

Undervote a useful tool

“The problems we face, did not come down from the heavens. They are made by bad human decisions, and good human decisions can change them.” ...Bernie Sanders

Locally, our city's trajectory is dictated by hundreds of “seemingly small” human decisions which snowball into an avalanche of public controversy and distrust. Those decisions are made by the Mayor - and Councilors who, frequently run unopposed.

We all should vote. Even though “protest voting” is trending in this presidential election, now is no time to abstain. However, in local elections, protest votes are an important way for voters to be heard. And “under-votes” are a potent protest that is often overlooked.

Protest votes are typically write-ins, or voting for a candidate not sanctioned by the two-party system - sometimes creating a spoiler. Protest votes can be a statement repudiating the two-party system; or a plea for a better system.

Another powerful protest is to withhold your vote in an unopposed race, like a council seat, or mayor's race. Your non-vote is COUNTED as an “under-vote” and reported just like regular votes and write-ins.

Under-votes are not just a casual omission, they are an intentional and revealing calculation. When considered in the context of total votes cast in a particular race: under-votes are an indication of how much support the candidate actually has, or doesn't have, regardless of “winning.”

In May's primary, Clair Syrett received 3,450 votes. Even though unopposed she received only 27% support from registered voters in Ward 7. Her under-vote of 2931, plus 97 write-ins, totaled slightly less than all votes in her favor. Not a mandate.

Chris Pryor is running unopposed for the fourth time. He received 3,632 primary votes, or 28% of 12,919 registered Ward 8 voters. Counting 2,982 undervotes and 68 write-ins, he had a total of 3050 voters cast negative votes for him. Not a resounding endorsement after 3 terms.

In the Mayoral race, there are two good reasons for under-voting. The first is to lodge a protest. The second is to reduce the burden for citizens to access the referendum process.

Under-voting for Mayor is a protest opportunity for voters who are dissatisfied with the status quo. Because she won in the primary, Lucy Vinis will be the only candidate for mayor on the ballot in November's runoff. Her seat is secured. She is very smart, and will work hard. She may become an effective Mayor.

What is troubling is that Vinis interpreted her win as an endorsement of the status quo. On election night she told the RG, “We've come through three terms with Mayor Piercy, I carry those values forward, and clearly those values are important to Eugeneans.” And her win meant, “...residents are generally satisfied with the political direction of the city.”

She ignored that fact that her Republican opponent was so right-wing that voters may have voted for her as repudiation of him. Or maybe voters hoped she would make better informed and transparent decisions than Piercy.

“Under-voting,” for Mayor, will not jeopardize Vinis’s seat. No serious write-in campaign has been mounted. Therefore, by casting an under-vote you will send the message that voters do NOT endorse the status quo and demand real reform,

Under-voting in the Mayor’s election also has the very important benefit of empowering Eugene voters to access the referendum process. When Council makes a bad decision without asking voters, like another regressive “City Service Fee,” or a new City Hall project, Article IV of our Oregon Constitution guarantees citizens a remedy. The referendum process provides the right to refer a council action to the ballot.

The requirements for a referendum are onerous. The signature gathering window is only 30 days - a week of which is consumed appealing city lawyer’s ballot language. And, here’s the crux - the number of signatures needed is 10% of all the votes cast for Mayor (including write-ins) in the last general election.

In Piercy’s last runoff she received 42,862 votes plus 8,104 write-ins, totaling almost 51,000 votes. Her 27,913 under-votes don’t apply to the minimum 5,100 signatures needed (plus 20% margin for disqualified signatures.)

But the math changes after this November’s election, the number of signatures required will be based on the votes cast for Vinis (plus write-ins.) If you think there may be a bad decision in your city’s future, the referral process is another good reason to under-vote, and not write-in.

In May’s primary, Vinis got 28,010 votes out of 53,340 cast (26% of registered voters.) The undervote was 6,590. This November, if voters cast many under-votes and few write-ins for mayor, the burden on citizens referring bad decisions to the ballot will be substantially reduced for the next four years.

Your under-vote counts.

Bonny Bettman-McCornack
Paul Nicholson
Wayne Lottinville
David Monk
Founding members of Checks & Balances