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Fitting solution

Lawsuit settlement should guarantee non-partisan voter registration process.

THE rejection of more than 60,000 voter applications last year for technical reasons by the Harris County Tax Assessor-Collector's office prompted a lawsuit by the Texas Democratic Party.

The plaintiffs contended that the scope of the rejections here vastly exceeded any other Texas county and were politically motivated. They claimed nearly a quarter of those applying to register prior to the 2008 elections were disqualified without following state law provisions for timely notification.

In a welcome development, both sides have agreed to a settlement that will shelve the legal action while stipulating measures to prevent the disqualification of voters for minor flaws in their applications.

The registration rejections occurred during the tenure of former Tax Assessor Paul Bettencourt, who resigned shortly after being elected last year to go into private business. His associate voter registrar, Ed Johnson, was also the director of a political software company owned by a GOP state rep who peddled county voter data to Republican campaigns.

Leo Vasquez, who was appointed by Commissioners Court to replace Bettencourt, initially denounced the lawsuit as an unfounded partisan witch hunt and judged Johnson's business activity legitimate. Still, he reorganized his office staff and removed Johnson and another politically connected staffer from the voter registration section. The settlement, which has been approved by Harris County commissioners but awaits an OK from the U.S. Justice Department, contains no admission of wrongdoing.

Vasquez issued a statement calling the settlement a vindication from baseless allegations. But the specified

changes in the tax-office procedures for handling registration applications make it clear that the original complaints were anything but frivolous.

The settlement requires that the office's voter registrar must either process a registration application or notify the applicant why the paperwork is being rejected within the state-mandated seven days.

The registrar must also provide within three business days, upon request by chairs of political parties, reports of all voters registered, applications received, the number rejected, and the names and addresses of those affected.

The settlement also prohibits employees and contractors working for the tax office's voter section from "having other employment or financial interests in any outside company providing voter information to any candidate, political party, or other person or entity."

Harris County Attorney Vince Ryan, whose office helped hammer out the agreement, praised it as a win for the county's voters by ensuring that everyone who fills out a valid registration application will be certified to vote.

According to Harris County Democratic Party chair Gerry Birnberg, the settlement "should make the voter registration process more efficient, fairer and easier for qualified citizens wanting to register to vote."

Tax Assessor-Collector Vasquez said his office is open to ensuring transparency in the process and his primary goal "remains to have every eligible citizen in Harris County registered to vote."

It's unfortunate that it took a lawsuit to secure a common-sense ban on voter registration officials moonlighting as consultants to political campaigns. The outcome is a positive step toward eliminating even the appearance of political influence in the voting process here.

Front-row seat

Baker Institute Webcast will offer useful perspective on fall of Berlin Wall.

HARD to believe, but the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall is just a few days off. The wall, which since 1961 had been a forbidding presence dividing the once-imperial capital of Germany, came down on Nov. 9, 1989.

For a brief but memorable interlude in that bracing, late-fall season there was disbelief mingled with joy among what seemed like most of the human race.

The fast-approaching anniversary of the wall's toppling will mean a host of academic and media events the world over. One of the first will be sponsored by Rice University's Baker Institute, and the public is invited to join part of it via Webcast.

On Friday at 5 p.m., the Baker Institute will bring together for questioning by journalists several of the key diplomats active in the unification of Germany after the wall fell. Among those available will be former U.S. Secretary of State James A. Baker III, former French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas, former German Democratic Republic Foreign Minister Markus Meckel, former Foreign Minister of the German Federal Republic Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Charles Powell, private secretary to former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

The interview will be followed by a

round-table discussion that will also feature former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. Rice history professor and Baker presidential historian Douglas Brinkley will moderate the discussion.

The roundtable will be open to the public via Webcast (<http://www.bakerinstitute.org/events/german-uni-fication-expectations-and-outcomes-panel-discussion>). Those interested in attending the event in person are advised to go online to bakerinstitute.org before setting out for the Rice campus to learn about the availability of seating. According to a Baker spokesman, the event is approaching a full house.

The fall of the Berlin Wall raised hopes for a more harmonious world — hopes that, alas, have not materialized. So, too, the hopeful predictions of an "end to history" following the collapse of communism.

What we've learned is that there was simply too much history, at least in that area of the world, to be able to simply move on.

And so the conversations about the Berlin Wall at the Baker Institute and elsewhere are not mere exercises in academic reflection. The scholars are still puzzling over the meaning of the dismantling of the Berlin Wall.

This Friday, the public is invited to pull up a front-row seat electronically to listen in on a most timely discussion.



LETTERS

Brain drain? No worries

Greed, avarice

REGARDING "Will pay rules cause brain drain?" (Page D4, Saturday), did I miss something? Are these not the same guys who created the economic mess we taxpayers are now responsible for cleaning up? Steven Hall's comment that "these people are considered the brains of the machine" seems a little disingenuous, based on the past performance of these brains, and coming from an executive-compensation firm. What would we expect Hall to say, "the guys I charge you hundreds of thousands of dollars for are greedy, amoral thieves?" I guess not. The problem is, people who are motivated by money, and money only, lose sight of the forest for the trees. As long as they have enough, they don't seem to understand the long-term detriment to them, as they rape the resources of the rest of the group. This is not what capitalism was meant to be; and as much as they decry government

intervention, it is their greed and avarice that puts us all at risk for the development of socialism and the restrictions of personal freedom. Kenneth Feinberg opines that compensation needs to be high enough to attract talent. Perhaps our search for talent should include those with a moral compass, and not those with nothing but personal self-interests.

— BARBARA MACKEY,
Houston

Never earned it

THE experts who fear that governmentally imposed pay cuts at taxpayer-subsidized organizations might cause the top executives to leave the companies that they have mismanaged are ignoring two things: First, the "talent" that got these organizations in the mess they (and we) are in never earned the pay they took from the taxpayers. Second, as so many well qualified and hard-working people can attest to in these hard times:

No one is irreplaceable. The concern that these executives might go somewhere else should rather be a hope that they do just that. Given their track records, it would be interesting to see where they might be wanted.

— ROB BRIGGS,
Montgomery

No loss

IT'S doubtful there will be a loss at the companies that lost billions and received bailout dollars if their top executives, who are responsible for the lost billions, leave for other companies. On Saturday the Chronicle asked, "Will pay rules cause brain drain? Experts fear top execs will go where money is." Their leaving could possibly be the best thing that could happen to these companies as they then could bring in responsible, talented execs who would turn these companies around rather than continue business as usual.

— TERRANCE COLLINS,
Houston

Vets promote public health

THE Harris County Veterinary Medical Association (HCVMA) would like to respond to the recent articles in the Houston Chronicle regarding mandatory pet licensing by the city of Houston ("It's showdown time over licensing of pets; City to enforce 1985 law requiring vets to turn over rabies shot records," Page B1, Oct. 17).

Veterinarians are champions of responsible pet ownership. This encompasses routine vaccinations, as well as spaying and neutering. These actions not only benefit our beloved pets, but also serve to protect the public health of the city. Every veterinarian takes an oath that states: "I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through ... the promotion of public health" Currently, the city will fine veterinarians for not reporting rabies vaccination records. This policy does not focus strongly enough on the issue of public health. Many pet owners will stop seeking routine medical care for their pets to avoid licensing, thus increasing the number of unvaccinated dogs and cats. Enforcement of mandatory pet licensing should be handled by law enforcement agents, not by veterinarians, who are sworn to "the promotion of public health."

There is also an ordinance in place that bans residents from having more than three pets. Those individuals will be even less likely to have their pets vaccinated for rabies to avoid being identified, fined and/or having some of their pets taken from them. This scenario may create a significant public-health problem by increasing the risk of human exposure to rabies in Houston.

— TAHL P. ROZCYKI, D.V.M.,
President, Harris County Veterinary Medicine
Association

Weak dollar poses risks

THE Chronicle's editorial "Dollar's daze" (Page B8, Thursday) accurately describes how a weak dollar adversely affects our economy by driving gasoline prices to \$4 a gallon and further increasing our foreign balance of payments deficit. A weak dollar will spur U.S. exports, but this advantage will be short-lived because it increases the cost of all imported products, not just oil. This complicates our domestic and foreign policies by continuing the financial support of unfriendly foreign supplier-nations who want the dollar dumped for foreign exchange.

The only program in this recession capable of stopping the dollar decline while priming our economy is the Pickens Plan, aimed at converting all diesel trucks and buses to domestically produced natural gas. At the same time we must recognize the negative impact of large gasoline engines

for personal use by imposing an impact fee to influence a conversion to smaller engines. These plans would preclude the need to increase the gasoline tax while virtually eliminating imported oil. Let individuals decide how big an engine they need and use the impact fee to compensate for the lost gasoline tax. Both programs will cut U.S. oil consumption more than 50 percent, eliminate \$150 billion in imported oil annually and have a significant "green" impact. These are real savings that will be annually reinvested as a stimulus to our domestic economy, not in the Middle East or Venezuela. Besides Canada, the U.S. is perhaps the only industrialized nation capable of energy independence. What are you willing to pay to save our nation's economy and our way of life?

— MICHAEL R. WIMBERLY,
Houston

Congratulations to county

REGARDING "Immigration screenings to continue; County leaders approve 3-year extension of the 287(g) program" (Page B2, Wednesday), as a citizen of Harris County I congratulate the commissioners who voted to continue the Sheriff's Department program of checking for illegal aliens. While the city of Houston continues its program of appeasement to criminal elements and making Houston a sanctuary for illegal aliens, the courageous leadership of the Commissioners Court is fighting for honest Americans. I expect the Houston area has at least a million criminals that need deportation to their homelands as they have broken the laws of the United States of America by invading our great country and destroying our communities, besides being a burden on our social systems.

— RICHARD MANNING,
Seabrook

LETTERS POLICY

VIEWPOINTS

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BIBLE VERSE

Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.

— JAMES 1:12