

commentary

from other pens...

If debates not televised; voters left uninformed

ST. PETERSBURG BEACH, Fla. — Many voters didn't have first-hand knowledge about the campaigns or issues in top state political races in 2000 because many debates were not televised.

Political analysts question whether televising more would have sharply improved that situation, however, because public interest often is limited about races at the state and local level.

Many people get their information about politics from local television news, which has cut back coverage of local races "because it's not a good draw," said Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. If debates were shown and seen by more people, it would change the public level of knowledge, he said. But he also questioned whether such programming "would have good audiences."

"One of the ways things might be improved is if people were forced," Kohut said Thursday while attending the annual meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. "You'd have a better informed electorate by default."

Under current practices, voters don't even have the option of watching political debates, said a report released Thursday in Washington.

Hundreds of debates for major offices such as governor, the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House were held in the 2000 elections, but many voters couldn't see them if they had wanted to.

The survey of debate coverage in 10 states was conducted by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate. It found that two-thirds of the debates in those states were not televised and fewer than one in five debates were televised by network affiliates.

The study focused on major candidate debates — for the U.S. Senate, U.S. House and governor — in California, Florida, Indiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Washington. The study was done with help from the Pew Charitable Trusts.

The debates televised by outlets not affiliated with a network averaged a 2 percent share of the market — or less than 1 percent of the eligible voters in the district or state where they were shown.

Two-thirds of the debates for statewide offices in those 10 states were televised. But only half were televised on network outlets, the report said. Only three in 10 congressional debates were televised on any outlet.

That means many voters got their information about candidates and the races from campaign ads and the scattered coverage they get from local television stations.

Curtis Gans, director of the committee, said one exception in 2000 was Minnesota, where outlets for ABC, CBS and NBC agreed to televise one of three debates between Sen. Mark Dayton and former Sen. Rod Grams.

In Minnesota two years earlier, a governor's race debate on public television helped elevate the chances of improbable candidate Jesse Ventura, who was then running under the banner of the Reform Party.

"Many people believe that was one of the key factors that helped him win the election, because a lot of people saw him versus two other flawed candidates," said Rob Daves, director of the Star Tribune Minnesota Poll. Members of the public who don't follow politics may tell pollsters they know more than they do, said Paul Lavrakas, a longtime political pollster who now works for Neilsen Media Research.

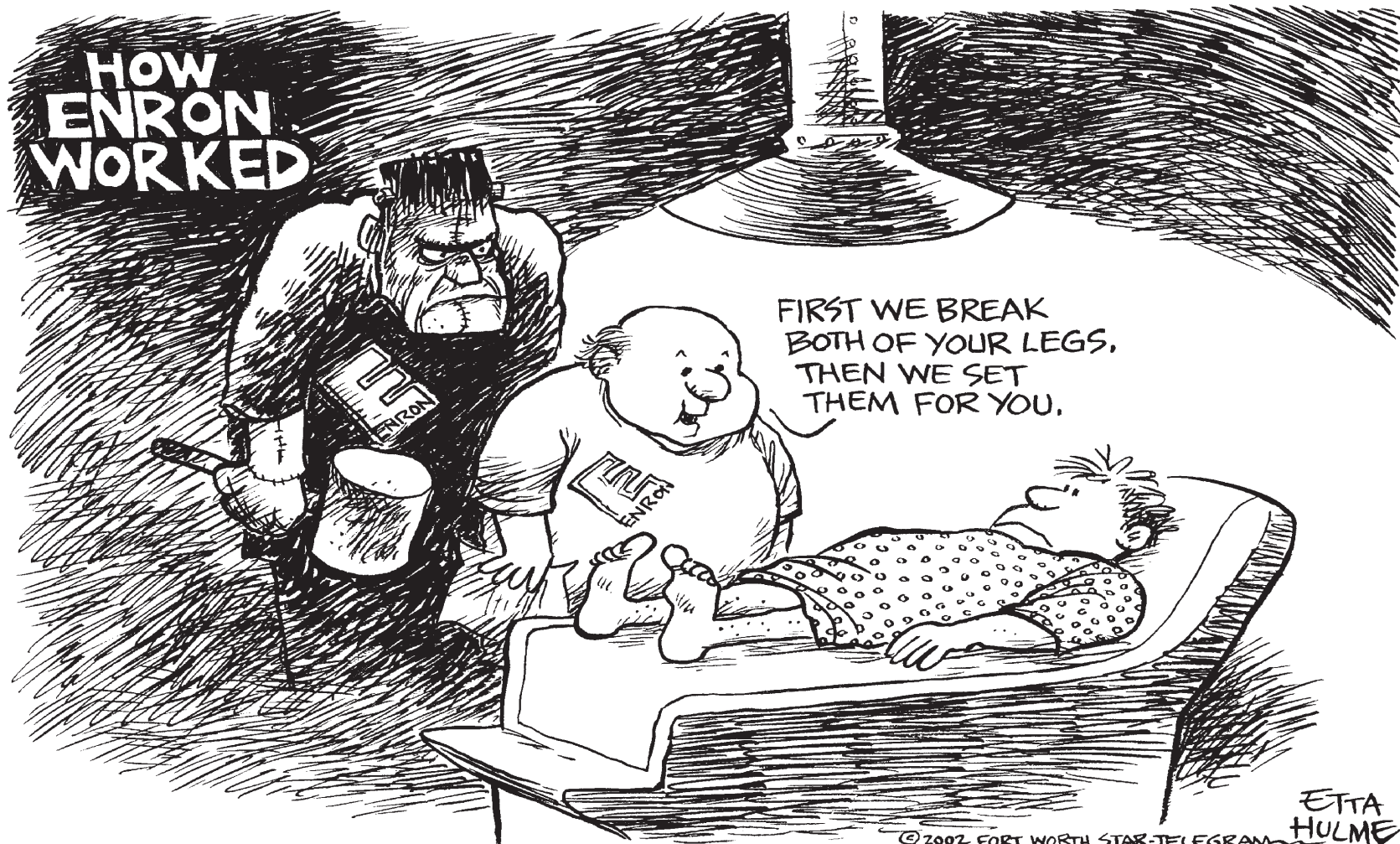
He recalled a poll experiment in which a bogus candidate was included in a question to the general public.

"Twenty percent knew of this person," he said, "and when asked who would they vote for, some people said they would vote for this person."

Many people get scattered information on local races from television news coverage and ads, said Tom Guterbock, director of the Survey Research Center at the University of Virginia. A televised debate might be their only chance to get a detailed look at the candidates.

"There are some states and races where that opportunity doesn't even exist," he said. "Where are people going to get this knowledge?"

EDITOR'S NOTE — Will Lester covers politics and polling for *The Associated Press*.



Most of us never get to fly first class

I don't know about you, but most people I know never get to fly first-class.

But maybe it's because we just don't expect material blessings. Maybe God wants us to have them, but also wants us to trust God for them instead of trying so hard to get them ourselves.

A person I know took time off from a busy schedule to travel and care for a sick friend. The ill person was alone and needing some spiritual and emotional support. You know how it is when you're sick. You get discouraged and feel nothing is ever going to be better. Just getting by seems to be all you can do. Things begin to look bleak, and life becomes overwhelming especially when viewed as possibly coming to an end. Sometimes you just need someone to hold your hand and remind you that there's light at the end of the tunnel — that God is in charge — even of life and death.

The friends faced several of the health problems together, talked over alternatives. They also were able to mingle the conversations with memories shared, found humor in the hospital situations, scratched their heads at the health care system, and looked under the clouds for silver linings.

Just having someone stand with you when you're sick makes it more bearable. Throughout the time together, the sick person kept expressing gratitude. "You don't know how much it means to have you here."

"You can't possibly understand how grateful I am that you came to be with me. I know this is costing you money; I want to help with your expenses."

"No," the other friend replied. "I know that you would do the same for me. You have been there for me in the past; now it's my turn to help you."

The voice from the hospital bed replied: "But at least use my debit card while you're here to put gas



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• commentary

in the car and pay for your food."

The friend accepted the debit card, but knew it would not be used.

Of course the time finally came when the friend had to leave. It was difficult to leave with the other person still in a hospital bed. All the possible arrangements were made and good-byes were said. Again, almost with tears, the person expressed his gratitude. "What a comfort you've been. How lucky I am to have such a good friend."

"We both are fortunate," the departing friend replied. "I'll stay in touch and keep praying for your health to return."

Sitting in the airport isn't all that much fun. Especially right now. You're warned to be there at least two hours ahead of time, but sometimes you're lucky and get all checked in within five minutes. That's what happened to this person. Never without a good book to read, the person settled down to read between spells of people-watching.

Then an announcement came on the loud-speaker; the waiting passenger only heard half of it. Looking at the person across the way, she asked, "What did he just say?"

"This flight is oversold. They will give a \$300 coupon for another trip on this airline to anyone who will give up their ticket on this flight."

"Well, I can do that. No one's waiting for me at the other end of the line."

The person went up to relinquish the ticket. The

airline representative expressed gratitude. "Just have a seat. I will re-schedule you as soon as this flight has left."

Before long, there was another announcement. "We are still needing seats on this flight. If you will give up your seat, we will give you a coupon for \$400 on another trip."

Better yet! A few minutes later, another announcement: "We will give a \$500 coupon to anyone who will give up their seat on this flight."

The person was thrilled — making money while just sitting in the airport.

The flight left. The person's name was called and subsequently asked to sign for the \$500 coupon.

"Take care of this," the representative warned. "It's just like cash. Here's your re-scheduled flight. Just go to the next gate. Your plane leaves in less than an hour, you will connect in St. Louis, and you will arrive at your final destination about three hours later than you were expecting."

Overjoyed, the passenger did as instructed, relieved that it was going to be so soon. Sitting down to look over the boarding passes, she read the flight numbers, the gate numbers, the departure times and seat numbers.

Then came the big surprise! Not only did she receive a \$500 coupon toward another trip to be used within a year, not only was her trip prolonged by just three short hours, but there was an added bonus. Her re-scheduled trip was First Class!

We have a great God. One who wants to give us showers of blessings and grand surprises. God rewards those who forget themselves and adjust their busy schedules to help others and trust God's guidance.

Maybe we aren't truly traveling through life first class because we're trying too hard to make it happen — instead of trusting God.

When jail plays psychiatrist

When Marisa Mariposa Garcia was booked on murder charges into Marin County Jail last month, her 3-year-old daughter lay in the coroner's office, dead from asphyxiation.

Garcia was, by all accounts, a loving mother trying to cope with her mental illness. She had checked herself into a San Francisco hospital in the early morning hours of April 9 and told doctors she had killed her daughter. Police found the girl's body at the Acqua Hotel in Mill Valley.

Authorities aren't saying yet what drove Garcia to kill her 3-year-old that day. But no one is denying she is a sick, distraught, suicidal woman who needs acute psychiatric care as she awaits trial.

So why is she languishing in the county jail, which is not equipped to treat someone as apparently seriously ill as she is? Why was she, early on in her stay, relegated to a padded cell during the day and sent to sleep in a regular cell at night when even the county medical staff acknowledges she clearly needed, and still needs, to be in a mental health facility?

Because for the past four months, Marin County — like Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino, Lake and Solano counties — has had no place to send its psychiatric inmates.

All six counties had contracts with Glenn Dyer Detention Facility in Oakland. But new state regulations — ironically intended to improve inmate care — forced the closure of the facility's psychiatric ward in January. Alameda County made a deal with John George Psychiatric Pavilion in San Leandro, but the hospital couldn't accommodate the other five counties.

(Even Alameda County's inmates have taken a hit with the new arrangement. About a third as many inmates receive acute care now that the jail has to send them to an outside facility. "It's the law of unintended consequences," said Alameda County Health Services Director Dave Kears.)

So Marin and the other counties have been scrambling, without success, to find alternatives. In the meantime, the jails' small medical staffs are struggling to manage the best they can.

"It's a real problem right now," said Marin County Public Defender Debra Leyva, who is representing Garcia. "When (Garcia) was first arrested, she would have been sent to a psychiatric hospital if there had been a place to send her to."

Though Garcia is still under 24-hour suicide



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• commentary

watch, Leyva said, "I don't think she can be cared for appropriately in a jail setting."

Marin is not dragging its feet in finding an alternative to Glenn Dyer's psychiatric ward. It has been looking for more than a year. But there are few choices — for Marin and every other county in California. (It's no surprise that psychiatrists have dubbed the Los Angeles County jail system the largest "mental institution" in the country, with more than 5,000 mentally ill inmates.)

"Looking at the budget deficit facing the state, and seeing how these hospitals are so expensive, it's not a problem that's going to go away," said Dennis Scheuller, commander of the detention and corrections division in Alameda County. "It's a real failing in the state to provide these facilities."

The crunch in the Bay Area and California is repeated a hundred times throughout the United States — and is getting worse. More state psychiatric hospitals have closed in the 1990s than in the '70s and '80s combined. Between 1970 and 1990, there was a decrease of 14 mental-health hospitals across the country — from 277 to 263. Between 1990 and 1999, 44 state hospitals closed.

It's difficult enough for non-criminals to get a bed at a mental-health facility. Inmates from county jails are not exactly at the top of anybody's list as desirable patients.

But the need among inmates is particularly acute. Thirteen percent of incarcerated people in the United States suffer from serious mental ill-

nesses compared to 2 percent in the general population, according to a 2002 report by the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education. Suicide is the leading cause of death in U.S. jails, and 95 percent occur among inmates who have a treatable mental illness.

Suicide has been extremely rare in the Marin County jail. In the old jail, there were so few that no one can even remember them. Since the new jail opened seven years ago, there had been just one.

On Feb. 28, less than two months after Marin County lost its contract with Glenn Dyer Detention, a 36-year-old mother of two named Renee Oatman was arrested on a nonviolent offense and booked into the county jail. Three days later, she hung herself in her cell.

Joan Ryan is a columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Send comments to her e-mail at joanryan@sfgate.com.

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Published daily except Saturday and Sunday and the day observed for New Year's Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day, at 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

Periodicals postage paid at Goodland, Kan. 67735; entered at the Goodland, Kan., Post Office under the Act of Congress of March 8, 1878.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Goodland Daily News, 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

TELEPHONE: (785) 899-2338. Editorial e-mail: daily@nwkans.com. Advertising questions can be sent to: gdnadv@nwkans.com

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SUBSCRIPTIONS: In Sherman County and adjacent counties: three months, \$25; six months, \$42; 12 months, \$79. Out of area, weekly mailing of five issues: three months, \$30; six months, \$45; 12 months, \$80. By mail daily in Kansas, Colorado: 12 months, \$115. (All tax included.)

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Founded by Thomas McCants
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