

week, it is my privilege to recognize Edgewood Locker of Edgewood, IA, as the Senate Small Business of the Week.

In 1966, Tom and Joan Kerns founded Edgewood Locker as a family-run operation in a rented building in downtown Edgewood. After experience on their family farm, the young couple decided to take the risk of opening a meat processing plant. Initially, the business focused solely on custom meat processing and locker storage services. Four years later, the Kerns family expanded operations by purchasing an old creamery on the north edge of town and remodeling it themselves. The business steadily grew with the involvement of their sons Terry and Jim, and by 1980, they established a generational family partnership. This enabled Edgewood Locker to expand its service offerings, as well as launch a retail store serving cuts, cured meats, and more. Over the years, the business undertook six major remodels to accommodate its increasing customer base and expanding range of services. In 1997, this ultimately led to Edgewood Locker's relocation into a new, state-of-the-art facility on the west edge of town. In 2022, the business nearly doubled its space, adding another 19,000 square feet to its facility.

Today, Terry and Jim continue to run Edgewood Locker along with the family's third generation Katie, Baili, Payson, and Luke. Under their leadership, Edgewood Locker expanded to employ 60 full-time employees from the local community while serving customers throughout Iowa. Edgewood Locker built a reputation for its high-quality meat products and award-winning processing services. The company provides full-service custom processing of cattle, hogs, lambs, goats, and deer, catering to both individual customers and wholesalers. Edgewood Locker prepares award-winning sausages, meat sticks, bacon, and more with their family recipes and works with over 140 retail partners across the State. Last year, the business produced over 1 million pounds of sausage and almost 500,000 pounds of venison products.

Edgewood Locker is deeply committed to community service. The company is a member of the Edgewood Chamber, the American Association of Meat Processors, and the Iowa Meat Processors Association, with over 200 industry awards hanging on its walls. The company also supports local schools, civic groups, and churches through charitable donations and sponsorships. Additionally, Edgewood Locker sponsors the annual Edgewood Rodeo. The business is committed to investing in the next generation by running a butcher apprenticeship program for high school and college students. The program covers the students' tuition at Hawkeye Community College and allows them to learn the skills of the trade by working at Edgewood Locker. Edgewood Locker will celebrate its 58th anniversary in Iowa later this year.

Edgewood Locker's entrepreneurial spirit and commitment to excellence are clear. I want to congratulate the Kerns family and the entire team for their hard work and dedication to providing exceptional products and services to families across Iowa. I look forward to seeing their continued growth and success.●

VERMONT STATE OF THE UNION ESSAY CONTEST JUDGES

● Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, since 2010, I have sponsored a State of the Union essay contest for Vermont high school students. This contest gives students in my State the opportunity to articulate what issues they would prioritize if they were President of the United States.

This is the contest's 15th year, and I would like to congratulate the nine volunteer judges who helped choose the contest winners and finalists. The contest relies on its committed team of judges. The judges take time to review each essay and evaluate the diversity in writing that engages students and will benefit them for years to come. The judges' willingness to participate in this project reflects their dedication to both the students and our State, and for that, I graciously thank them.

The judges include:

Andrew Chobanian of Oxbow High School—participant for 3 years

Jason Gorczyk of Milton High School—participant for 12 years

Krista Huling of South Burlington High School—participant for 12 years

Robert Jackson Randolph Technical Career Center—participant for their first year

Krystal Melendez of North Country Union High School—participant for their first year

Mary Schell of White River Valley School—participant for 3 years

Terri Vest of Twinfield Union School—participant for 15 years

Robert Walls-Thumma of North Country Union High School—participant for their first year

Caroline Zeilenga of Randolph Technical Career Center—participant for their first year

I am very proud to enter the State of the Union Essay Contest judges into the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD to recognize their contributions.●

VERMONT STATE OF THE UNION ESSAY WINNERS

● Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, since 2010, I have sponsored a State of the Union essay contest for Vermont high school students. This contest gives students in my State the opportunity to articulate what issues they would prioritize if they were President of the United States.

This is the contest's 15th year, and I would like to congratulate the 475 students who participated. It is truly heartening to see so many young people engaged in finding solutions for the problems that face our country. To my mind, this is what democracy is all about.

A volunteer panel of Vermont educators reviewed the essays and chose Justason Lahue as this year's winner. Justason, a junior at Burr and Burton Academy, wrote about the impact of social media on youth mental health. Ari Glasser, a junior at Essex High School, was the second-place winner. Ari wrote about the influence of billionaires on American politics. Ely White, a senior at Leland & Gray Union Middle and High School, was the third-place winner, with an essay on political polarization.

I am very proud to enter into the Congressional Record the essays submitted by Justason, Ari and Ely.

The material follows:

WINNER, JUSTASON LAHUE, BURR AND BURTON ACADEMY, JUNIOR

Social media is deteriorating adolescent mental health, yet the United States' government is treating the situation like a social experiment; our government is waiting to see what will happen despite the mounting evidence that social media has dangerous effects. Until we apply evidence-based regulations to limit social media use, adolescent well-being is in jeopardy.

The current evidence of harm is compelling. A 2023 Gallup survey found that teenagers spend an average of 4.8 hours on social media daily. Alarmingly, a longitudinal study involving 6,595 adolescents revealed that spending over 3 hours daily on social media doubled the risk of poor mental health outcomes, such as anxiety and depression. These are not studies in isolation: a systematic review of 13 studies also found that unhealthy engagement of social media was correlated with depression, anxiety, and psychological distress.

While these studies demonstrate correlation, there are also indicators of causality. Numerous studies highlight how limiting social media use can improve mental health. A randomized controlled trial reported that reducing social media use by just 30 minutes daily lessened depressive symptoms in college students. Another study involving adolescents showed that ceasing social media use for 4 weeks resulted in a 25-40% improvement in subjective well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, depression, and anxiety) when compared to psychological interventions such as therapy.

Social media use can worsen adolescent mental health, while lessening use demonstrates the opposite effect. Adolescent brain development is most active from ages 10 to 14. However, the arbitrary and rarely enforced 'internet age' currently set at 13 exposes immature brains to a world of entertainment, inappropriate content, and harassment. Given these biological factors and the evidence of potential harm, a more appropriate age for adolescents to access the internet is 16 years of age.

I propose a bill called the Youth Mental Health Protection Act. This act would target a root cause of social media-related youth mental health issues by changing the legal age of 'internet adulthood' (i.e., when one can sign up for most online platforms, consent to terms of service, and share personal data). This act would make 16 the legally required age to access social media, similar to obtaining a driver's license in most states, another privilege requiring complex thinking and decision-making. Finally, the Youth Mental Health Protection Act would hold social media companies liable by requiring age verification prior to account creation.

Requiring age checks would likely lessen the negative effects of social media on adolescent mental health, however, this is just

one step the United States government needs to take to solve this crisis. To counteract the harms introduced by this ongoing social experiment, policy-makers need to act now. Enacting the Youth Mental Health Protection Act and prioritizing further research on the effects of social media is imperative to safeguard the mental health of our nation's youth.

SECOND PLACE, ARI GLASSER, ESSEX HIGH SCHOOL, JUNIOR

President-elect Donald Trump has so far nominated over a dozen billionaires to his cabinet, with a combined net worth of over \$400 billion—more than ten times the GDP of the state of Vermont. In addition, Elon Musk, the richest man in the world, was one of Trump's strongest supporters during the election campaign: He donated a staggering \$277 million to Trump and other Republican candidates, according to CBS News. It is clear that the ultra-wealthy control a growing share of both political and economic power in the United States, holding disproportionate sway that erodes the power of the American people. The expanding influence of the billionaire class is one of the greatest challenges facing America today.

The recent trend of billionaire influence is reminiscent of the Gilded Age, a time when an incredibly wealthy group of industrialists such as John D. Rockefeller presided over vast monopolies while the government struggled to break them up. Meanwhile, the urban masses worked long hours with deplorable conditions and little pay. It was a kind of oligarchic society, one where these "Captains of Industry" wielded immense political and economic influence. Today, America is in a sort of Second Gilded Age—complete with drastic wealth inequality and a dangerous level of influence by the ultra-wealthy that is becoming ever nearer to oligarchy. Just 735 billionaires hold more wealth than the bottom half of all American households.

In order to reduce the concerning level of billionaire influence, many reforms must be enacted, but perhaps most important is a wealth tax. This could raise trillions of dollars for the government while also reducing the wealth and influence of billionaires over time. One such proposal would be Senator Bernie Sanders' plan, which would implement a progressive wealth tax, starting at one percent on net worth over \$32 million, up to eight percent on net worth over \$10 billion. According to Sanders, this plan would cut in half the wealth of billionaires over just 15 years, greatly reducing wealth inequality and the power of the top 0.1 percent.

In addition to reducing the economic power of billionaires, their political influence must be reduced through the use of campaign finance reform—most importantly, overturning the 2010 Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. FEC*. This case eviscerated campaign finance regulations and essentially allowed unlimited contributions to political groups known as super PACs, such as the one Elon Musk donated to. While it may be difficult, passing a proposal such as the We the People Amendment would reverse the *Citizens United* decision by putting an end to the antidemocratic concepts that money equals political speech, and that corporations are people.

While there is no simple solution to ending the dangerous influence of billionaires in American politics and the economy, through important legislative action such as a wealth tax and campaign finance reform, America can stop the encroachment of oligarchy on its society.

THIRD PLACE, ELY WHITE, LELAND AND GRAY UNION MIDDLE HIGH SCHOOL

Abraham Lincoln once said, "a house divided against itself cannot stand." Speaking

solemnly of the dire state of division in the United States leading up to the Civil War, it is now over a century later that his words resonate once more.

Political polarization has grown in the past decade in the United States, transforming healthy debates of ideas into an endless battle of "us" against "them." Division has infiltrated into all facets of American life, a political landscape where compromise is rare and partisan loyalty is prioritized. This deepening division threatens the ideals of our democracy, making it nearly impossible to address the critical issues that face our country today.

A 2022 NBC News survey revealed that 80% of Americans believe the opposing party "poses a threat that, if not stopped, will destroy America." This growing divide is evident in the 2018–19 government shutdown, when a standoff between Democrats and Republicans over border wall funding caused a 35-day gridlock. With neither side willing to compromise, 800,000 government workers went unpaid, and federal services became disrupted. Heightened polarization has normalized the prioritization of party loyalty over national needs, a theme of officials refusing to seek bi-partisan solutions even with critical federal services, workers, and decisions at stake.

Beyond our boardrooms and capitals, division based on political views has become synonymous with what it means to be American. Pew Research Center's 2022 report on polarization shows that 72% of Republicans view Democrats as more immoral than other Americans, and 62% of Democrats say the same about Republicans. Political identity has become tribal in nature, a defining characteristic of one's morality and values. Political polarization strains relationships in families, communities, and workplaces, the American Psychological Association reporting that 38% of adults avoided conversations with people of opposing political views.

Addressing solutions to America's political division is complex. Specific systemic reforms, however, can help reduce polarization by shifting the incentives that drive division. Ranked-choice voting (RCV) is a system that allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference, the votes for the lowest-ranking candidate then redistributed to voters' next choice until a majority is achieved. RCV would encourage candidates to appeal to broader ranges of voters rather than just their base, incentivizing politicians to take moderate stances rather than extreme party-driven positions. Reforming the closed primary system by adopting open or top-two systems would force candidates to appeal to a broader electorate, reducing the influence of extreme partisanship and encouraging more moderation. Integrating civic education and media literacy into our schools and communities could also work as a grassroots solution in helping individuals evaluate information and recognize bias in misinformation and ideological chambers.

The future of our democracy depends on our ability to bridge divides and prioritize unity over partisanship. We must rebuild trust, restore faith in our institutions, and create a government that serves all Americans. Change begins with us—and we call and act for a system that brings us together, not tears us apart.●

VERMONT STATE OF THE UNION ESSAY CONTEST FINALISTS

●Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, I ask to have entered into the RECORD some of the finalists' essays written by Vermont High School students as part

of the 15th Annual State of the Union Essay contest conducted by my office.

The material follows:

FINALISTS

AMY VAUGHAN, OXBOW HIGH SCHOOL, JUNIOR

Climate change is at the forefront of issues in the nation; however, its effect on farming and food systems is often overlooked. Climate change poses a growing threat to agriculture through fluctuating weather patterns that cause crop losses and increase production costs (EPA). These disruptions jeopardize food security and threaten farmers' livelihoods. While the challenges are significant, an effective, sustainable solution is to support outreach and educational initiatives, particularly through university extension services. By increasing funding for these programs, farmers and other individuals can be equipped with the knowledge needed to adopt climate-resilient techniques, strategies, and practices (University of New Hampshire Extension). This approach will strengthen the agricultural industry's ability to navigate a changing climate.

In recent years, farmers have faced increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, including severe droughts, flooding, and fluctuating temperatures (NOAA Research). These changes contribute to soil degradation, water shortages, and crop failure (Chicago EPA). A study from the United States Department of Agriculture found that "Increased temperatures can also lead to issues like crop sunburn from extreme heat, which can reduce annual yields for farms by as much as 40%" (USDA Climate Hub). This, in combination with other climate issues, results in decreased farm revenue adding to farmers' struggles with financial instability (USDA ERS). Data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis states that "agriculture and related industries contributed roughly \$1.537 trillion to the U.S. GDP in 2023". Given the importance of agriculture to U.S. food security and the economy, we can not ignore the effects decreased farm revenue would have on our society as a whole.

One step towards a solution is strengthening educational outreach efforts which can support farmers in understanding how to deal with this rising challenge. Land-grant universities have historically played a vital role in broadcasting research-based agricultural knowledge to the farming community (Association of Public Land Grant Universities). These programs offer valuable resources on crop management, pest control, irrigation techniques, and more (UW-Madison Extension). Many extension services include these topics in their program objectives. However, despite the acceleration of climate change, many extension services are underfunded and ill-equipped to meet the growing demand for climate-specific information.

Increased investment in these programs will provide farmers with timely, actionable climate advice. University-led outreach programs can teach farmers about climate-resilient practices such as regenerative farming, crop diversification, and soil health improvement techniques (University of New Hampshire Extension). Furthermore, extension services can introduce precision agriculture technologies to optimize crop monitoring and resource use. Addressing the impact of climate change on agriculture requires more than just technological innovation or policy reform. It requires empowering farmers with the knowledge and tools to adapt. By investing in outreach and education through university extension programs, the United States can build a more resilient agricultural system capable of weathering the challenges of a changing climate, ensuring long-