

*Oklahoma*  
HUMANITIES

WINTER 2012

DECISION 2012

PERSPECTIVE ON THE  
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

FIROOZEH DUMAS

BRIDGING CULTURES  
THROUGH HUMOR



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# Oklahoma HUMANITIES

VOLUME V, ISSUE NO. 1

WINTER 2012

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The opinions expressed in *Oklahoma* HUMANITIES are those of the authors. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in the magazine do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Oklahoma Humanities Council, its Board of Trustees, staff, or donors. Advertising in *Oklahoma* HUMANITIES magazine does not imply endorsement of the advertiser or its claims.

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## ON THE COVER

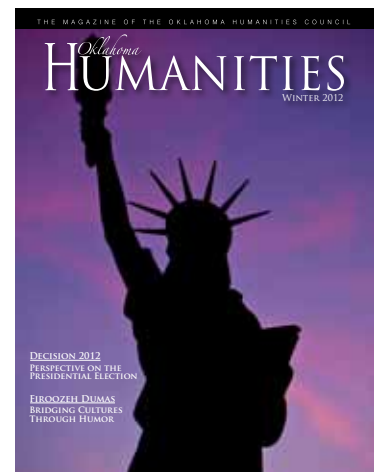
Replica of the Statue of Liberty on the Square in Enid, Oklahoma. Photo by Mike Klemme, whose current passion is helping organizations tell their stories and connect with constituents through photography. [www.mikeklemme.com](http://www.mikeklemme.com)

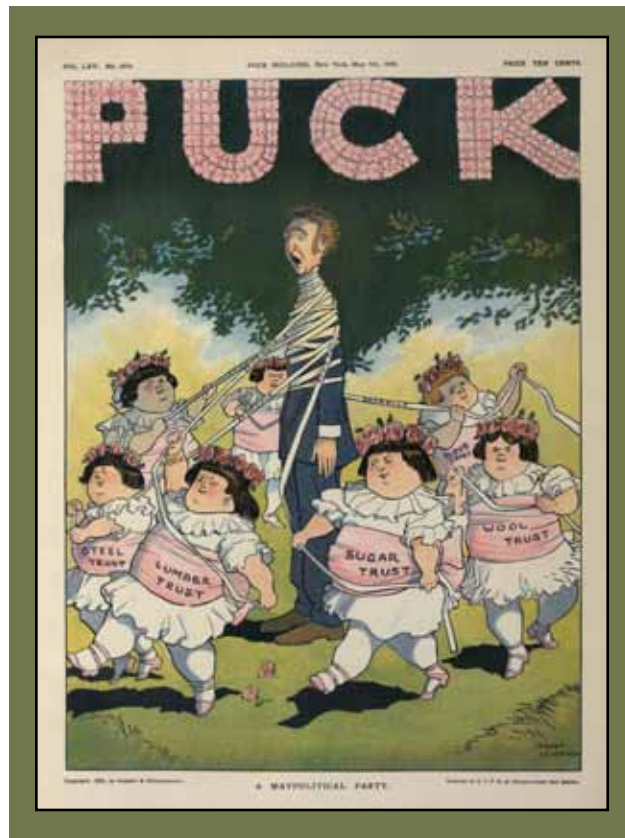
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A MAYPOLITICAL PARTY. Shows a man (labeled “Consumer”) serving as the maypole while dancers (labeled as industry trusts “Steel, Lumber, Sugar, Wool, Glove”) wind their ribbons (labeled “Schedule”) around him. The political commentary is timeless in suggesting that “special interests” are often blamed for tying up the work of government and, as a result, individual citizens. For more on *Puck* magazine and other vintage political cartoons featured in this issue, see page 15. Illustration by Albert Levering, c. 1909 by Keppler & Schwarzmann. May 5, 1909, *Puck* magazine. Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsca-26371

## SPECIAL FEATURE: DECISION 2012

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*From the Executive Director*  
ANN THOMPSON

I always thought of myself as a humanities person as a kid, but I liked electronics. Then I read something that one of my heroes, Edwin Land of Polaroid, said about the importance of people who could stand at the intersection of humanities and sciences, and I decided that's what I wanted to do.—STEVE JOBS

The statement above was quoted in a *New York Times* article by Walter Isaacson, biographer of Steve Jobs. The sentiment expressed is much like that in our first letter to the editor (adjacent to this column), a very thoughtful response from a reader who reminds us that math and science need not be compromised in our promotion of humanities disciplines.

When I was in junior high school, in the midst of the Cold War, I was subjected to “New Math.” I don't remember much about it except Venn diagrams and concentric circles. I can't say I've seen much practical application of those concepts in my life. Apparently the movement was an attempt to mold students into aspiring mathematicians to compensate for the Sputnik embarrassment, when the Soviet Union was the first to launch a satellite into space. New Math didn't “take” with me and I've been a “humanities person” ever since.

How nice to be reminded that one need not be exclusively either a science-and-math person or a humanities person. Benjamin Franklin was a perfect amalgam of the two (see Ann Neal's letter, opposite). Here was a humanist who applied scientific knowledge creatively to great achievement. Our first ambassador to France, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, and a writer and printer, he also invented the lightning rod, the Franklin stove, and bifocals. He certainly stood at that same intersection of humanities and science that Steve Jobs recognized. Some of us can only stand in awe of such interdisciplinary genius.

## LETTERS

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### REASONED RESPONSE

In the Summer 2011 issue of *Oklahoma HUMANITIES* magazine, it was not the articles on politics and religion that stuck with me, but Mark Slouka's article titled “Dehumanized: When Math and Science Rule the School.” As I have read and reread it, I continue to be unreasonably irritated by what he has written. Digging through it one more time, I think we would basically agree on how we should be educating our children and our society in general. Why, then, does the article continue to intrigue and irritate me? I guess the distillate is that I resent the implication that an engineer is somehow less able to understand or appreciate what it means to be human, that he or she is unable to conduct a reasoned search for the truth.

It is irritating that Mr. Slouka thinks I am unable to be an autonomous human being, reasoning and independent minded, simply because I studied math and science instead of history, literature or philosophy. It is irritating that he thinks I am unable to resist coercion or manipulation or demagoguery—or worse that I might be guilty of coercion or manipulation or demagoguery—because my degree is not in a humanities discipline. Most of all, perhaps, I resent that Mr. Slouka doesn't think I am able to understand or appreciate democratic values, let alone perpetuate them. I am, apparently in his view, not the kind of person able to assist in the survival of a democratic society.

I, along with Mr. Slouka, am saddened by the state of our schools and public policies. But I don't think whining about the teaching of math and science or glorifying the humanities to an unreasonable plane is productive. Philosophers often aren't burdened with facts. So if you will allow me to philosophize a bit: I am suspicious that most of our politicians, today's statesmen if you will, were not overburdened with the study of math and science. We might just find ourselves a little better off if we had a few more physicists, chemists, welders, engineers, plumbers, and nurses in charge of our democracy.—Dr. Bill Woodard, Bartlesville

### FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

I enjoyed reading about “Politics and the Pulpit” [Summer 2011], but our Founding Fathers did not see a need for freedom from religion on the part of government except at the national level since many of the states had established religions. Our Founding Fathers and Mothers were very religious and simply did not want Congress establishing a religion and certainly didn't want Congress to prohibit the free exercise thereof, so the clear intent was for the citizens of each state to be free to exercise their religion however they want to, free from Congressional regulation.—Brad Baker, Sperry

In regard to *Oklahoma HUMANITIES*, Summer 2011—Great Edition! All articles were outstanding, but the special feature, “Politics and the Pulpit,” and “Dehumanized” [Mark Slouka] were special. Thanks for your magazine.—Bryna Lane, Ada

### OHC PRIVACY POLICY

Protecting your privacy is extremely important to us.  
For detailed information on our privacy policy, call us at  
(405) 235-0280 or go to our website: [www.okhumanities.org](http://www.okhumanities.org)



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## FILLING THE GAP

I always enjoy thinking about the various articles that are presented in *Oklahoma HUMANITIES* magazine. These articles give me reason to “pause” and consider timely issues as well as longstanding discussions in the humanities. My life is very full and busy, but I always take time to read your magazine.

I have colleagues and family members who also enjoy the magazine. We often discuss your publication’s articles over dinner or coffee. In rural Oklahoma we do not always have much chance to talk about significant issues confronting the human condition. Please continue to publish such a quality product—we need your work to give us a reason to think!

The Oklahoma Humanities Council is an excellent organization that provides timely and necessary information and programs about the humanities to our state. It fills a gap in shared knowledge that no other entity can address. As a rural community advocate, I would like to see more humanities programs made available in rural areas across our great state!—Kay Decker, Freedom

## JOIN OUR E-NEWS LIST!



[www.okhumanities.org](http://www.okhumanities.org)

Want the latest news on OHC events? Join our e-news mailing list and receive information as it happens. Go to our website, look under “News” on the left side of the home page, and click on “Sign up for E-News!” We appreciate the opportunity to provide you with up-to-the-minute news and event information from the humanities community.

We invite feedback from our donors, grantees, and participants to assist in evaluating OHC programs. Please take a moment to respond to our online survey, located on the homepage of our website: [www.okhumanities.org](http://www.okhumanities.org). The survey will be available through January.

## SEND US YOUR FEEDBACK

Send your letters and opinions to the Editor at: [carla@okhumanities.org](mailto:carla@okhumanities.org). Include “Letter to the Editor” in the subject line of your message. We look forward to hearing from you.



*From the OHC Board of Trustees*  
ANN NEAL, CHAIR

The trees have shed their leaves, and festive times with family and friends are winding down in the New Year. Amidst all the reflective thinking and sharing during the holidays, I had the chance to participate in an OHC event where Ben Franklin (portrayed by Stephen Smith) was the featured speaker. Ben addressed us on important, circa 1776 topics, and the attendees had a chance to ask him questions regarding the state of affairs in his life and the life of the Colonies. The juxtaposition of the holidays, meeting Ben Franklin, and this issue of *Oklahoma HUMANITIES* magazine has me pondering the importance of the humanities to the founding of our nation.

Ben Franklin certainly spent his lifetime in meaningful public engagement with the humanities. His interests ranged from witty and pithy writings to inventions to politics. Where would our country be without his pursuit of the cultural understanding of France, and his civic involvement in municipal and state endeavors?

The list of our Founding Fathers’ interests in the humanities is long. George Washington steeped himself in the classical Roman texts which informed his view on the creation of the United States. Thomas Jefferson used his in-depth knowledge of political theory to create the documents which inspired those who founded our nation. Alexander Hamilton’s brilliant understanding of economics created a financial and monetary system that is still effective. An understanding of cultural and classical studies, political theory, and economics were as essential then as they are today.

This issue of our magazine is focused on the upcoming presidential election. As Benjamin Franklin stated, “Nothing in this world is certain but death and taxes,” and I would add: the need for a vigorous and engaged study of the humanities. The OHC staff and Board of Trustees hope you continue to support the humanities in all its various facets in the New Year.



Martin Wing, Attorney at Law, Tulsa

## BOARD WELCOMES NEW MEMBERS

OHC is governed by a 24-member Board of Trustees comprised of private citizens, academic scholars, and governor’s appointees. We welcome the following new members.

Dr. Scott LaMascus is Professor of Language and Literature and Director of the Honors Program at Oklahoma Christian University. He also taught at the University of Oklahoma and Georgia Southwestern State University. He earned his M.A. and Ph.D. at the University of Oklahoma and pursues research interests in literary theory and American literature. He serves as Director of the McBride Center for Faith & Literature and is a member of the Executive Board of the Conference on Christianity & Literature, an affiliate organization of the Modern Language Association.

Joan Gilmore is a graduate of Drury University, Springfield, MO, which honored her with an Outstanding Alumnae Award in 2001. As a journalist, she served as Women’s News Editor and Metro News Editor for *The Oklaboman*, then opened a public relations agency. She now writes a daily column for *The Journal Record*, Oklahoma’s business newspaper. She is a founding member of the board of Leadership Oklahoma City and of Executive Service Corps of Central Oklahoma. She devotes many hours to volunteer work with various agencies. As a founding member of Children’s Medical Research, she served as a vice president and chaired its national television production, Children’s Miracle Network.

Dr. Susan McCarthy is First Vice-President of Wells Fargo Advisors and was named one of the “Top 100 Women Financial Advisors” in the U.S. in 2006. She is the author of *The Value of Money* (Tarcher, 2008) and *More Than Wealth* (DKS Publishing, 2004), and frequently speaks on estate planning, asset allocation, market conditions, and investment policy design. She has served on numerous boards and investment committees throughout the community. She received her Ph.D. in French Language and Literature from the University of Wisconsin and spent several years in higher education before entering the business world.

Mary Blankenship Pointer is an Oklahoma native and attended the University of Oklahoma. She began her banking career in 1977 and currently serves as Senior Vice President, Business Development for the Oklahoma Region, UMB Bank. She is a member of Leadership Oklahoma City Class XXIV and Leadership Oklahoma XXII. Mary serves on numerous boards on the local, state, national, and international level.

Susan Webb teaches for Oklahoma City Ballet and the Lyric Theatre Thelma Gaylord Academy. She has a B.P.A. from Oklahoma City University (magna cum laude) and has worked in the professional dance industry in Oklahoma, New York, and Florida. Her accolades include a feature on OETA’s *Gallery*; “Outstanding Community Outreach” award from the Assembly of Community Arts Councils; and Honorary Membership in Business Circle of the Arts. She is now a consultant in media. Her service positions include working with the Oklahoma Independent Petroleum Association, the Oklahoma Energy Resources Board, and past membership on the Oklahoma City University Alumni Board. ☺

## THOUGHTS ON PLANNED GIVING

*When you think of the Oklahoma Humanities Council, what key words or phrases come to your mind?*

Stimulating, valuable, respected.

*What aspect of OHC’s work gives you the most satisfaction?*

OHC is serving our entire state, not just metropolitan areas such as Tulsa and Oklahoma City. The Council offers a wide variety of programs and grant support to foster humanities projects. Museum on Main Street is just one example: the program is a partnership between OHC and the Smithsonian Institution to bring museum-quality exhibits to small communities that would otherwise never have access to such prestigious programming.

*What inspired you to become an OHC donor?*

As a former Chair and member of the OHC Board of Trustees, I know firsthand that the organization accomplishes its mission with care and stewards donor gifts in a responsible way. Supporting the Council financially helps make the humanities accessible to all citizens and Oklahoma a richer, better place to live and thrive.

*Is there an important moment, person, or special occasion at OHC that influenced your decision?*

During my time on the OHC Board, I witnessed the broad impact of the Council’s programming and grants on the cultural life of our State. I have seen the organization weather transitions and fluctuations in funding, yet remain strong, stable, and immeasurably important to our State.

*What was the single most important consideration in your decision to make a planned gift to OHC?*

I value the humanities—how discussion and engagement with disciplines like jurisprudence, literature, ethics, and comparative religion help us better understand ourselves and the world we live in.

*What prompted you to make your gift at this particular time?*

I recently reviewed my estate plan, and took time to reflect on the value I place on the many charitable and educational organizations with which I’ve been involved. I realized that by making a planned gift—or making arrangements for part of my estate to be distributed—to those organizations, I could help sustain their good works for future generations. I’m proud to be part of the effort to sustain the Oklahoma Humanities Council and its work.



# OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES AWARDS

HONORING EXCELLENCE IN THE HUMANITIES

2012 AWARDEES:



*Oklahoma Humanities Award*  
Dr. Alvin Turner  
Dean Emeritus  
School of Humanities & Social Studies  
East Central University



*Community Leadership Award*  
Dr. Catherine Webster  
Associate Professor of French  
University of Central Oklahoma



*Public Humanities Award*  
Dr. Bill Corbett  
Professor of History & Chair  
Northeastern State University



*Outstanding OHC Project*  
A Tapestry Tour of  
Five Historic Sites in Southwest Oklahoma  
Sponsored by Southern Prairie Library System  
& Museum of the Western Prairie, Altus



*Community Support Award*  
Oklahoma Gazette



*Humanities in Education Award*  
Rector Johnson Middle School  
H<sup>3</sup> (History Happens Here) Time Travelers' Book Club  
Broken Bow, OK

**TICKETS AVAILABLE NOW!**

**March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 6:30 p.m., Tickets \$85**

2012 Oklahoma Humanities Awards

Online Reservations: [www.okhumanities.org](http://www.okhumanities.org)

Event Location: Oklahoma History Center, OKC

Information: Call OHC at (405) 235-0280

**RESERVATION DEADLINE: MARCH 9<sup>TH</sup>**



# Poetry from Eddie

## You Can Do It, Eddie!

When I was a kid, I played hard at basketball.  
I wasn't all that good. I was far from being tall,  
but I could make a layup, and I hustled down the court  
and played the game with heart. I really was that sort!

Still, I was so very tiny that a free throw was too long.  
I lacked the strength to throw that far, so often they went wrong.  
I remember one game, it was late, and the score was close,  
and I got fouled and knew we needed those points the most.

One and one at the free-throw line—make one and get another,  
and I was focused and I was ready—but I hadn't factored Mother!  
My mom went to every game, in fact to each event.  
She knew a mom's job when she saw it, duty heaven sent!

So, as the pressure mounted and quiet reigned supreme,  
I pictured myself successful, and in a winner's dream.  
As I bent my knees, and began to shoot, I knew that I was ready!  
When suddenly a shout shattered all my preparation;  
it was Mom with, "You can do it, Eddie!"

Well, needless to say, I was so embarrassed, I missed that crucial shot  
and I could have dropped down through the floor, right there on the spot!  
But now, after all these years later, I can't recall one score.  
Don't remember how many we won, or lost—doesn't matter anymore.

But I do remember Mom, and I know she was always there,  
wanting only the best for me; I know she truly cared!  
And sometimes when things are rocky, or some task is hard to do,  
I hear my Mom with, "You can do it, Eddie!" and it takes me right on through!



Eddie's high school basketball team. He's in the front row, holding the ball.



# D. Wilcoxon



—J. Don Cook, *Steering from the Hip* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2011)

## EIGHT SECONDS

**He** eases himself down onto a mountain top,  
a volcano of muscle, blood and bone,  
and there's only room for one up there;  
he's up there all alone!

The chute sides clank and clatter  
as the beast pulses wild within.  
He pulls the rigging tight and thinks,  
“Here we go again!”

When the mountain briefly settles,  
the chute gate belches open—open wide,  
and the cowboy high atop yells out,  
“COME ON BOYS, LET'S RIDE!”

Two thousand pounds explodes out into the open air,  
bellowing and snorting, mad as Hell at the burden way up there!  
Two quick steps and a whirlwind spin,  
but the cowboy's still up there, settled in!

Then a mighty bawling leap, and the bull crashes to the earth,  
four feet planted firmly, aghast at this thing around his girth.  
He spins again, and yet again, a tornado born in Hell;  
and holding tight, and straining hard, the cowboy fights the well—

that vortex in the center where all the sirens call,  
“Let go! Get off! Be done, before he makes you fall!”  
where you'll crash among the crushing hooves and vainly try to crawl,  
seeking safety from those hooking horns, by scrambling for the wall!

But the instant passes quickly and he's in control again.  
“Come on old boy, I'm still here, so spin, and spin, and spin!”

And joyous laughter fills his mind as he hears the buzzer call!  
8 SECONDS! IT'S ETERNITY! 8 SECONDS—MAN, IT'S ALL!



*Firoozeh Dumas*  
*Bridging Cultures through Humor*

An Interview by Dr. Scott LaMascus, Oklahoma Christian University, and Editor Carla Walker

The following interview is distilled from a three-hour conversation with Firoozeh Dumas when she visited Oklahoma City last July. We were dizzy from Oklahoma's hottest summer on record—it was a balmy 105 degrees, down from a record-setting 110 just two days prior. Dizzy or no, we had great fun. It's too bad the printed page isn't equipped with a laugh track (we haven't quite perfected the app for that). Firoozeh is the consummate humorist and relates her journey from Iranian immigrant to American citizen with both cheek and nostalgia. Add to the mix that she married a Frenchman and you'll understand she has plenty of experience in embracing "the other."



Carla Walker: At one of your appearances, the moderator asked what you would be if you weren't a writer and you said "a cook." You told her, "Food is a great way to learn about other people and other countries; food says so much about a culture." Tell us about the place of food and family in Iranian culture.

Firoozeh Dumas: People don't realize this, but Iran is an amazing place for fruits and vegetables, we have such a wide variety. People imagine Iran to be a desert, which is not true at all; part of it is very fertile. For hundreds of years, Persian cooks have had access to so many great ingredients. Iranian women take pride in how well they cook their rice. They take pride in cooking. I work, so it's more like *what am I thawing?*

We also eat together in Iran. You never see anybody eating alone. There is no such thing as food to go, you sit down and eat with family. It is the heart of the culture. Whenever you go into the home of an Iranian, they have to feed you. It doesn't matter what time it is, it doesn't matter who, even if you've just had a Thanksgiving meal, the attitude is: "You're in our house, let's eat." If there is ever some sort of national emergency, go to the home of an Iranian because we are well stocked.

Walker: When you gather for big family meals, all the aunts and uncles and cousins, does everyone bring food?

Dumas: We don't do potluck. It's not at all in our culture. One person has to suffer and cook for everybody. That's why in one of my articles I said, "Evolution thy name is potluck."

Firoozeh as a young girl, "too cool" in sunglasses, Abadan, Iran. As anomalies to their new American neighbors, Firoozeh's family fielded many questions about Iran: No, they didn't own a camel. Yes, they had electricity but did *not* live in a tent. The correct pronunciation of the country is "Ee-rahnn," not "I-ran."

Walker: Tell us about the conversations around those meals. In an interview you said that there is an emphasis on conversation in Iranian culture that is perhaps missing in American culture due to technology and the fast-paced lives we lead.

Dumas: When you have an hour-and-a-half meal, followed by tea, you talk. It wasn't as if there were computers and other distractions when I was growing up; getting together with family was what we did. It wasn't until I came to America that I realized that people go on vacations to places other than their relatives' homes. To me, a vacation meant you go to a relative's house and you all sleep on the floor. We are very tribal.

Walker: Are your discussions about family or about what's going on in the world?

Dumas: There is constant storytelling and rehashing of the past. One of my uncles will dominate the conversation, and then my dad will retell whatever story my uncle just told, and then my aunt will say, "No, you are both wrong," and she will retell the whole story. In my family there is so much humor. As my relatives age—my father and his siblings are all in their eighties—they will say, "Okay, the first ten minutes we're going to just talk about prostates, then we're done."

Scott LaMascus: You value education and you travel frequently to speak to high school audiences who read your books as part of their coursework. In fact, you're here in Oklahoma to speak to high school students participating in General Tommy Frank's Four Star Debate program. What is your message to students?

Dumas: I think it's really important, not just for students but for everybody, to realize that what you see on the news is the worst of every country. You need



to go beyond that to get to the human stories. I want kids to be media savvy and to realize that every news outlet has some kind of bent to it. You can't go to just one. If you like Rush Limbaugh, fine, but listen to somebody that totally disagrees with Rush Limbaugh, too, and make up your own mind.

Critical thinking is important and I think this generation, ironically, even though there's so much information available to them, they don't necessarily seek it. I say, next time there is a major world event, go on BBC.com. Read their version. Go on CNN.com. Read their version. Go on FOXNews.com. Read their version. And understand that every bit of information you get is coming through some sort of bias filter. No news organization is completely neutral because these are humans reporting.

LaMascus: Your books offer a perspective on the socio-political views of Iranian Americans before and after the revolution. How have things changed since that period during the Carter administration?

Dumas: When President Carter let the Shah come to the U.S. for treatment of his cancer, Iranians were very angry. They wanted the Shah returned to Iran to stand trial for crimes. A small group of militants invaded the embassy in protest and took American diplomats as hostages. That was the first time that most Americans even thought, "Where is Iran?" Unfortunately it was the worst introduction possible. I remember my father, along with every other Iranian, said, "Oh, this is a ploy, they'll be out tomorrow. Iranians, we're not hostage takers." No Iranian ever thought it was going to take 444 days to get the hostages released. And unfortunately, what happened during those 444 days was that the image of Iran as an anti-American nation was carved into the psyche of Americans, and I think that's still there. Even though Iran was not involved at all on 9/11, so many people associate Iran with that tragedy. One thing I try to do with my lectures, traveling throughout the United States, is to present a voice and story that Americans haven't heard.

Walker: Immigration is a subject of contentious debate in America right now. Tell us about your family's experience of coming to this country and the level of acceptance or non-acceptance that you experienced thirty years ago versus what immigrants experience now.

Dumas: Our experience was so positive and it really shaped us. I love America. Had I come into a hostile country, obviously I would have had a very different impression of what Americans are like. Iranian immigrants

who came after the revolution really did experience a different America than my family did. When we came here in 1972, we lived in Whittier, California, where ninety-nine percent of the people had never heard of Iran. People were making us cookies and treated us with such kindness and hospitality. We experienced what I refer to as the real America. For Iranians that came after the revolution and after the hostage taking, it was, "Oh, you're from that country we all hate." When I lecture, I remind Americans what they were like before 9/11, because we don't benefit as a country by deciding, "Let's all hate the same people." There is no gain in this mutual hatred. It's like air pollution: we all suffer and our children suffer.

In the debate in America about immigration, what I don't often see is a distinction between legal immigrants and illegal immigrants. When my father decided he wanted his children to be educated here, he came ready to work hard and to give to this country in exchange for the opportunities that his children would be given.

In California we have many illegal immigrants from Mexico who play a huge role in the state economy. There's an issue with illegal immigration, but that doesn't mean that we get to treat inhumanly those who are here contributing to the economy. In this country, all kinds of businesses rely on the labor of illegal immigrants. You wouldn't have a restaurant business without illegal immigrants. Half the nannies in California are illegal immigrants. Half the people cleaning those houses are illegal immigrants. You can't complain about illegal immigrants and at the same time benefit from their being here.

I personally am against illegal immigration, let me make that clear; however, once we figure out how to stop illegal immigration, what do we do with those who are already here? People say we shouldn't educate their children. Really? You want all these children not to be educated for our benefit? We talk about denying them healthcare. Do you really want people with hacking coughs to be working in restaurant kitchens or serving you food? It's a very complicated issue. It's a gray area and the more people try and make it black and white, the further we get away from the solution.

Walker: Part of the problem in our ongoing debate about immigration is that we don't know how to talk to each other. Your essay "A Politically Correct Christmas" (NPR, 2010) suggests that our efforts to be politically correct actually inhibit civil discussion.

Dumas: All political correctness has done is to scare people away from asking questions that need to be asked. There is no such thing as a bad question if it's coming from a place of honesty. I think that political correctness has not made people more culturally sensitive, it has just stopped conversations. I would rather people ask me something about my culture than reach their own conclusions because they are too afraid to ask. Usually the answer is much simpler than they realize.

LaMascus: Your books reveal some very painful episodes: an ugly mob scene with your family when you were invited to the White

Firoozeh (she's the one with pigtails, second row from the bottom) and classmates with her first (and favorite) teacher in America, Mrs. Sandberg. Upon meeting her new teacher, Firoozeh proudly recited the full extent of her knowledge of the English language: "White, yellow, orange, red, purple, blue, green."





House; the prejudice and ignorance about Iran among ordinary Americans; even rejection by some family members. But your writing makes us laugh about those experiences. What is the relationship for you between humor and suffering, laughter and tears?

Dumas: If someone is hurt, it's never funny. But in a lot of instances, if you give them a few years, you'll look back and think *that is kind of funny*. Part of the reason why the negative has not left a lasting impression on me is that if you have just an ounce more joy in life than pain, this is what you remember. I have been the recipient of so much kindness that I've been able to forgive people that are narrow-minded. You have no idea how much better life is if you have an open heart. I've had great conversations with complete strangers in the airport. It didn't matter that that person was from another country, or what religion they were, or what we disagreed on. For that moment, we got together and had a lovely conversation. I think I am very lucky to go through life not being afraid of people who are different than I am.

LaMascus: Let's talk about humor in a slightly different way. In your writing, humor is often generated by disjuncture or a slippage in language. You're hilarious, for example, when you write about "dog foods" like hush puppies and hot dogs, and how those things confused your family when you were first introduced to them. Why does language appeal to you as a source of humor?

Dumas: I think I've always been fascinated by words, because words change over time. When you are learning another language, that's when it strikes you how different things are. For instance, my family always asks me questions about English. I am their "expert" on the language. About a year ago, my father calls me and says, "What's the difference between 'knocked down' and 'knocked up'?" I said, "Dad, I've experienced both and they're very different." You would think that small variation wouldn't matter. One word: "down" or "up." How can you not love language?

Walker: Considering your love for language and writing, I wonder how the ability to express yourself would have evolved had you stayed in Iran. Would you talk a little bit about the importance of free speech?

Dumas: I don't think I can talk a *little bit* about free speech. Free speech is like oxygen to me. You cannot appreciate free speech if you have lived your whole life in America, because you cannot envision not having it. It's like gravity. Nobody says *thank God for gravity*, because we have always had it. When you live in a country like Iran where you don't have freedom of speech, what you learn to do is self censor. You even censor your thoughts. It changes who you are, it limits your world, because you know that there are certain thoughts that you're not supposed to have.

The hard part about having free speech is that we have to listen to a lot of idiots! I would still take that over not being able to speak freely and hear everyone's opinions. Free speech comes with responsibility. Free speech does not mean that you are allowed to have hateful speech. Part of what goes with free speech is respect. Sometimes we need to just agree to disagree.

Walker: I want to ask you about the rich experience that you have with two cultures, Iranian and American. What are the assets of each of those cultures?

Dumas: Starting with the Persian culture, I think the closeness of family. We take care of our own. I'm from pre-revolution Iran, so things are probably



Firoozeh (center) with older brothers Farid (left) and Farshid in Abadan, Iran. When the family came to the U.S., they learned about American culture by watching television. Firoozeh says, "My brothers used to call me *T.V. Guide* because I knew every show on every channel. They would say, 'Channel four, three o'clock,' and I'd say, 'Brady Bunch.'"



What experience could be more "American" than a visit to Disneyland? Firoozeh's father believed Walt Disney was a genius and took the family to the attraction many times after they moved to Southern California. Here, Firoozeh (left) and her friend, Heather, pose with Mickey Mouse.



A typical Sunday lunch at Aunt Fatimeh's home. Around the table is (clockwise from top): Firoozeh (seated); Dr. Kani, a cousin's husband; and Firoozeh's father, Kazem. Favorite family foods pictured here include: beef and chicken kebob (saffron is the secret to the golden hue on the chicken); lentil rice with dates, raisins, and caramelized onions; and white rice with saffron.

different now, but we never had nursing homes. Everybody has an old person living with them, some aunt who never married. My dad used to say, “In America everyone has a dog and in Iran everyone has an old person.” Partially, too, Iran is a much smaller country, about the size of Texas, so it is easier geographically to stay close with your extended family.

What have I gotten from America? That’s a long list. I just love that in America you can become the best version of yourself. There is no other country in the whole world where you can do that.

Walker: My impression after reading *Funny in Farsi* is that your family was so open and curious when you arrived in America, that you approached this new experience with open arms. I didn’t get the sense that you were afraid. I think I would be at least hesitant, setting off to live in a country where I knew little about the language and culture.

Dumas: When we first came, we were here for only two years and the idea was, *We are going to eat everything in America and see as much as we can*—which we did. We were at the garlic festival. We were at the bake festival. We were eating fried foods on a stick.

I remember my second-grade teacher, Mrs. Sandberg, invited us to her house for dinner and her husband was a hunter. They had animal heads mounted all over every room. They served us venison. Of course we had no clue what venison was, so my mother says in Persian to my father, “What is this?” and my dad says in Persian, “Eat it.” We were eating this meat and looking at all the animal heads, thinking, *Which one of you is this?*

Walker: Gauging from your essays, it seems that television was a big part of assimilation for your family. Yet, you don’t have a television in your own home now with your children. For a new immigrant coming to this country, would you say that watching television is a good or bad tool when trying to understand our culture?

Dumas: If you want to understand American culture, go to a garage sale. Go to a baseball game. Go to some kind of festival. I think television is the worst of the worst. MTV is all over the world, so people in the Middle East think that American teenagers are promiscuous and have no morals. That’s not the image you want. A lot of Iranians came to America after the revolution, and the first question they’d ask was, “What has your daughter experienced here? What’s it like?” and my mother would say, “Oh, the nicest people, such nice families.” They were really surprised because that is not the image they had of Americans, of families being close-knit.

There is so much fear of “the other” nowadays. I wish that there were a channel that focused on good news and positive stories. I would call it the Good Karma Channel. For example, after hurricane Katrina I got emails from many Iranian groups that were having fundraisers for hurricane victims and I thought, *I wish Americans knew this. I wish Americans knew that all these Iranians are having fundraisers for people they will never meet.* That would never make network news—ever.

Walker: I was moved by what your father taught you about religion, which you describe so well in your essay “The Ham Amendment.” Would you tell us some of his philosophy?

Dumas: Basically my dad said it’s not the rules of religion, like what you eat or don’t eat, it is how you treat your fellow man; that’s the only detail God cares about. He also said—in Christianity, in Judaism, in Islam—there are good people and bad people. Just because someone belongs to a certain religion doesn’t mean anything, you don’t know what kind of person they are. You have to judge every person individually. I hear the phrase “Christian values” and we Iranians have those same values—we just call them “values.” There is so much that is universal among all of us.

LaMascus: In addition to visiting with students, you addressed the Iranian American community while you were here in Oklahoma City. What did you want to communicate to them?

Dumas: Part of the reason I was interested in speaking at Oklahoma Christian University is because I have lots of Iranian fans and Middle Easterners who read my website. I want them to see that bridge going both ways. There are misconceptions on both sides. I spend a lot of time in rural America, and when I go home I always debrief my family. “How was it?” they’ll ask me and I say, “They were so kind to me.” People I meet across the country take me to local places, to do this and that. I feel like every time I’m talking to my family, every time I’m relating that to a group of Iranians, I’m also telling them, “Look, you don’t need to be afraid.” That’s my message to Americans, but I’m telling the same thing to Iranians, too. It goes both ways.

LaMascus: You are the bridge.

Dumas: The irony is, it’s easy to bomb a bridge, but it is so hard to build one. ☺

Firoozeh Dumas is the author of *Funny in Farsi* and *Laughing Without an Accent*. She is currently working on a tween novel (which contains no vampires) for Random House. Firoozeh also lectures throughout the United States, using humor to remind us that our commonalities far outweigh our differences. Interview transcribed by Stanton Yeakley, Oklahoma Christian University, English/Pre-Law major.

## LEAVE A LEGACY

By making a gift provision in your will or trust—often referred to as a planned gift—you can defer a contribution, relieve the tax burden on your estate and, in some cases, retain an income stream during your lifetime, while still creating a lasting legacy to benefit the Oklahoma Humanities Council. We encourage you to discuss planned gift options with your professional advisor. For information, contact Traci Jinkens, OHC Marketing & Development Director: (405) 235-0280 or [traci@okhumanities.org](mailto:traci@okhumanities.org).



# Puck

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

Why can't Congress agree on anything? How do I wade through the political hype to find hard facts on candidates? Does my vote really count anyway?

If you're asking these questions, you're probably among the mass of Americans who are "fed up" with politics. But the right to vote in the election of leaders is a founding principle of democracy and our country.

It may seem that politics is more contentious than ever, that Congress has never been more deadlocked, that campaign mudslinging is at its all-time dirtiest. History tells us otherwise. Take for instance *Puck* magazine, founded 135 years ago by cartoonist Joseph Keppler. The illustration on this page is tame in comparison to the scores of political cartoons the magazine published in its heyday. We've featured several *Puck* cartoons in this issue (pages 20, 21, 28, and our Contents page) and the similarities in political themes are surprisingly timely: "special interests" tying up consumers and government; the juggling act between politicians and "big business"; political parties approaching Wall Street to fill campaign coffers.

Like the young woman on this page, the candidates are posing for the polls. Making waves in the background are the newest issues, debates, and dust-ups. The shipping forecast shows rough seas with clearing skies come November. Here's hoping the following four articles lend perspective to inform your vote.



DECISION  
2012

FOLLOW THE FLAG. Illustration by Walter Dean Goldbeck, c. 1914 by Puck Publishing Corporation. July 4, 1914, *Puck* magazine. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-28064

Goldbeck



"What is believed to be a record for staying on the job is held by Rep. Louis Ludlow, Democrat of Indiana. A member of Congress since 1929, Ludlow has never gone back to his state during recesses but has remained on the job at the Capitol. He is a former president of the National Press Club and was the first newspaper correspondent to go directly from the press gallery to a seat in Congress." Photograph by Harris & Ewing, Aug. 31, 1937. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-hec-23291



# Information Please

The 4-1-1 on Becoming an Informed Voter

By John Greiner



## Practical tips for managing media overload

**W**ilbur Wright, who with his brother Orville introduced the world to manned flight, and humorist Will Rogers are easily recognized names among Oklahomans, and they unknowingly played roles in state elections of the past. Only trouble was, the famous aviator Wright was dead when voters first elected Wilbur Wright of Muskogee labor commissioner in 1970, and famous humorist Will Rogers was living in California when Oklahomans elected Will Rogers of Moore to Congress in 1932.

### What's in a Name?

The two candidates' famous names helped get them into office. Rogers was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives while the famous humorist-turned-journalist Will Rogers was writing columns and appearing in movies. The less famous Rogers had been a school superintendent in several Oklahoma towns when he filed for office. In his lifetime, he'd gone by Will C., W.C., and William C. Rogers, he told *The Daily Oklahoman* on July 15, 1932. There's a pretty good chance that some voters didn't realize in 1932 that the Rogers running for Congress was not "the" well-known Will Rogers.

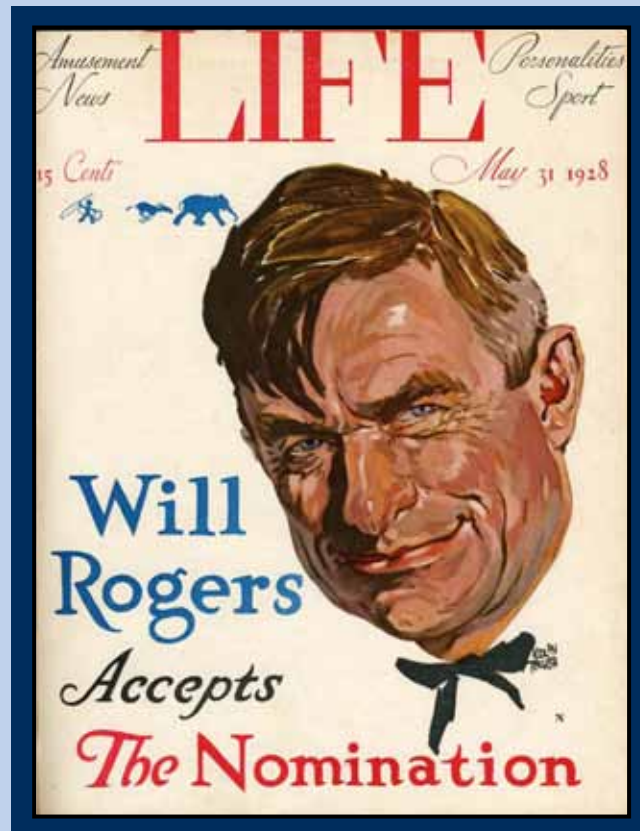
Wright, a Muskogee watchmaker and Democrat, was elected Oklahoma Labor Commissioner in 1970. He showed up on the Democratic primary ballot again in 1974 when seven Democrats ran for their party's nomination for state labor commissioner. That year Wright was pushed into a primary runoff by another Will Rogers, a retired highway patrol trooper. Wright won the runoff and was elected to office. He resigned in 1975 after he pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge involving travel claims. But a misdemeanor didn't prohibit him being a candidate again; he ran unsuccessfully for corporation commission in 1976.

Famous-name candidates have cropped up often since Oklahoma became a state. As recently as 2008, a David Boren (city of Moore)—not the David Boren who is current president of the University of Oklahoma and a former state legislator, governor, and U.S. Senator—ran against an incumbent state senator and came close to winning. Famous names can attract a voter's attention and sometimes, in the absence of knowing a candidate's stance on the issues, his/her vote.

### Media that Matters

The 1974 Wright-Rogers runoff election pointed out the dilemma that faces Oklahoma voters: How do you get information on a candidate for public office? These days, voters are bombarded by politicians' press releases extolling their virtues and blasting their opponents in one or two well-constructed sentences. Bumper stickers and slogans abound to portray a candidate in a good light—or to cast aspersions on his or her opponent.

John Greiner was a Capitol Bureau reporter for *The Oklahoman* for 37 years. He was inducted into the Oklahoma Journalism Hall of Fame in 1993 and awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Society of Professional Journalists in 2010. His retirement in 2009 prompted a state Senate resolution in praise of his work.



LIFE magazine cover, 1928, showing Will Rogers as the presidential candidate for the "Anti-Bunk" Party. As part of the spoof, Rogers wrote a series of articles for LIFE, mocking candidates and politics. Courtesy Will Rogers Memorial Museum

## INFORMATION AT A GLANCE

Oklahoma State Election Board: [www.ok.gov/elections](http://www.ok.gov/elections)

- Find telephone numbers for your county election board
- Register to vote [or confirm that you're registered]
- Find out where to cast your ballot

Oklahoma Ethics Commission: [www.ok.gov/oec](http://www.ok.gov/oec)

- Find out who is financing a candidate's campaign
- Read reports on campaign contributions and expenditures
- Read informal opinions in interpreting ethics laws

Oklahoma State Legislature: [www.oklegislature.gov](http://www.oklegislature.gov)

- Find directories and bios of current state legislators
- Find the state and federal legislators for your district
- Browse the Oklahoma Constitution and Statutes
- Track the progress of current legislation

League of Women Voters of Oklahoma: [www.lwvok.org](http://www.lwvok.org)

- Read a guide on citizen lobbying
- Read candidates' answers to League-posed questions
- Find links to info on state and federal elections and issues

*Editor's note:* Websites and election dates are "as of press time."



Voters have a tendency to pay more attention to the big, statewide races such as governor and U.S. Senate. Keeping track of everyone who is running can be a monumental task for voters. Several hundred candidates generally file for state and federal offices in an election year. In Oklahoma's 2012 elections, state and federal political candidates will be running in districts with new boundaries. Voters will have to understand in which district they now live and which candidates are vying to represent them.

Those voters searching for ways to inform themselves will rely on the media—newspapers, television, and radio—for information on candidates. The media's role in our democratic process is to inform citizens of what is going on in their government. This includes what is happening during campaigns and their aftermath.

With advancing technology, people receive information from other sources too, including political blogs and Internet commentary, sometimes written by unknown sources or spokespersons on behalf of the candidates running for federal, state, county, and city offices. Some candidates now use social networking to campaign. The focus of these marketing efforts, no matter which media avenue is used, is to put the candidate in the best light possible to get him/her elected. If a message is one-sided, the source may be a candidate's campaign. It's not necessarily false, it's just incomplete.

Jim Davis, associate professor of American and Applied Politics at Oklahoma State University, says that in some elections "the only [media] coverage is . . . how [candidates] are doing on election night"—too little, too late to factor into voters' decisions. Local newspapers in small communities, however, usually provide more comprehensive information on the candidates in their areas. People in smaller towns can hear candidates on local radio stations, too. Davis calls this "Dollar a Holler" campaigning, where candidates pay to have their advertisements run on the smaller radio stations.

Much of this information—or lack of it—is dependent upon timely submissions and responses from candidates, and the accurate reporting of materials received or observed by the media. Unlike campaign-generated materials, the media's job is to observe and report objectively all sides of an issue or political race in order for the reader or viewer to reach his own conclusion. Modern technology has resulted in candidates often communicating with the media via email rather than face to face. In one way, this enables a candidate to reach a wider audience. But it makes it more difficult for the media to ask follow-up questions. A salient follow-up question may be ignored by a candidate reluctant to reply, making it difficult to delve deeper into an issue. Also lost in an Internet exchange is body language and other signs that the issue needs further investigation. Media reports that give

both sides of a particular issue can be trusted. Often, one side will have no comment, but at least the effort was made by the media to get the other side. Also, people should not confuse news reports on a candidate with editorial comments which express opinions.

### **When You Want to Know More**

Besides the traditional news media, a voter can turn to Oklahoma government, ethics, and election websites to get more information. These websites can provide information on candidates and, equally important, who is backing them financially. These include the websites of the state House and Senate, the Oklahoma State Election Board, the League of Women Voters, and the State Ethics Commission. In July of every election cycle, the state House of Representatives publishes a synopsis explaining all the state questions that will be on Oklahoma's election ballot. To find it, visit: [www.okhouse.gov](http://www.okhouse.gov); click on "House Publications" then "Research Publications." State and county political parties can also provide platform and biographical information on their candidates.

And voters can and will learn some things from the candidates themselves by attending public debates, town hall gatherings, and campaign appearances. Those opportunities may be a voter's best bet to ask questions or converse with candidates personally. Of course, voters will also have to vet printed campaign materials delivered directly to their homes, as well as recorded phone messages and ads from Political Action Committees (PACs), groups created to raise and spend money to elect or defeat candidates or ballot issues such as state questions. Examples of state questions include permitting liquor by the drink and a recent one to prohibit judges from using Sharia Law (Islamic Law) in deciding cases. Like all political advertising, voters will see just one side of the issue or candidate in a PAC advertisement.

### **Casting an Informed Vote**

Want to be a more informed voter? Make the effort to find out as much as you can about candidates and the issues being debated. Make your vote your own. Voters who stay home on Election Day are letting those who do vote make the decisions. Have a voice in an issue by casting your ballot. The only way to really have your voice heard is to actually vote! ➔

#### **2012 Oklahoma Election Schedule:**

- Tuesday, March 6: Presidential Preferential Primary Election
- Tuesday, June 26: Primary Election
- Tuesday, August 28: Runoff Primary Election
- Tuesday, November 6: General Election





President George W. Bush addresses joint session of Congress, Sept. 20, 2001. Though a rare occurrence, Congress projected total unity following the 9/11 attacks. *The Christian Science Monitor* reported: "It's the hour of the statesman on Capitol Hill. The byword is not just bipartisanship, where two parties work together, but nonpartisanship — where all work for the common good" (Gail Russell Chaddock, Sept. 19, 2001). Photo by Paul Morse, courtesy National Archives and Records Administration, ARC 5997341

# WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH CONGRESS?

*Is the partisan divide too deep to accomplish "the people's work"?*

BY CINDY SIMON ROSENTHAL AND RONALD M. PETERS, JR.

Cindy Simon Rosenthal is Director and Curator of OU's Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, and the author of *When Women Lead*. Ronald M. Peters, Jr., is Regents Professor of Political Science at the University of Oklahoma, and the author of *The American Speakership*.

In their book *Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the New American Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2010), scholars Cindy Simon Rosenthal and Ronald Peters examine contemporary American politics and how Nancy Pelosi navigated social, political, and institutional forces to become the first woman Speaker of the House in U.S. history. Here, they employ that research to show how political trends are making the inner workings of Congress anything but "business as usual."

**T**he debate over the national debt ceiling last summer exposed in great detail the state of national (and particularly congressional) politics. What political scientists and policy experts previously described as "gridlock" has now morphed into a total breakdown of governance and doubts about the U.S. government's ability to function effectively. While an eleventh-hour deal averted a U.S. default on paying its bills, financial markets around the world reacted to the drama with gyrosopic swings. In an August 2011 press release announcing its first-ever downgrade of the country's credit rating, Standard &

Poor's cited doubts about "the effectiveness, stability, and predictability of American policymaking and political institutions."

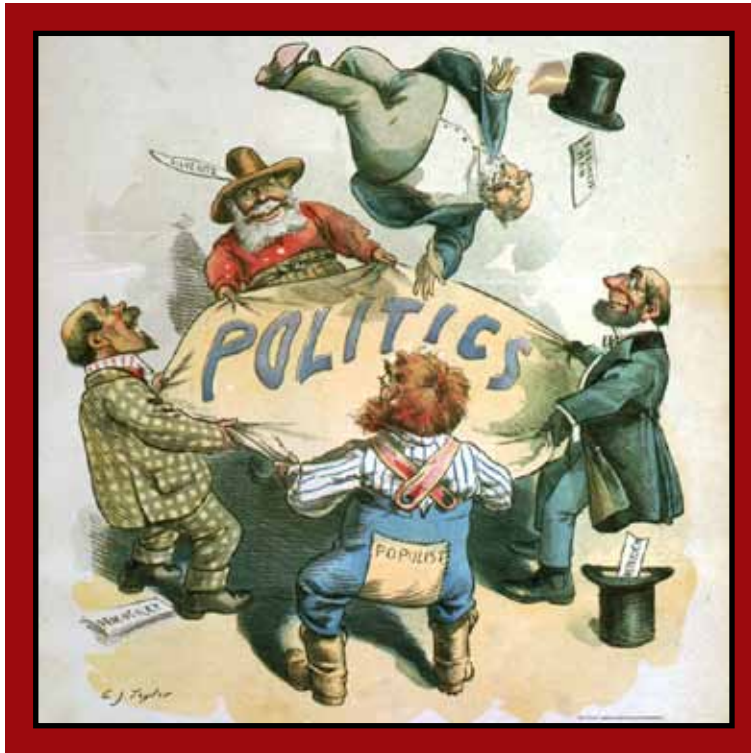
In *Federalist 10*, James Madison took solace in the protections of the "extended sphere" (our sheer geographic expanse) to prevent the creation of large factions that would potentially lead to tyranny by the majority. Madison believed that the causes of factions could not be prevented, but their worst effects might be controlled. Madison could not have anticipated, however, the influences of technology and partisanship that have reshaped politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The polarization of Congress did not evolve overnight. Rather, specific trends have transformed political praxis in Congress over the last 25 years. What Americans and the global community observed in the recent debt ceiling debate was the culmination of what we describe as the "New American Politics." Understanding the New American Politics reveals a great deal about how legislators arrived at a precipice during the summer of 2011.

## CONGRESS IN TRANSITION

The dynamics of the New American Politics reflect evolutions in partisanship, campaign funding, political organization, technology, and representation. First, and widely-recognized, is the hyper-partisanship in Congress and on the campaign trail. Both parties have sought to win elections by mobilizing their base voters rather than appealing to the center of the electorate. Historically the parties fought for the median voter, effectively moderating positions in national elections; but a strategy focused on mobilizing a party's base thrives on dividing the electorate into "us" and "them" with the goal of turning out more of "us" than the other party's "them." If elected officials see little purchase in campaign appeals to a moderate middle, then neither party has incentives to seek bipartisanship in governance or even to characterize the other party in positive terms. Indeed, preaching to the choir encourages a shrillness which characterizes the opponent in almost demonic terms. This effect is observed in particular in party primary elections, with candidates pulled to the extremes in order to secure nomination.

Polarization has consequences. The *National Journal* reported the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress was the most ideologically divided in 30 years (Ronald Brownstein, Feb. 27, 2011). As a consequence, then Speaker Nancy Pelosi was forced to develop and pass legislation by seeking the 218 votes needed for passage from within her own caucus. Bipartisan negotiations in the Senate, where 60 votes were needed for passage, frequently broke down. Voters in turn punished centrist congressional members in the 2010 midterm elections; many

conservative "Blue Dog" Democrats lost their seats and the most moderate Republican House member (Mike Castle of Delaware) was dumped in his party's primary when he attempted to run for the U.S. Senate. Similarly, Utah Senator Bob Bennett was denied a fourth term by a Republican convention dominated by Tea Party activists intent on punishing him for his vote on TARP (the Troubled Asset Relief Program designed to address the subprime mortgage crisis). Needless to say, bipartisan cooperation evaporated in the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress with prominent Republicans, including Senate Leader Mitch McConnell, embracing as their "single most important" goal to make President Obama a one-term president. In a ForeignPolicy.com essay ("Worst. Congress. Ever."), veteran congressional scholar and American Enterprise Institute fellow Norman Ornstein quoted Senator McConnell's view of bipartisanship: "We worked very hard to keep our fingerprints off of these proposals, because we thought -- correctly, I think -- that the only way the American people would know that a great debate was going on was if the measures were not bipartisan."



*FUN FOR THE POLITICIANS, BUT ROUGH ON THE BUSINESS MAN.* Depicts four men, "Populist, Democrat, Silverite, Republican," tossing "Business Man" on a sheet of "Politics." Illustration by Charles Jay Taylor, c. 1896 by Keppler & Schwarzmann. June 10, 1896, *Puck* magazine. Library of Congress, LC-USZC4-5605

Two other trends in the New American Politics feed the partisan divide: money and organization. The 1974 Campaign Finance Reform Act established the political action committee (PAC) system that dominates today's politics. Intended to strengthen the role of political parties through unlimited party contributions known as "soft" money, the legislation enhanced the role of PAC fundraising in campaigns, heightened the power of lobbyists who could access PAC funds, and rewarded the talents of those political officeholders with prowess at securing donations. The act also opened the door to big donors writing large checks for "party

building" activities. In the short run, the infusion of party money allowed the Democrats to overcome a gap in organizational capacity and to match the innovations of the Republican Party in the fields of direct mail, database development, micro-targeting, and efforts to identify, communicate with, and turn out base voters.

The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, the so-called McCain-Feingold law, attempted to reform some of the abuses of soft money and the proliferation of issue advocacy groups that utilized corporate or union funds. In 2003, the Supreme Court upheld most of the law in *McConnell v. Federal Election Commission* (which included then-Majority Whip Mitch McConnell among the plaintiffs); but in 2010, in a 5-4 decision that included Justices appointed by President George W. Bush, the Supreme Court struck down sections of McCain-Feingold that limited corporate contributions (*Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*). The "permanent campaign"—what political scientists call the non-stop effort to raise funds,



placate interest groups, and woo voters—has become a fixture of Congress, requiring unprecedented amounts of money, and the need to accumulate mountains of campaign cash will not abate any time soon.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, communication technology is transforming politics. The Internet and social media have dramatically accelerated the fragmentation of society into polarized enclaves. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman sees technology as a key driver of modern political activism: “Thanks to cloud computing, robotics, 3G wireless connectivity, Skype, Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, Twitter, the iPad, and cheap Internet-enabled smartphones, the world has gone from connected to hyper-connected” (August 13, 2011). In his book *Republic.com 2.0*, legal-scholar-turned-Obama-advisor Cass Sunstein describes the resulting political fragmentation as “enclave deliberations” in which citizens (and elected officials) converse only with like-minded persons and gather information selectively from only sympathetic sources. Such selective deliberations undermine the possibilities of compromise.

The last trend captures the growing diversity of American society with new groups and voices seeking representation in the government. The Civil Rights Movement, the women’s movement, waves of new immigrants, and growing income inequality have changed the face of American politics. What was once a predominantly white, middle-class, and non-Hispanic country is projected to be majority minority by 2050. As the country has become increasingly diverse over the past 40 years, so have our elected representatives. These differences animate political discourse and are exploited in campaigns. They create chasms of policy differences never to be bridged in Congress, and ultimately the ideological chasms produce the dramatic swing elections of 2006, 2008, and 2010 in which party centrists (whether moderate Republicans or Blue Dog Democrats) fall victim. In 2010, 45 of the 98 Democrats with the most moderate voting records were defeated and the party lost the seats of 10 other moderates who retired (Brownstein). Oklahoma’s own Rep. Dan Boren occupies the lonely middle and has chosen to retire from Congress in 2012. The GOP is targeting his district.

In a *Newsweek* column written shortly after the debt ceiling vote, former Rep. Jane Harman (D-CA) lamented the loss of bipartisanship: “Governing effectively and solving problems used to be rewarded. Now, what’s rewarded is defeating the other party. And sadly, no one seems to find political value in bipartisanship. How I miss Ted Kennedy, Bob Dole, Phil Hart, Howard Baker, Tom Foley, and Bob Michel” (August 15, 2011). Many have worried about the institution of Congress, which no longer facilitates friendships across the aisle. The lack of a working relationship starts at the top but permeates every

rank of the membership. Indeed, Nancy Pelosi and John Boehner have a distant relationship, and former Speakers Newt Gingrich and Dennis Hastert were barely on speaking terms with Democratic Leader Dick Gephardt. This contrasts with Speaker Tip O’Neill who golfed regularly with Republican Leader Bob Michel.

Today, members occupying the ideological middle of their party, who build a career of seeking compromise, have little chance of rising in leadership; indeed they may face ostracism.

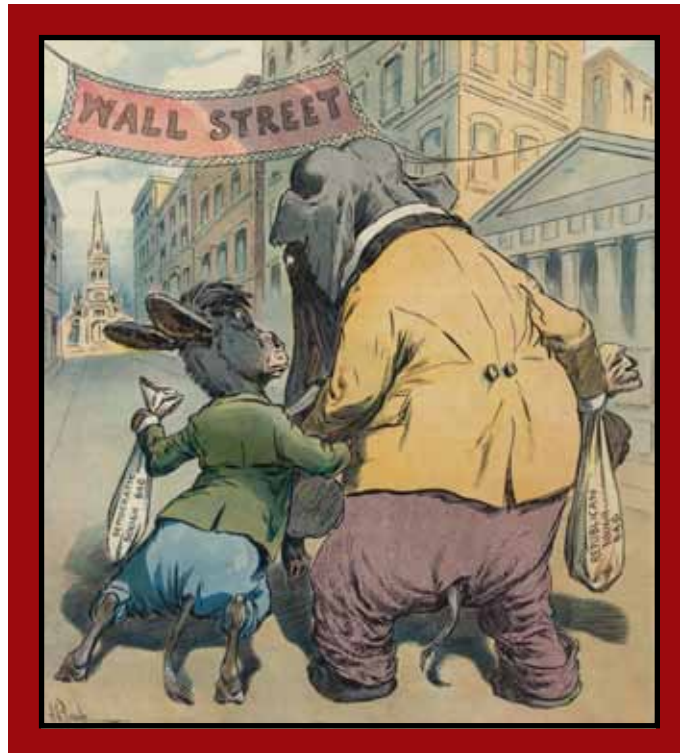
## THE DEBT LIMIT SHOWDOWN

Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution gives Congress final say over federal government taxing, spending, and borrowing to pay debts, which, for the country’s first 128 years, meant specifying amounts, interest rates, and terms. Reporting for *CQ Weekly* in July 2001 (“In Whose Hands”), John Cranford and Joseph J. Schatz noted that borrowing changed in the midst of the struggle to finance World War I. The Second Liberty Bond Act of 1917 shifted borrowing discretion to the U.S. Department of Treasury and eliminated micro-management by Congress. By the end of the Great Depression, the debt limit extended to virtually all government-issued debt and social safety net programs.

In the late 1970s, Rep. Richard A. Gephardt (D-MO) persuaded his colleagues to adopt House rules that allowed members to make increases in the debt limit almost automatic with passage of a budget. When House Republicans took the majority in 1995, they initially abandoned the so-called Gephardt rule but then reinstated it because

of its utility in protecting members from a politically difficult vote. Speaker Nancy Pelosi kept the rule in place during the 110<sup>th</sup> and 111<sup>th</sup> congresses, even though House Democrats did not pass a budget in 2010 and the House-passed budget in 2011 died in the Senate. When Speaker John Boehner took control in January 2011, he faced a class of Tea Party-backed freshman Republicans who vowed to use the debt ceiling to force unprecedented cuts in federal spending. They had no use for the Gephardt rule.

The summer of 2011 was not the first time partisan politics have been interjected into debt limit debates. Even with the protection of the Gephardt rule, the Congress has had to vote to increase the debt limit 35 times since 1981, of which 14 bills included other legislative provisions dealing with spending and deficit reduction. Cranford and Schatz argue that the Senate sometimes has taken a posture of bipartisanship, but the House has, as often as not, viewed debt ceiling votes as partisan affairs.



Go on! YOU ask 'em! They can't do more than refuse. The Democratic donkey, carrying the “Democratic Dough Bag,” and the Republican elephant, carrying the “Republican Dough Bag,” walk down “Wall Street,” seeking campaign funding for the upcoming presidential election. Illustration by John S. Pughe, c. 1908 by Keppler & Schwarzmann. April 1, 1908, *Puck* magazine. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-26258.

The 2011 debt ceiling debate differed from previous votes because of the shadow cast by the fragile economy and the weak jobless recovery. Ornstein cautioned that the debt ceiling showdown was “a dangerous flirtation . . . carrying with it the very real threat of economic catastrophe.” A bipartisan chorus of warnings from Main Street and Wall Street included prominent standard-bearers of Republican economic philosophy like Reagan presidential advisor Martin Feldstein and Henry M. Paulson Jr., Treasury secretary to President George W. Bush. Nonetheless, partisan brinkmanship prevailed.

### GOOD POLITICS VS. GOOD GOVERNANCE

In governing, the two parties face different challenges. The Democratic caucus has a broader ideological spectrum. For example, Speaker Pelosi had to build her majority by recruiting more conservative Democrats to run in Republican-leaning districts. She was thus pulled both to the Left—by her own predilections and the liberal majority of her caucus—and to the middle. Her challenge was to find votes irrespective of her own policy preferences. She mitigated caucus dissension by building a leadership team of loyalists. As a result, the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, operating under highly polarized conditions and unified party control in the Congress and the White House, accomplished a significant public policy agenda that included a stimulus package, health care reform, and financial regulation.

In the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress, voters brought back divided government with GOP control of the House and much narrower margins in the Senate. The deep recession arising from the economic crisis of 2008-2009 gave legs to the Tea Party and produced a freshman House class of highly ideological conservatives who raised the ante on partisanship. Though a pragmatist by reputation, Speaker Boehner has been pulled further to the Right to avoid being undercut by Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA) and the Tea Party freshmen. Indeed, it was pressure from Cantor and unapologetic obstructionists that blocked negotiations for a “grand plan” on the debt ceiling with President Obama.

While the electoral dynamics for each party might differ, the consequences for governing do not. Extremes are dominating; the middle is vanishing; the incentives for cooperation no longer exist. Our political structure has either shrunk the middle or, more likely, has rendered it unable to express itself in the electoral process. Under these circumstances, the system cannot work effectively to solve the major problems we face. Without a strong middle and a willingness to compromise among political leaders, it's hard to see a way forward. ↪



*House Speaker Nancy Pelosi speaks at the Democratic National Convention, Denver, Colorado, Aug. 25-28, 2008. Photo by Carol M. Highsmith, courtesy Library of Congress, LC-DIG-highsm-03819*





## The Changing Colors of Oklahoma Politics

*The surprising “blue majority” in the reddest of red states*

BY GLEN ROBERSON    IMAGES COURTESY OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**T**om Kielhorn is a respected man. He has been a university professor, a marketing analyst, a political consultant, and an advisor to governors, senators, and congressmen. Today he sits with a friend in an Oklahoma City restaurant awaiting his food and talking politics. Normally, this is one of his favorite pastimes. Politics is in his DNA.

He finds no joy in the subject today. Tom stares out the window, his chin in his right palm. “I can remember a time when state Democrats would pay a Republican’s filing fee just to run against them. Now . . .” His voice trails off. Rapping the tip of his index finger on the table, he says, “I refuse to believe we [Oklahomans] have changed that much!”

The source of Dr. Kielhorn’s angst is the ascendancy of the Republican Party in Oklahoma during the past half decade. From statehood in 1907 until 2004, Democrats won 81 percent of all elections, whether statewide or local. Now, the Grand Old Party (GOP) controls the State House of Representatives, the State Senate, the Governorship, and every other statewide elective office. It has graded inroads into local government as well, electing county commissioners, prosecutors, and city judges. Jim Inhofe is serving his third term in the U.S. Senate. Is this just a passing storm of party majority, or are these developments a harbinger of long-term climate change?



## RED STATE, BLUE STATE

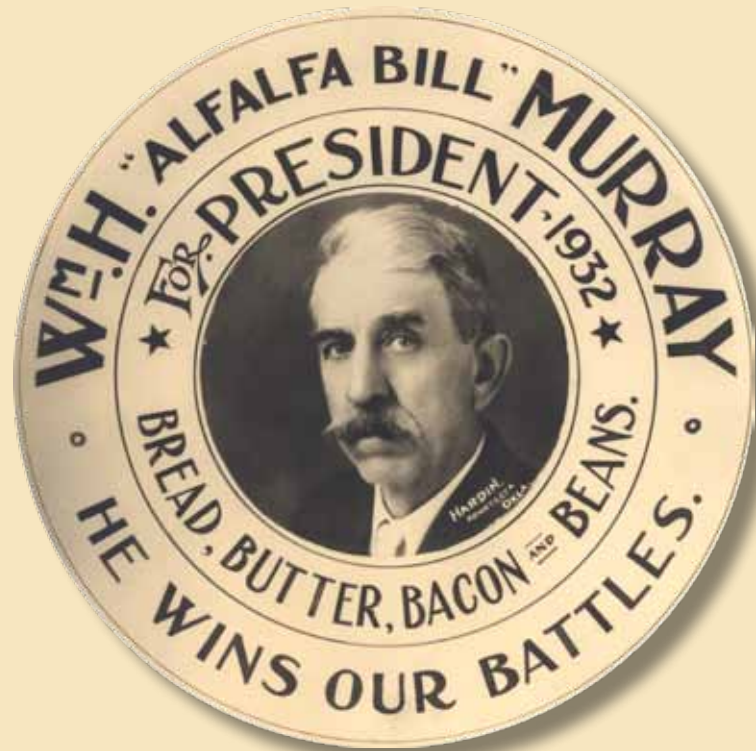
Oklahoma Republicans have held power before; they were the party of statehood. Republican President Benjamin Harrison opened Oklahoma Territory to settlement by authorizing the land run of 1889. Republicans controlled the territorial legislature and filled the growing townships with loyal postmasters and prosecutors willing to promote the party cause.

But statehood ended GOP dominance. Democrats of adjacent Indian Territory outmaneuvered Republicans and sent 99 of the total 112 delegates to the State Constitutional Convention in Guthrie. Republicans found themselves in the ridiculous political position of being “for” statehood, but “against” a constitution written by Democrats. Their dilemma cost them political power for an entire century.

The Democrats at the State Constitutional Convention were not a monolithic group. Some were lawyers like Charles Haskell (who later became the state’s first governor); others were successful businessmen like banker Lee Cruce (the state’s second governor); a few were labor leaders. They all shared a deep faith in the agrarian way of life and a deeper mistrust of the onrushing industrialism: factories; Wall Street financiers (Haskell called them parasites); huge business “trusts” like Standard Oil and Carnegie Steel; and expanding cities where criminals sneered at civic values and political machines turned governing into graft. They despised most of all how industrialism massed people into factories and cities and threatened the frontier ethos of unrestrained libertarianism (which lauded individual liberty and minimal government) personified by independent farmers and risk-taking small-town businessmen. Thomas Jefferson christened them the backbone of the republic and the protectors of democracy. They believed it with absolute conviction. Yet, they watched their children leave the family farm, lured by the promise of the city; they heard slurs entering the common lexicon, phrases like “country bumpkin” and “hayseed.” Frank Baum’s scarecrow, the symbol for the farmer in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), wanted a brain.

Oklahoma Democrats have often divided their loyalties between the national and the state parties. At the state and local level, Democrats have offered candidates from a wide spectrum of political ideology. In the past, a voter could find a conservative middle-of-the-road candidate as well as liberal candidates running against each other in the state Democratic primary. Such divisions have made it difficult for them to offer a consistent platform as a unified party. During the Great Depression, liberal Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal were widely popular with the Democratic rank and file. Oklahomans gave Roosevelt large majorities in his four elections. Yet, that same party elected governors William “Alfalfa Bill” Murray (1931-1935), who opposed Roosevelt’s “socialist programs” and disliked him personally, and conservative Leon Phillips (1939-1943), who found the New Deal “repugnant” and filed lawsuits in federal court to stop construction of the Denison Dam and Pensacola Dam, both funded by FDR’s Works Progress Administration. Only Governor E.W. Marland (1935-1939), founder of Marland Oil (Conoco), admired Roosevelt’s efforts. Marland even dreamed of his own “Little New Deal.” The Democratically-controlled legislature killed his programs.

Today, Oklahoma Democrats can no longer disassociate themselves from the national party. Polls indicate most Oklahomans view the national Democratic Party as too liberal for their taste. The “ticket splitting” of the past is no longer an acceptable strategy for much of the state electorate.



Top, clockwise from left: Campaign poster for Olney Flynn, 1946. Campaign poster for J. Howard Edmondson, 1958. Political ad for J. Howard Edmondson, 1958. Middle: Alfalfa Bill Murray runs for President with the 1932 “Bread, Butter, Bacon & Beans” campaign. Photo by Joe Hardin Studio. Bottom: Oklahoma Constitutional Convention in session, City Hall, Guthrie, O.T., Feb. 1907. Photo by Fred S. Barde

## VARIATIONS ON “THE DREAM”

From the very beginning, Oklahoma’s political culture sat in a conservative milieu that continues today. Our political legacy is shaped by that not-so-distant frontier society, personified by ambitious, independent farmers and ranchers, storekeepers, and indigenous industries like oil and gas. There has never been a wide gap in the Oklahoma mind between homesteader and wildcatter. Dr. Keith Gaddie of the University of Oklahoma stresses that Republican and Democratic leaders drink from the same reservoir of “pro-business” attitudes. Whether the Governor is a Democrat like Lee Cruce and Robert S. Kerr, or a Republican like Dewey Bartlett and Mary Fallin, all promote business investment and growth in the state.

Even the “outlying” political movements of our past, whether from the Left or the Right, idealized the agrarian ethos. Prior to World War I, Oklahoma had more Socialists per capita than any other state. Oklahoma Socialism demanded government ownership of railroads, a graduated income tax, and a general redistribution of wealth. It championed struggling tenant farmers, for whom the agrarian dream had become a nightmare.

The “new” Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s came from the “better sort”: merchants, professionals, and educators who saw themselves as the protectors of traditional civic morality. Like the “old” Klan of post-Civil War days, they believed people of western European ancestry to be superior to all others and stridently supported segregation of the races. But they publically beat bootleggers in Tulsa and drove prostitutes from the streets in Oklahoma City. Wife beaters, gamblers, and the like felt their wrath. Klan members believed they were doing God’s will by disinfecting a fallen society.

But then, our politics has always had a religious bent. Oklahoma is the only state to come into the Union “dry.” It is easy now to paint prohibitionists as religious busybodies who wanted to dictate their own moral values to others. But there was a real social issue underlying that religious motivation; for huge numbers of people, alcohol was the drug issue of their time, and alcoholism was the addiction that destroyed families and threatened the social fabric of the community.

Socialist gatherings resembled church revival meetings more than political rallies. Their tents billowed with shouts of “Amen” and the refrains of “The Old Rugged Cross.” These impoverished, landless farmers, who paid loan rates as high as 14%, cheered the story of Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers and proclaiming, “Blessed are the poor.” Their Jesus was more than a personal redeemer; He was a social revolutionary.

## THE SILENT MAJORITY

Now the Republican Party is back in power, using the modern technologies of television, computers, and social networking to create a united platform espousing lower taxes and smaller government. For the last 10 presidential elections, the Republican Party’s candidate has swept Oklahoma. Democrats had to content themselves with electing candidates to state and local offices. In 2008, Republican presidential nominee Senator John McCain carried every county in the state over Democratic Senator Barack Obama, prompting *Tulsa World* writers Michael Overall and Tom Lindley to proclaim Oklahoma “the reddest of red states” (Nov. 6, 2008). It marked a historic victory for Republicans in local races, too.

The current irony is that more Oklahomans are registered as Democrats than as Republicans. The January 2011 Report of the Oklahoma State Election Board shows 999,943 Democrats registered in 52 counties. Republican strength totaled 849,332 voters in 25 counties. While Democrats might lead in total numbers, party registration is a poor way to gauge partisan strength and Democrats can take no comfort in it. Party loyalty is declining in Oklahoma, as it is throughout the country, and voters cross party lines in elections all the time. Samuel Kirkpatrick, David Morgan, and Thomas Kielhorn wrote in *The Oklahoma Voter* in 1977 that only 19 percent of eligible voters in the state possessed a strong political philosophy. There is no reason to believe that figure has moved far. The Election Board reports that 26 counties show 11.5 percent of voters registered as Independent, and the trend is growing.

Also of note is that, historically, rural areas in our state have exercised more political power than urban areas. Of the 44 Speakers of the Oklahoma House of Representatives, 26 come from towns under 10,000 in population. Democrats have long depended on these small communities of eastern and southern Oklahoma to send them to office. But census figures show these rural communities are losing people at the annual rate of 3.6 percent. As the rural population declines, so does the Democratic base.

Republicans have offset rural erosion with growing strength in urban Cleveland, Oklahoma, and Tulsa counties. In Cleveland and Wagoner counties, the two fastest growing in the state, Republican registration outnumbers Democrats 52.1 percent to 47.9 percent. Though it is difficult to get comprehensive data, people moving into the state have tended to settle in our metropolitan areas. Nationally, political consultants maintain as an operating principle that people occupying urban centers, where incomes are rising, tend to vote Republican.

## OKLAHOMA VALUES

There is sufficient evidence to conclude that Oklahomans are altering their political allegiances. Demographic trends indicate that the Republican Party has a strong chance to continue its recent successes. The GOP also offers a united image to the public (though the Tea Party movement may challenge that picture), which may give the party an advantage. But no one is sounding the death knell for Democrats: Brad Henry was a popular two-term Democratic governor. Another strong showing by Republicans will add proof of longer-term partisan change. A Democratic resurgence would be evidence of a political season where the two parties demonstrate equal strength. Either way, the old political environment of Democrats dominating politics like they have over the past century is gone.

What remains are the commonly held old libertarian values of self-determination and individual liberty, rooted in the frontier experience of the state. These Oklahoma values transcend “Red” or “Blue”—and in that very fundamental way, we have not changed at all. ☛

Dr. Glen R. Roberson works in the State Historic Preservation Office for the Oklahoma Historical Society, where he has published articles and book reviews on the history of Oklahoma and the Great Plains. He has taught history at the University of Central Oklahoma, and courses on the Great Plains and the Modern Urban West at the University of Oklahoma.





# For Better or Worse

Understanding the Electoral College

*A look at how your vote counts* By Jan Hardt

Dr. Jan Hardt is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Central Oklahoma. She has written many works in the areas of Congress, campaign finance, Oklahoma elections, and the Oklahoma legislature.

Although it has many critics, the Electoral College is our method for selecting the president of the United States. Calls to abolish the system were the subject of bitter public debate after the 2000 presidential election, when Al Gore won the general election popular vote but lost the Electoral College vote to George W. Bush. That election reminded Americans that voting for president is not just about the popular vote, but rather a convoluted system invented by the Founding Fathers.

## To Have and to Vote

The Constitution Framers were wary of giving citizens, state legislatures, or even the federal government too much control. They devised the Electoral College through a series of compromises. First, they believed average citizens were mostly ignorant, too easily swayed by popular sentiment, and might pick a candidate that was not in the best interests of the country; they chose instead to have elites (electors) within each state select the eventual winner. Second, the system appeased both advocates of federal selection and those who favored states' rights; while electoral votes would be certified by Congress, states were allowed to establish procedures for choosing their electors. Finally, the Electoral College made allowances for the varying size and population of states; the number of electors for each state is equal to the sum of its U.S. representatives (a variable number based on population, which favors large states) and senators (static at two per state, which gives small-state votes the same weight as large-state votes).

The beginnings of the Electoral College are found in Article II of the Constitution, which says that “Each State shall appoint . . . a Number of Electors” who shall “meet in their respective States, and vote by Ballot for two Persons.” These ballots were to be sealed, transported, and counted in the presence of the Senate and House of Representatives. At the time, candidates ran alone, not with a running mate. Under the one-ballot formula, the top two vote recipients were elected president and vice president, regardless of political affiliation. The candidate with the greatest number of votes would be president, so long as that person received a majority from all electors. The vice president would be the candidate that received the second-most votes. If the majority vote was tied between candidates, the House would immediately choose one of them by ballot to be president.

The flaws in this procedure were revealed almost immediately. The system raised the possibility that the president and vice president could be selected from different political parties and then forced to work together. Today, it would be hard to imagine President George W. Bush serving with Vice President Al Gore after the 2000 election. But in 1796, President John Adams and Vice President Thomas Jefferson, men who disagreed mightily on important issues, were elected from opposing parties. The election underscored political differences and how electors would cease to be true “free agents” as the Framers intended, instead compelled by competing groups to vote along party lines. It paved the way for a two-candidate ticket (naming president and vice president running mates) and the practice of nominating electors who would pledge to vote the “party ticket.”

The 1800 election revealed more problems with the system. Electoral College votes produced a tie between Democratic-Republican candidate Thomas Jefferson and his running mate, Aaron Burr. Burr did not step aside from consideration for president, so the decision was thrown into the House of Representatives, where the vote remained deadlocked for days. Federalist Party members controlled the House and were loath to support Jefferson; neither were they inclined to back Burr, who appeared opportunistic. Finally, after 36 ballots, Jefferson received a majority of votes and was elected president. To resolve this one-ballot weakness and prevent similar tie votes, Congress adopted the 12<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1804, establishing two separate ballots: one for president and one for vice president.

Despite the changes of the 12<sup>th</sup> Amendment (and the framers’ best intentions), flaws remain in the Electoral College system. For example, the 1824 election produced a president without a majority of popular votes or electoral votes. The Federalist Party had fallen out of favor, so, for a time, U.S. politics rested on a one-party system. With multiple candidates from a single party, none could gain a majority and four candidates split the electoral vote: William H. Crawford, Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, and Henry Clay. Jackson won more popular and electoral votes than the other candidates, but failed to achieve a majority. The election was again thrown into the House where, under the 12<sup>th</sup> Amendment, only the top three candidates would be considered, eliminating Henry Clay. As Speaker of the House of Representatives, Clay wielded great influence over the proceedings and lent his support to Adams, who emerged the winner. Within days, Adams nominated Clay to be Secretary of State, a move that was bitterly protested by Andrew Jackson, who called it a “corrupt bargain,” though the allegation was never proven. The election marked an important turn in American politics. After losing in 1824, Andrew Jackson campaigned for the next presidential election under the newly-formed Democratic Party, traveling the country to take his message “to the



Republican National Convention, Sept. 1-4, 2008. Republicans raise ‘Country First’ signs as their leaders speak, St. Paul, Minnesota. Photo by Carol M. Highsmith, courtesy Library of Congress, LC-DIG-highsm-03851

people.” The evolution of our present two-party system, the campaign trail, and strategies to capture electoral votes can be traced back to this formative time in our history.

### In Majority and Wealth

The greatest defect in the Electoral College system is that the candidate who receives the most popular votes can lose the election. Prior to 2000, this was always a concern, but the last time it happened was so long ago (1888) that no one truly believed it would happen again. The elections of 1916, 1948, 1960, 1968, and 1976 were narrow; most notably, the 1960 election between Democrat John F. Kennedy and Republican Richard Nixon could have produced the same results as the 2000 election if just a few thousand votes switched in three states. It was not until the 2000 election that most Americans realized that when they vote for a presidential candidate in November, three elements are put into motion: 1) determining the *national* popular vote winner (which does not count); 2) choosing the popular vote winner for their *state*; and 3) selecting the *state of electors* who cast Electoral College votes.

The state popular vote decides how Electoral College votes are cast, making it the most important part of the vote. The method for choosing electors varies from state to state and even from party to party. Many are selected through party conventions or ballots. These electors usually vote for their state’s popular-vote winner, although they are not necessarily bound to do so. Twenty-seven states require that electoral votes reflect the popular vote, either by state law or pledges made to political parties, though no elector has been prosecuted for voting outside a pledge. In Oklahoma, it is a misdemeanor to be a “faithless elector.”

Recognizing the importance of the state popular vote, references to *red*, *blue*, and *purple* after the 2000 election came to mean *Republican states*, *Democratic states*, and *competitive states*, respectively, not just colors in a crayon box. The 2000 election revealed that the system is not politically neutral—in fact, far from it. Simply put, the Electoral College gives certain states, voters, candidates, and political parties an advantage over others.

Once candidates have received the nomination from their parties, the Electoral College system forces them to address individual states. If only the national popular vote “counted,” candidates would appear and campaign in only the



most populous states (California, Texas, New York, and a few others). With the emphasis on the *state* popular vote, candidates are forced to campaign in competitive (purple) states, large and small. As the 2000 election showed, every individual state and each elector can make a difference in a close election.

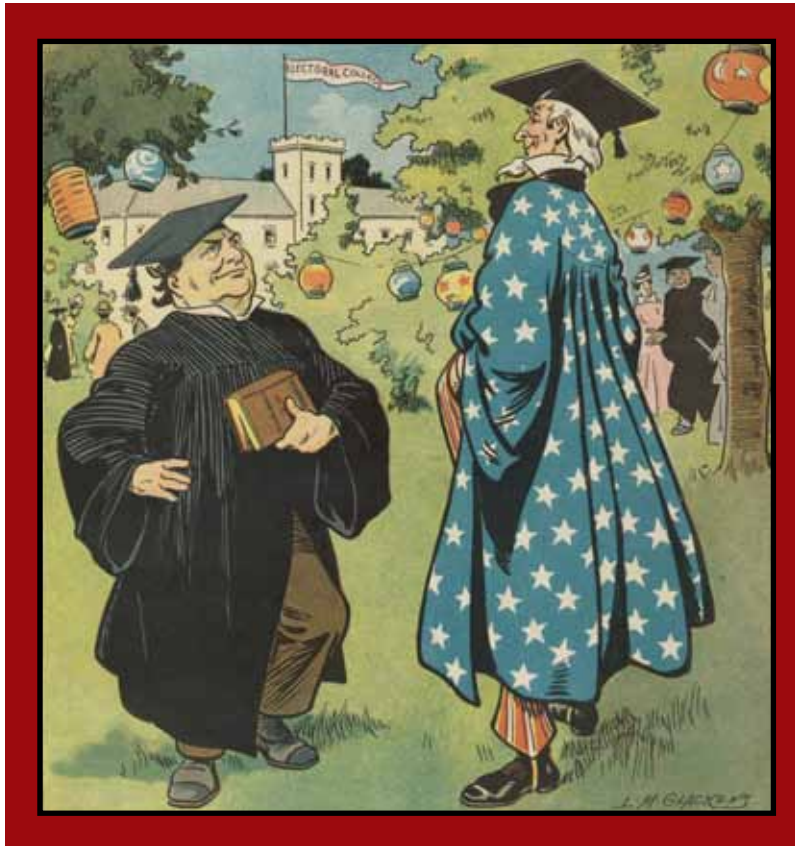
Overall, the Electoral College enhances the political clout of states because each state gets to vote as a unit; however, the winner-take-all system clearly benefits larger states. Remember, each state's number of electors is equal to its total of U.S. senators and representatives. Today, California has 55 electors or 10.2 percent of all Electoral College votes. But small states have an advantage, too. The seven smallest states (such as Delaware, Rhode Island, and North Dakota) are said to have the "Senate Bonus," two votes that give a portion of their electoral votes equal weight with larger states.

The Electoral College system also provides advantages to certain candidates. To win the popular votes of states, candidates need significant financial resources for campaign ads, coast-to-coast travel, and staff. The results of successful fundraising were evident in the 2008 election. Republican John McCain raised over \$306 million for his campaign; Democrat Barack Obama raised over \$750 million. Why such a difference? McCain chose to accept federal funding for his campaign, while Obama chose not to accept it, meaning he could raise as much money as needed. It was the first billion-dollar presidential election in U.S. history. Obama raised more money than all private contributions raised by *all* other Republican and Democratic candidates combined. This gave Obama a tremendous advantage by allowing him to spend money when he needed it most, such as the \$77 million he spent on advertising alone in the first two weeks of October 2008, reportedly more than fast-food giant McDonald's spends on advertising in a month. McCain, by contrast, had only \$85 million to spend from Labor Day to the November election. More ads and "face time" with voters increases a candidate's chances of capturing the popular vote and, consequently, electoral votes.

The two major political parties also clearly gain from the Electoral College system. Candidates must have a majority of electoral votes to win, which favors a two-party system. A third-party or Independent candidate would have to win the popular vote in numerous states. This can be problematic for non-major party candidates because, unlike the two major party candidates, they are not guaranteed a space on the presidential election ballot. They

would do better under a system such as *proportional representation* where candidates can win less than 50 percent of the popular vote and still get electoral votes. With winner-take-all, however, this is such an impossible feat that no third-party/Independent candidate has really had a chance in the modern era. Even Ross Perot with his 18.9 percent of the vote in 1992 was unable to gain electoral votes; in his best state, Maine, he garnered only 30.4 percent of the vote.

There are also clear losers: non-competitive states and the voters living in those states. Being a solid red state (Republican) or solid blue state (Democrat) makes it is very difficult for candidates to change the outcome



ON THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE CAMPUS. Uncle Sam and William Jennings Bryan chat at the graduation ceremonies of the Electoral College. Bryan holds a book titled *Reveries of a Candidate*. Illustration by Louis M. Glackens, c. 1907 by Keppler & Schwarzmann. June 12, 1907, *Puck* magazine. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-26174

of those winner-take-all state votes; thus, very few presidential candidates come to a solid red state like Oklahoma. Both parties know that it would take the equivalent of a political tornado for the Democratic nominee to win here. No Democratic candidate has won the state since 1964. Oklahoma is a clear loser from the standpoint of civic engagement, because both major parties are reluctant to visit, spend money on television campaign ads, or mount grassroots efforts in such a non-competitive state. As a result, voter turnout in presidential elections is often lower in non-competitive states, unless there is an exciting race further down the ticket, such as for governor or senator, or state ballot questions that attract voter attention.

This lack of competition also creates a lesser known but

significant disadvantage for some voters. It is well known that minority groups are clustered geographically, often in non-competitive states, thus weakening their voting influence. In large Midwestern states like Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, and Indiana, there are comparatively fewer minority groups compared to states like Texas, New York, or California. In the last few presidential elections, these large Midwestern states have had little competition and thus have not received the attention from candidates they might have deserved given the size of their minority populations.

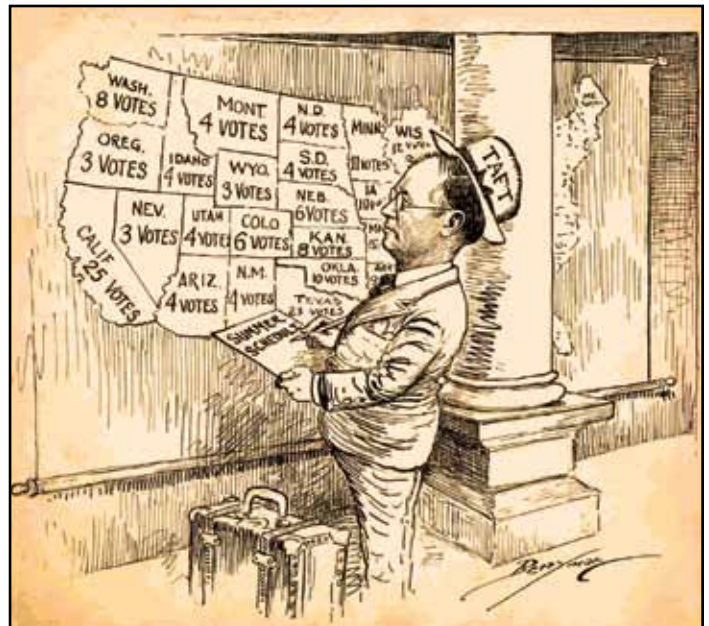
### Until Death or Reform

Given all of these flaws and advantages, it is not surprising that the Electoral College has often been a candidate for political reform. More than 700 different proposals suggesting reform or abolishment of the system have been introduced in Congress. Reform alternatives generally fall into two camps: those that would keep the Electoral College intact and those that would abolish it.

“Intact” options include the *district plan* and the *proportional plan*. Under the district plan, already used by Maine and Nebraska, the candidate who wins the plurality (the most votes) as opposed to the majority vote (50% + 1) in each congressional district obtains that district’s electoral votes; the candidate who wins the statewide vote receives the two bonus senatorial-representation votes. While the district plan makes the Electoral College more reflective of the nationwide vote, it still does not eliminate the possibility that the plurality vote winner could lose the election. The proportional plan, which was rejected by Colorado voters in 2004, would award electoral votes proportionally based on the state popular vote. It would be complicated to administer and, more significantly, would make it extremely difficult for a candidate to receive a majority of electoral votes because minor party candidates would no longer be shut out. This could throw the election into the House of Representatives, making it possible that a minor party candidate could essentially “hijack” the election until one party or candidate capitulates (much like the 1824 election where Henry Clay marshaled House votes in support of John Quincy Adams over the two other candidates under consideration).

The simplest reform to abolish the Electoral College would be for the candidate with the most votes nationwide to win the election. Called a *plurality vote*, this method is most consistent with the “one person, one vote” concept and would produce the fairest election. However, there are concerns that this would encourage candidates to compete in only a few populated states and win the vote with a small fraction of the public. There are also concerns that this could encourage fringe candidates since they would not have to necessarily compete nationwide to win. An alternative would be a plurality vote with a runoff election, such as used by Oklahoma, Louisiana, and other states for their state-office elections. The top two vote recipients in the general election would compete in a runoff several weeks later. This would guarantee that the winner could claim support from a majority of voters. Yet, it adds another election (primary, general, then runoff), requiring a lengthened campaign season, more money, more endless campaign ads, and perhaps more bored voters. The third proposal to abolish the Electoral College is the instant runoff vote, similar to the runoff system except voters would indicate their rank-ordered preferences on the original ballot. Vote totals would then be recalculated until a winner emerges. This system probably would be confusing to voters, requiring more information costs for voting, and might encourage more candidates to run because votes for third-party candidates would no longer be “wasted.”

Despite wide discussion of reform, abolishment of the Electoral College seems unlikely. The last time that significant reform modifying the Electoral



*Summer Schedule.* One Member of Congress Who is Not Going Abroad this Summer. Depicts Ohio Senator Robert A. Taft, son of former President William Howard Taft, examining an electoral map to plan his “summer schedule” of campaigning as a presidential candidate. Drawing by Clifford K. Berryman, published July 24, 1947 (ARC 1693481). A collection of nearly 2,400 pen-and-ink drawings by Berryman, originally published in Washington newspapers from 1898 through 1948, is now held in the U.S. Senate Collection, Center for Legislative Archives, National Archives.

College made any progress was in 1804. The challenge for reform is that changing the Electoral College would require a constitutional amendment, which requires that two-thirds of both the House and Senate propose the amendment and that three-fourths of state legislatures ratify the amendment. This is unlikely to happen anytime soon. It would take only 13 of the 99 state legislative bodies (House and Senate in each state legislature, except for Nebraska which is unicameral) to block such an amendment. And there are numerous differences *within* each state (rural versus urban, coastal versus non-coastal, etc.) that would make agreement unlikely. Too many states benefit from the current system. Small and large states as well as competitive states have a definite stake in keeping the Electoral College exactly the way it is.

Electoral College reform is probably never going to happen—even though the presidential election in 2000 made many voters “see red.” For the foreseeable future, American voters and their presidential candidates are wedded to the Electoral College system, for better or worse. Yes, the system can be confusing, but striving to understand the Electoral College can inform our votes—and even make us better citizens. 🐾



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# CALENDAR

Don't miss these outstanding events supported by OHC grants. You can find hundreds of cultural activities on our website:  
[www.okhumanities.org/calendar](http://www.okhumanities.org/calendar)

## LECTURE

### *Conversations with Poet Claudia Emerson*

April 4, 8 p.m.-9:30 p.m.  
Meinders School of Business, Oklahoma City Univ.  
2501 N. Blackwelder, OKC  
Info: 405/208-5472



The Center for Interpersonal Studies through Film & Literature hosts an evening with poet Claudia Emerson, who won the 2006 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for her collection *Late Wife*. Free and open to the public.

## NATIVE CULTURE

### *Building on Weaving Traditions*

Jacobson House  
609 Chautauqua Ave., Norman  
Information: 405/366-1667



Woodlands applique design by Leslie Deer

Join tribal elders and guest scholars as they discuss and demonstrate tribal language, arts, and customs.

### *Woodlands Appliqué*

March: Tuesdays, 6:30-8:30 p.m.  
Open to the public; fee for class supplies

### *Kiowa Language & Customs*

March-June: Thursdays, 6 p.m.-8:30 p.m.  
Free and open to the public

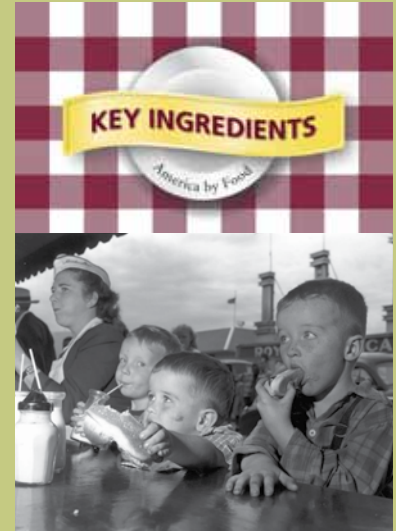
### *Powwow Songs & Traditions*

March-June: Wednesdays, 7-9 p.m.  
Free and open to the public

## EXHIBIT

### *Key Ingredients: America by Food*

The Smithsonian exhibit *Key Ingredients: America by Food* is traveling the state. Exhibit themes examine the influences of culture, ethnicity, landscape, and tradition on foodways across our country.



### *Fort Gibson*

Fort Gibson Historic Site  
907 North Garrison • (918) 478-4088  
Through January 21, 2012

### *Purcell*

Purcell Public Library  
919 North 9<sup>th</sup> • (405) 527-5546  
January 28-March 3

### *Goodwell*

No Man's Land Museum  
207 W. Sewell • (580) 349-2670  
March 10-April 21

### *Waymoka*

Waymoka Air Rail Museum  
1386 Cleveland, Harvey House • (580) 824-0795  
April 28-June 9

### *Collinsville*

Collinsville Public Library  
1223 W. Main • (918) 596-2840  
June 16-August

*Key Ingredients: America By Food* is part of Museum on Main Street, a collaboration between the Smithsonian Institution and the Oklahoma Humanities Council. Support has been provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities; Beaver Express Service; and SONIC, America's Drive-In. *Photo:* Food booth, Minnesota State Fair, 1947. Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

## EXHIBIT

### *Celebrating 100 Years of Girl Scouting*

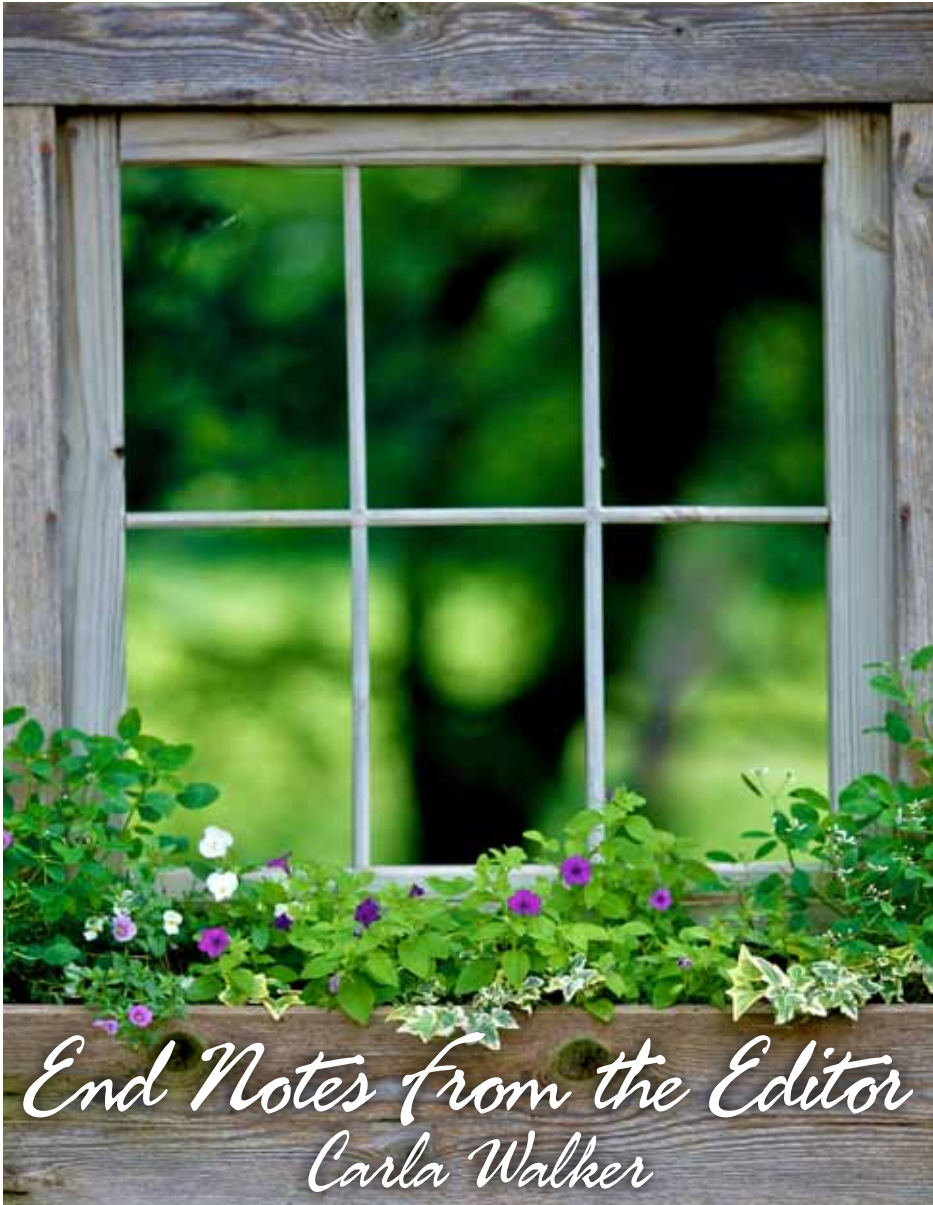
*It's Your Story, Tell It!*

Information: 405/528-4475  
[www.gswestok.org](http://www.gswestok.org)

The Girl Scout movement will be 100 years old in 2012. A traveling exhibit highlighting the Girl Scout leadership experience will be open to the public at the sites below. *Photo:* Girl Scouts plant a forsythia bush at the Ft. Sill Girl Scout Hut during a 1961 tea honoring Juliette Low, Founder of Girl Scouts. Courtesy Girl Scouts of Western Oklahoma.

March 9-16: Oklahoma State Capitol, OKC  
April: YMCA Conference Center, Shawnee  
May: Chickasha Public Library, Chickasha  
June: Girl Scouts Training Center, Ardmore  
July: Girl Scouts Training Center, Lawton  
August: Girl Scouts Hut, Duncan  
September: Girl Scouts Hut, Kingfisher  
October: Girl Scouts Hut, Elk City  
November: Girl Scouts Training Center, Enid  
December: Girl Scouts Council Office, OKC





of all Oklahoma correctional institutions to our magazine mailing list.

The next letter came from a reader in New York City. Tom (name changed) found a copy of our magazine on the street in Manhattan and kept it to read on the subway at night. Though “it was interesting,” he observed that our content was “dead silent on important issues,” such as illegal immigration. He suggested we cover the topic with differing viewpoints by authors outside academia which, in his opinion, is “controlled by liberal leftists.” Tom is not alone in questioning our choice of authors, so I’ll share my reply: *We present context for public issues through the interpretations of scholars who are educated in the field of discussion. We strive to present a mix of views that, being read together, offer balance and substance for readers’ further study and discussion.* Tom stated he is a low-income American, a fact that is relevant only to underscore that the humanities, often labeled as elitist, offer perspective for *everyone*. He requested a free subscription to our magazine, which we are happy to provide.

The last commentary came unsigned, via email, just after we published an article by NPR’s Krista Tippett. Krista discussed ten years of radio conversations and what they have taught her about the beauty and possibility to be found in Islam. The anonymous message in response was short and to the point:

I find nothing about Islamism that can possibly be beneficial to Americans (located anywhere). Spend your time working on religions that relate to our country in some way.

Many readers are unmoved or puzzled by our content. To this writer, I would reply that comparative religion is a time-honored humanities discipline. Featuring humanities topics that enlighten readers and spark discussion is at the heart of our mission—for our magazine and our organization.

For you, our readers, we plant a garden of ideas. Our aim is to inspire critical thinking and we like hearing about what crops up for you. Pick a little of this, share a seedling of that, and you might discover an admiration for things you never dreamed would grow on you. Please keep your letters coming. We never tire of your views. •

*The surest compliment for an editor* is feedback. Letters to the editor help us know that readers are engaged with our content and moved enough to want to be a part of the conversation. Some people agree with the ideas they read in *Oklahoma HUMANITIES* magazine; others disagree—vehemently. Debate is at the heart of the humanities, so we’re invigorated when readers want to share their sentiments. Other letters can’t be published in our “Letters” section because a writer’s privacy might be compromised. Without revealing their identities, I’d like to tell you about some of those communications we received in the last few months.

The first is an eight-page, handwritten letter from an inmate (we’ll call her Mary) at a women’s

correctional center. Mary read the prison library copy of our Summer 2011 edition, featuring the topic of “Politics and the Pulpit.” She thanked the Oklahoma Humanities Council for the publication and praised our coverage of the subject. Correctional inmates, she said, have many opportunities to participate in religious services, but little access to differing viewpoints. “We don’t have real conversations and discussions of morality and ethics,” she wrote. “We have a poverty of knowledge, understanding, and tolerance.” She astutely noted that prisons are evidence that our country needs more “liberal education in the humanities to produce better citizens.” At the time, we had only the library’s name and were unaware it was part of a correctional facility. After reading Mary’s letter, we have since added the libraries





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