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ORLANDO SENTINEL EDITORIAL

Make your voice heard during this election season

Every election is a big deal, and this year is no different. That starts with the smallest cities and works its way up to the national level, where Republicans and Democrats will fight over control of Congress even as one-third of voters have opted out of either major party. In the runup to the 2026 elections, Americans have seen some of the oldest tricks in the book, including gerrymandering designed to give one party overwhelming control of a state's voters and blatant attempts to exclude some groups of legitimate voters from the polls. They've also seen newfangled means of targeting and sometimes deceiving voters, including the use of AI to make citizens doubt the evidence of their own eyes.

But Floridians shouldn't let their faith in democracy falter under the weight of that cynicism. Most of all, voters have the opportunity to make momentous decisions for themselves and their communities. In this year's primaries, Central Florida voters have already made significant choices about who should lead local school boards and county governments. They have given the boot to one congressional incumbent who just two years ago appeared to be thoroughly entrenched. They have set the stage for major decisions about Florida's future, including whether they want to jettison the rigid pattern of control set by Gov. Ron DeSantis.

A STATE IN PLAY

Term limits have taken the autocratic governor off the ballot, but a key legislative ally (former state Sen. Blaise Ingoglia) and DeSantis' former chief aide (James Uthmeier) are both running for powerful statewide offices. In the former, Florida would be electing a chief financial officer who has willfully turned a blind eye to



rampant fiscal shenanigans by the governor's office. In the latter, voters would be choosing an attorney general who has shamelessly trampled legal boundaries as if he were the sole arbiter of the law in Florida.

These are not partisan foibles. The vast majority of elected Republicans (and Democrats) across Florida are honorable people who take their oath to honor the state constitution and statutes seriously. They deserve better representation.

The other two statewide races on the ballot are more traditional matchups, including the race to replace DeSantis and Agriculture Commissioner Wilton Simpson's bid for re-election. But that doesn't mean that voters should evaluate them purely on ideological grounds. Voters should ask themselves who will be the most open, accountable and effective.

LOCAL DECISIONS FIRST

But the most important face-off on the ballot might not be between two candidates. It's between "yes" and "no" on a proposed constitutional amendment that looks like an innocuous tax cut. But many believe it would deal a devastating blow to home rule in Florida, transferring budgeting authority to faraway Tallahassee bureaucrats.

The debate over Amendment 3 will be cast by many as a partisan dispute. But take another look: Across the state, some of Florida's most conservative politicians and organizations are coming out to oppose the hastily drafted measure, which was originally so deceptive that courts threatened to strike it from the ballot.

Beyond those marquee races, there will be dozens of other contests at the county and city level, giving local voters a voice in how they want their communities to grow and what services and needs they prioritize.

HERE TO HELP

It might all seem overwhelming. But voters don't have to go it alone.

Over the coming weeks, we'll be working with the Central Florida News Collaborative to provide comprehensive coverage of the races up and down the ballot. In addition, our editorial board will be conducting interviews and making endorsements in as many races as we can — including legislative and local races.

A word about our endorsement philosophy: We do not rely on party as the determining factor in any endorsement. Instead, we look for the candidates who will do the best job for the district they're vying to represent. Ideology is significant, of course, but experience and character also play a large role. When considering incumbents, we'll ask whether their challenger has made the case that they should be replaced.

But the overall goal is to give our readers as much objective, useful information as we can about each candidate. That's why we invite many of them to video interviews with the editorial board — it provides the opportunity for them to speak directly to voters about what they would do if elected.

RAISE YOUR VOICE

Our final promise is this: We are willing — in fact, we are eager — to share views from our readers, including those who disagree with our endorsement decisions (along with those who agree, of course). But we can't run opinions from readers who don't speak up. So we urge people to send in their assessments of the candidates and races that matter most to them.

There are just a few guidelines: Most commentary should be in the form of a letter to the editor, which has a 250-word limit. We cannot publish unsubstantiated allegations against any particular candidate; if you feel you have information about a race that should be considered, it's better to contact our newsroom. Letters that are purely personal attacks will be considered low priority.

Overall, the most convincing letters stick to the issues that divide one candidate from another, and share the readers' viewpoints on why they feel someone would (or would not) do a good job if elected.

The bottom line is this: Choosing the candidates who earn your vote can be a daunting task. The Sentinel's role is to give you as much information as we can, while providing you with the context to support the candidates that we endorse. Now, as always, our focus is on giving you the background to confidently participate in the fundamental activities of democracy — including raising your own voice, right here on our pages.

The Orlando Sentinel Editorial Board consists of Opinion Editor Krys Fluker, Executive Editor Roger Simmons and Viewpoints Editor Jay Reddick. Use insight@orlandosentinel.com to contact us.

GUEST COMMENTARY LOCAL

I inherited a responsibility to Eatonville



Bea Hatler

century ago. My great-great-grandparents, Edward and Anna Hungerford, donated the first 40 acres to the Robert Hungerford Charitable Trust to establish a school for African American children. Over time, our family entrusted 160 acres to the trust.

The Robert Hungerford Normal & Industrial School was named for my great-grandfather, Robert Hungerford, a doctor who brought medical care to young African American patients in Florida in the years after the Civil War. After losing their son Robert, my family chose to honor his life through education and opportunity for African American children.

But the story of this land has never been only about the Hungerfords. Eatonville was already a remarkable African American community, established and governed by resilient people determined to build a

future for themselves. The Hungerford School became part of that story.

For generations, my family had a role in stewarding the trust. And when that stewardship was threatened, members of my family stepped forward.

In 1937, my relative Elizabeth Hungerford Goodwin, along with the Rev. Richard Wright, brought concerns about the Hungerford property to the Florida attorney general. The resulting legal action ultimately affirmed the public charitable trust and protected the property from an attempted foreclosure.

My grandmother, Constance Hungerford Fenske, carried that responsibility forward. In 1951, she challenged the transfer of the property to the Orange County school system because she believed it would undermine the purpose for which the trust had been established. She fought all the way to the Florida Supreme Court.

These are stories I carry with me. They help explain why this land holds such a deep responsibility for me.

When the property was previously threatened by a private development proposal, I supported the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community in their effort to protect

it. I believed then that the land's history and purpose needed to be protected. My convictions about that 2023 lawsuit haven't changed. Today's new lawsuit, challenging Orange County Public Schools' decision to sell the property, is a different matter.

Today I see an opportunity to move forward with a nonprofit partner I believe can honor the Town of Eatonville and the people that call it home.

I serve on the Dr. Phillips Charities Eatonville Initiative Advisory Committee because I want to be part of that stewardship after the sale of the property. I have asked questions, listened, and spent time understanding the people and plans involved. Through that process, I have come to support Dr. Phillips Charities and its partnership with Orange County Public Schools.

I do not support the current lawsuit because I believe another prolonged legal battle risks keeping this land in limbo when there is an opportunity to put it to work.

The vision being developed includes a cultural museum, early childhood education, health resources, gathering spaces and opportunities to preserve and share Eatonville's remarkable history and culture. To me, that is what stewardship can look like in this next century.

Preservation does not have to mean keeping something frozen in time. We can honor Eatonville's great history while creating something that serves people today and gives future generations room to thrive.

And I want to be clear about something: I'm not here to tell Eatonville what its future should be. That belongs to the people who live, work, worship, raise families and build businesses in this community.

My responsibility is different. My family was entrusted with stewarding this land more than a century ago. I believe my responsibility now is to help honor the purpose behind that trust and to stand alongside the community as it determines what comes next.

As the proud mother of three sons, I hope one of them will eventually carry that responsibility forward. For now, the responsibility is all mine.

After decades of uncertainty surrounding this land, I believe the time to move forward is now, and we have an opportunity to do it together as a community.

Bea Hatler is the great-granddaughter of Robert Hungerford and a member of the Eatonville Initiative Advisory Committee with Dr. Phillips Charities.

Letters to the editor

The politics of cats and dogs

Recent TV commercials have lamented the participation rate of citizens in elections. The lesson I take from it is this: When a merchant is unable to sell his goods, he changes suppliers and offerings; he doesn't just blame the buyers.

Americans now know that neither Republicans nor Democrats actually listen to and act for the individual. They are both organizations and, in my opinion, only represent organizations. Why should we participate in an election process that doesn't empower us?

I think the problem with America is structural, empowering organizations at the expense of individuals and individuality. The only cure is a Constitutional Convention to restructure the election process and the responsibilities of those we elect — in other words, an attempt to change what politicians of every ilk are selling.

We used to be like dogs, happily participating in spite of the lack of reward. Now we are like cats, sitting off to the side watching with little interest in the foolishness.

— Roger Van Zanen, Deltona

A twist on justice

So as the Sentinel wrote about the Hope Florida corruption case, "there was no indictment, the (grand jury) report concluded, because no witness admitted responsibility for the 'misappropriation' or claimed to know who ordered it" (Editorial: "Hope Florida scammers treat Floridians like fools," Sept. 5).

So, next time I rob a bank, all I must do is not admit I did it or acknowledge who told me to rob the bank. And therefore, I can't be



charged. Am I getting that right?

— Wayne J. Smith, Orlando

Parents don't always have all the answers

As a retired teacher with 37 years of service in Orange County, I'd like to educate the gentleman who wrote in a Sept. 4 letter that there's no need for pre-K funding because it's the parents' job to prepare their kids for school. In a perfect world that may very well be true. In reality, there are many parents and guardians who are poor, working

multiple jobs to make ends meet, often barely literate and sometimes less than proficient in English. How can their children hope to be at the same level of readiness as those of middle- and higher-class families who have the knowledge, time, energy and resources to prepare their kids for school? The answer is: Fully funded pre-K available to all.

— Anne Gardepe, Winter Park

Quality of life is about more than labels

In this political season, labels are thrown around to see what sticks: Capitalism,

socialism, fascism, communism, authoritarianism.

The main difference that I see between capitalism and socialism is that capitalism puts profit before people and socialism puts people before profit. We see in some yearly surveys that some of the happiest places on Earth are in socialist countries, not in communist Russia or capitalist America.

I am in my early 70s and am living on America's version of socialism, Social Security. I paid into the system that now pays me back. Nothing about socialism is free, it is based on shared values that we agree upon and each pay for.

It is about quality of life. We have to agree on minimum standards in such as guaranteed education through college or trade school, universal healthcare, daycare, mental health or people with disabilities. I think we should expand ways to contribute, such as volunteering, community service, internships or military service.

Free enterprise is the engine that makes the American Dream achievable for many. I view capitalism as free enterprise on steroids. When capitalism becomes accumulated wealth and this wealth allows special interests to buy politicians and affect the laws that govern all people, that is wrong, that is not We the People.

Capitalism works well with democracy, but also with communism as in China. In the U.S., wealth may be able to guarantee freedom, but you and I require good governance and democracy to guarantee ours.

— Glen Kendrick, Orlando