit over the next four months from a spirited campaign between at least two candidates to fill an open seat on the state Supreme Court. For that, voters can thank retiring Justice Jon Wilcox.

Voters will get to choose the next Wisconsin Supreme Court justice, which is better than having the governor appoint someone.

The way in which Wilcox handled his retirement deserves to become a model for other justices.

Last spring, a year before his 10-year term expired, Wilcox announced he would not seek re-election but would fill out his term.

That might seem like the obvious way to retire, but it is actually rather rare in a political world in which each side tries to get an advantage. For example, when Wilcox ran for election 10 years ago, he was able to run with the advantages of incumbency, even though he had never been elected to the job. That was because his predecessor retired early, allowing then-Gov. Tommy Thompson to appoint Wilcox a justice prior to any election.

The same maneuver was unavailable to Wilcox this time because the governor, Jim Doyle, is a Democrat and presumably would have appointed a justice not to Wilcox's liking.

But Wilcox also could have tipped his retirement intentions early, to allow a protégé a chance to prepare for a campaign, while withholding his public announcement until shortly before the election to stifle competition from the other side.

Instead, he chose the high road.

So, candidates Linda Clifford, a Madison lawyer, and Annette Ziegler, a Washington County judge, have had time to raise money and prepare campaigns. As a result, voters are better off.

Ensuring lower costs

Sometimes less is more — as when less regulation is more beneficial to Wisconsin.

Case in point: Wisconsin drivers enjoy the second-lowest car insurance premiums in the country. The annual cost of combined liability, collision and

Less regulation in Wisconsin helps save motorists money.

comprehensive insurance was \$707 per vehicle, according to a report from the National Association of Insurance Commissioners

that used 2004 data. Only Iowans paid a lower price, \$686.

One of the reasons for Wisconsin's low cost is that the state refrains from tying insurers up in too many regulations. Consequently, lots of insurers write car insurance in this state, leading to competition — and lower rates.

Less traffic congestion and fewer auto thefts than other states also help to cut premiums.

But the connection between less regulation and lower costs is a relationship Wisconsin lawmakers should remember.

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YOUR VIEWS

Retain what works in post-Castro Cuba

I just returned from a trip to Cuba with a professional research program on women's health. I witnessed firsthand a comprehensive, accessible, quality health care system.

Cuba may be poor, but their health statistics are in many areas equivalent to ours. In fact, their infant mortality rate is only slightly higher than the U.S. average. Considering that Wisconsin has one of the worst infant mortality rates in the nation for African Americans, we may have something to learn from our Cuban neighbors.

I am worried about what may happen in the U.S. administration and among Cuban exiles during Cuba's transition away from Fidel Castro. I fear violence, and the people of Cuba are worried as well.

Ultimately it doesn't matter what we think about the Cuban system. Cuba is a sovereign country whose citizens want a peaceful transition post-Castro. There are different kinds of freedom.

— Laura Berger, RN, Madison

Help beyond tutoring is available

Sometimes, hiring a tutor is not enough. Anne M. Stack's Dec. 1 article titled "Sometimes, hiring a tutor is the correct answer" outlined extra help options for students needing exposure to academic content. Her article neglected to address those occasions when tutoring is inadequate.

Cognitive skills training offered by educational support franchises such as LearningRx strengthen weak underlying skills like memory, attention, logic, auditory and visual processing, all necessary for acquisition of academic content. Cognitive skills training addresses the causes of learning and reading problems by strengthening the building blocks of IQ.

LearningRx is a local source for cognitive skills and reading training for children and adults for whom tutoring is not enough. Prospective students take part in skills assessments to determine specific weakness. Families can then opt to enroll in a one-on-one program to close the gap between current skill levels and those needed for school and career success.

— Connie Nadler, director, LearningRx, Madison

Early trans fats studies revealing

It's interesting that, more than 30 years after homogenized trans fats became the norm for processed food use and frying, we now see cities like New York banning the use of such fats in restaurants.

SEND US YOUR VIEWS

Is there a war on Christmas? We welcome your views of 200 words or less.

Why is it so interesting here in Madison? Because back in late 1960s and early '70s, while I was studying agriculture at UW-Madison, they were studying this trend and raising concerns about the long-term health of people using homogenized trans fats as substitutes for animal fats.

If memory serves, the main concern was that the human dietary system recognizes animal and other natural-occurring fats, which when eaten are broken down and absorbed. The agriculture school raised concerns that the process of hydrogenation to produce a solid changes the structure of the fat, and perhaps our bodies cannot recognize it. They didn't know if it would build up in the body or cause other health problems.

I think they were correct in their concerns. Is this why we see active, 80-year-olds still going strong who, for their first 50-plus years ate lard, butter and other fats considered bad, and we see 20-, 30- and 40-year-olds having heart attacks, overweight kids and so on? Too bad more studies were not done in the late '60s. If you go through a grocery store, almost all processed foods contain trans fats, so it will take time to change the process.

— Stephen Scott, Merrimac

GUEST COLUMN

More data needed on ethics bill

By PAUL MALISCHKE

The news and editorial coverage in Wisconsin about the ethics bill has been superficial.

Newspapers are covering the "horse race." Will it pass, and who is supporting it? But the substance of the proposals have not been written about.

Who will be on the proposed Government Accountability Board? What will be their qualifications? Who will appoint them? What powers will they have? What are the specific reasons causing some legislators to move slowly on the bill?

Here is one area that needs discussion: Should Senate Bill 1 be amended to provide for a separate Election Administration Board?

The flaw in SB 1 is that it severely undervalues election administration. The clear emphasis of SB 1 is investigation and enforcement of ethics and criminal violations.

Obviously this is important, but election administration is

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equally important and deserves a separate board.

In the past several months, the existing state Elections Board has discussed and made many important policy decisions involving election administration.

The Elections Board has handled approval (and denial) of new voting equipment, new security rules, rules for same-day registration, issues on the statewide voter registration system, challenges to nominating papers, privacy of voter data, budgeting and audits of vote counts.

If there is only one board, part-time volunteer board members will be overwhelmed by the depth and breadth of the decisions to be made. The current Elections Board receives an agenda of more than 100 pages a few days before its meeting.

There is increasing recognition that election administration has a major and growing role in achieving proper elections. This is due to recent law changes on the federal and state levels and controversies around the country. This trend is likely to continue.

With separate boards, people with appropriate abilities can be appointed to matching tasks.

Prosecutors, former judges, lawyers, and ethics professionals can be on the Government Accountability Board. Examples of appointees to the Election Administration Board would be a statistician, a voting equipment expert, and a municipal or county clerk.

Public accountability will be enhanced by having separate boards. Extremely long meetings and agendas make it very difficult for citizens to monitor these meetings and present arguments on important topics.

Another way to increase public accountability would be to require coverage by Wisconsin Eye except in unusual circumstances.

Currently, there is nearly universal criticism over decisions based upon partisan bias.

Let's not replace this with policy decisions that are flawed due to lack of expertise.

Malischke is a member of Fair Elections Wisconsin, www.fairelectionswi.com.

Ask Oprah: It's not easy being famous and black

The rappers are mad at Oprah again.

Just one rapper, actually: the gentleman who calls himself 50 Cent, but whose 1994 mug shot identifies him as prisoner No. 94R6378: Jackson, Curtis. Mr. Cent — "Fiddy" to the cognoscenti — was one of a trio of rappers (Ice Cube and Ludacris were the others) who lambasted the Queen of All Media last summer for being insufficiently willing to promote hip-hop. Now, Mr. Cent renews the attack.

In an interview in Elle magazine(!) he charges Winfrey with being not black enough. Winfrey, he says, "started out with black women's views but has been catering to middle-aged white American women for so long that she's become one herself." He also calls her an "Oreo," which — for those not fluent in black-on-black insult — means black on the outside, white on the inside.

Mr. Cent, should it not be



LEONARD PITTS JR.

painfully obvious from the foregoing, is an idiot. Worse, he's an idiot with a painfully transparent need for approval from the woman he has spent so much energy denigrating. I'll leave it to the mental health community to explain what that means. I'm here only to make one point:

It's not easy being O.

Yeah, I know: Cry me a river. And \$1.5 billion (the reported size of Winfrey's fortune) buys a lot of Kleenex.

I'm not trying to engage your sympathy for the most powerful woman (sorry, Hillary, beg pardon, Condi) in America. I'm only trying to say it's a hard trick to man-

age, being both famous and black. Or, at least, famous to the degree that Oprah Winfrey is — i.e., to the degree that you are recognized as readily in white homes as in black.

To reach that level of renown is to find yourself pulled between competing expectations. On the one side, they praise you for "transcending race" — whatever that means — and they get resentful if you remind them of the ways you are not like them. On the other side, they are alert to any sign that you have Forgotten Where You Came From and they will call you out if they think you're suffering racial amnesia.

I've always thought Oprah Winfrey handled those competing pulls with a rare grace. She produces programming ("The Legends Ball") that celebrates the passages of great black women, she promotes black authors (full disclosure:

I was once one of them), she speaks out on racial issues, she makes a movie ("Be-loved") on the horror of slavery, she builds a school in South Africa — and yet, somehow, white women don't fear her, still love her. Even when she rebukes them for racial insensitivity.

I remember when one of those women, intending a compliment, told Winfrey she didn't think of her as black. And Oprah said, Whoa. Black, she explained, gently, but emphatically, is exactly what she is. And her predominantly white audience, as I recall, cheered. That's a minor miracle.

Granted, I watch daytime television infrequently. So maybe in those dozens of Oprah shows I haven't seen, Winfrey proves herself the black man hater and white woman worshipper black critics often depict. But you'll forgive me if I doubt. You'll forgive me if I suspect the

Oprahs I haven't seen track pretty closely to the ones I have: celebrity interviews, pop psychology and self-actualization strategies for women of a certain age and station in life.

It's hard for me to understand what's wrong with that, or inherently "not black" about it. 50 Cent makes the mistake a lot of white people do: assuming there is but one monolithic black experience and that it is street, poor and hardcore.

Which doesn't just insult Oprah Winfrey. It insults all of us because it denies a simple fact: Black is many things.

That's something Mr. Cent should consider next time he's holed up in his mansion in Farmington, Conn. (median income, \$67,000, black population 1.5 percent) writing rhymes about how hard life is for poor black folks on mean streets.

Pitts writes for the Miami Herald; pitts@miamiherald.com.

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Letters Editor

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