

THE SARASOTA

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News Leader

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WALMART BOWS OUT AT RINGLING

WALMART WINS COUNTY'S OK

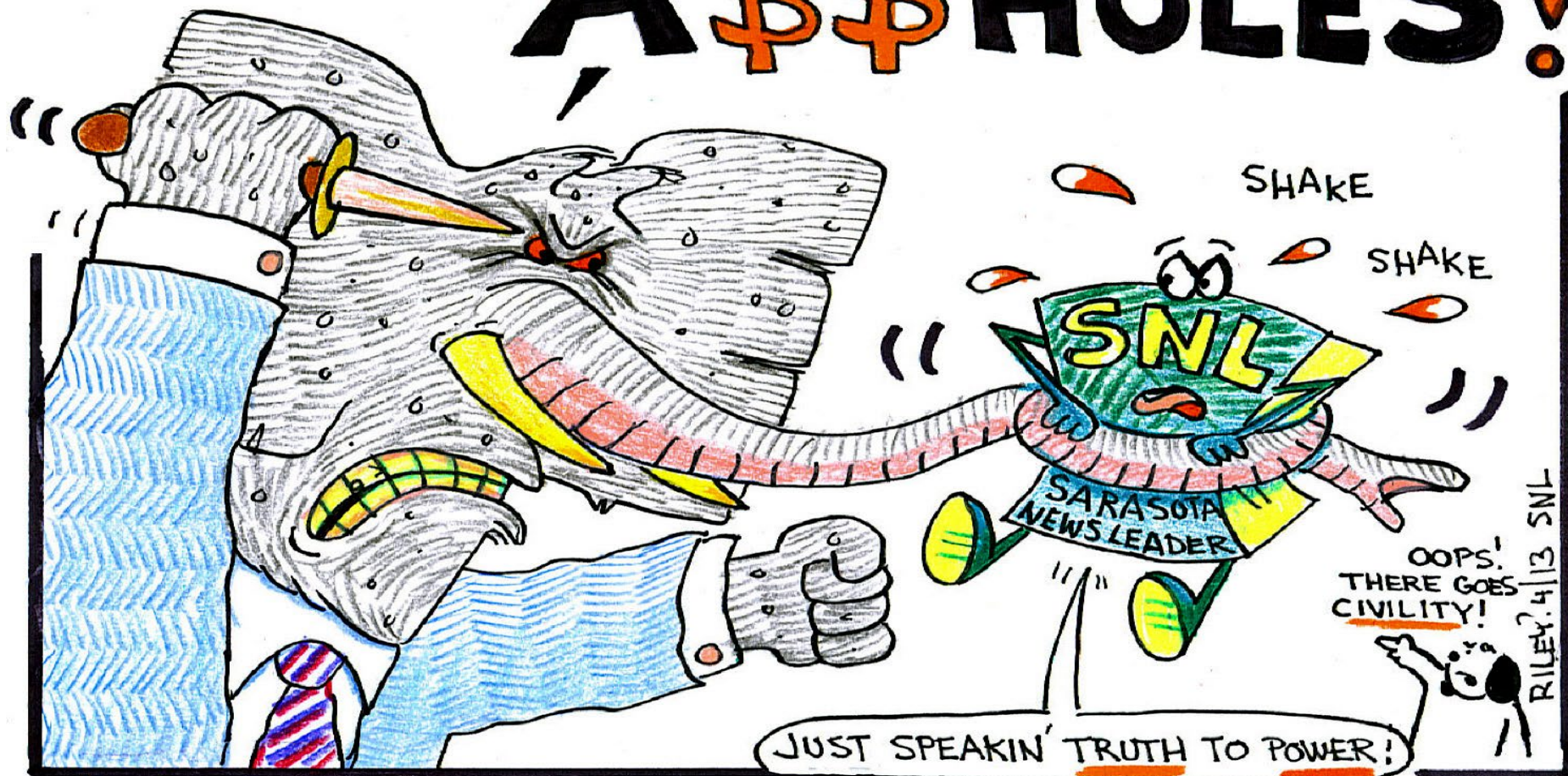
WEIGHING THE ODDS

Inside

Old school journalism. 21st century delivery.

OPINION

"A \$\$\$ HOLES!"



REPUBLICANS HARSH IN OPPOSING FAIR ELECTIONS

EDITORIAL

Quite a few counties in Florida — and Sarasota is among them — are dominated by Republican local officeholders, despite Republicans being a minority of registered voters in those counties. That is because Florida historically has been a “closed primary” state, meaning only Democrats vote in Democratic primaries and only Republicans vote in Republican primaries ... and Independents (what we refer to in Florida as No Party Affiliation, or NPA) are essentially disenfranchised.

Should one party not field a candidate in a general election, then that party’s voters and NPAs effectively have no voice in the election of that officeholder, who wins *de facto* after surviving his or her party primary.

With more new residents of Florida relocating from states where Independents are not shut

out of primary elections, a citizens initiative passed in 1998, amending the state constitution to allow the opening of a primary when only one party is fielding candidates in the general election. Unfortunately, it was left to the Legislature to codify this change and, like the proverbial rats being in charge of the cheese inventory, the Republican-dominated Legislature carefully inserted a loophole that undid the constitutional amendment: If a write-in candidate was qualified (and it should be pointed out that “qualify” is a very loosely defined term here, since we all can “qualify” as human beings almost as easily as a write-in candidate can “qualify” for an election), then the primary would remain closed to all but registered voters of that party.

Admittedly, the loophole has been employed by Democrats in counties where they have a strong majority, but that was more a defen-

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sive response to the many more counties where Republicans shut out Democrats and NPA voters by putting up “straw” opponents in the general election by means of write-in candidates. These write-in candidates almost never did any campaigning or spent money on advertising, and they typically dropped out of the races once the primaries had been decided, ceding victory to the primary winners.

The most recent example in Sarasota County was the Republican primary battle between Supervisor of Elections Kathy Dent and challenger Jon Thaxton, who was term-limited from retaining his County Commissioner seat. As no Democrat filed to run in the general election, the Republican primary should have been open to Democrats and NPAs, since the primary became, for all intents and purposes, the general election.

But Republican bigwig Jack Brill had his 24-year-old daughter enter the race as a write-in candidate, shutting out all but Republican voters and denying Jon Thaxton the moderate voters he needed to oust the unpopular Dent. Party ideology trumped electoral fairness.

To rub salt in the wound, Victoria Brill conceded publicly, when she withdrew her straw candidacy, that she never had any intention of actually running for the office. She only wanted to prevent almost 70 percent of Sarasota’s voters from having a voice in the election of a supervisor of elections.

In the April 5 issue of *The Sarasota News Leader*, we reported on the efforts of the Public Interest Coalition — made up of groups including the Sarasota County Council of Neighborhood Associations, the Sarasota Audubon chapter and the Sierra Club — which is pro-

posing a simple solution to the inherent unfairness of our local electoral process: make county offices nonpartisan.

With prospective county commissioners and other county officeholders running in nonpartisan races, every voter would have the opportunity to have a say in choosing the winners. Certainly, candidates’ party affiliation still would be known, and perhaps trumpeted by prospective candidates. That seems to be the case in municipal nonpartisan races here and in other states. But, while the voters might weigh party affiliation or ideology in making their choices, no one would be denied the right to vote because of a cloistered electoral methodology that is antithetical to the democratic process.

In our article, we quoted Joe Gruters, Republican Party of Sarasota chairman, voicing opposition to the idea, because he claimed all races were indisputably partisan. He did not explain why the partisan affiliation of candidates and a nonpartisan race were mutually exclusive, perhaps because, as we already have observed, that would be a ridiculous claim.

Bill Zoller, a Republican and president of Citizens for Sensible Growth in Sarasota County, was identified in our article as a leading advocate for a shift to nonpartisan races. After the fake candidacy of Victoria Brill and the arrest of Republican stalwart Bob Waechter for identity theft in an effort to falsely impugn another Republican, Zoller wondered, “How much worse can it get? That’s about as low as you can go.”

Apparently, Jack Brill took exception to our article and sent an email that stated the following:

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*“It is time to send in a response. Other wise [sic] you will continue to be compared to Waechter and taking shots form [sic] these a**holes!!!!~*

Respectfully Yours,

Jack Brill”


(Note: The asterisks are ours; they replaced the actual “S’s” Mr. Brill indiscreetly used.)

Unfortunately, he neglected to change the “to” address in his email to his intended recipient (likely Joe Gruters), so the email came back to our subscription manager.

In psychological terms, his behavior is known as “projection.” Rather than acknowledge fault for one’s transgressions, one fixes the blame upon those who give voice to the transgres-

sions — sort of an adult version of the school-yard retort, “Oh, yeah? Well, so are you!”

The truth is that excluding more than two-thirds of the county electorate so a minority party can control the electoral process is neither fair nor democratic. It amounts to ideological apartheid. That is why state voters amended the constitution 15 years ago, and why county voters may well take the next step in restoring credibility to representative government in Sarasota County.

Gruters, in opposing a change in the electoral process, asserted that anyone who voted to make county races nonpartisan was “a fool.” But perhaps county voters might respond, as George W. Bush once said, “We won’t get fooled again.” 

PLEASE VOTE FOR ATWELL AND CHAPMAN

EDITORIAL

On May 14 City of Sarasota voters will choose two at-large city commissioners from a field of three. We urge you to pick Suzanne Atwell and Susan Chapman.

The reasons for each are different because each carries totally different tools, abilities and resources to the job. Alas, we cannot put them in a blender to puree them to create one perfect at-large city commissioner.

But we expect once elected, they will recognize the skills each brings to the commission table and respect the need for different approaches to governance.

Suzanne Atwell is a social worker by trade. She is everybody’s best friend, and she revels

in her current role as mayor. When it comes to kissing babies and cutting ribbons and spreading oil on troubled waters, she is uncannily smooth. Peace follows in her wake. But she sometimes is lost in the details of policy, and she can be uncertain and sometimes silent on complex issues.

Susan Chapman is a lawyer by trade. She has proven time and again to be a friend when one is needed. Her terms on the city’s Planning Board have tempered her, but she is capable of scorching the earth in pursuit of fairness. She is fearless and tough as a top-kick sergeant. By standing up for neighborhoods from all over the City of Sarasota in their times of need, she has won sincere admiration from the poorest and richest residential areas in town.