

OPINION

ELECTION 2026

Think twice before choosing your primary ballot this year

We have some bad news. Based on a recent analysis, 88% of Montana's legislature will be decided in the June 2 primary. Let that sink in: nearly 9 in 10 seats in the 2027 legislative session will be decided in less than a month, in an election where fewer than half of Montanans participate.

The Montana Legislature affects Montanans lives deeply. Legislators set our state budget, decide how much we are taxed (or not), fund our public schools and community infrastructure (roads, bridges, sewer and water systems, housing, energy, and internet), and make decisions about our access to healthcare, our criminal justice system, and our elections. And the fate of

88% of those critical legislators is sealed a full five months before the November general election.

We bet you already know which political party will win your legislative seat. It's likely the party that has won it for years, even decades. That's why clever, out-of-state interests are pouring millions of dollars into our legislative primaries, trying to buy Montana's representation. They're betting against Montana voters. But Montanans are clever, too.

Now, the good news: we have real choices in our legislative primaries, with over 60 contested elections across Montana happening right now. And Montanans get to choose

which ballot they pick this primary, whether Republican, Democratic, or Libertarian. We get to decide how our vote will be most meaningful to us, our community, and our state.

We write to you as fellow Montana citizens who have both held elected office, one as a Republican and one as a Democrat. We are united by one belief: that Montanans deserve competitive elections, and that they should participate in the election where their vote has the most impact.

This year, if you live in a district with a competitive legislative primary, we urge you to vote the primary ballot that will determine who represents you in the legislature. If you are

wondering what difference your primary vote can really make, consider this: in 2024, the top ten most competitive Republican legislative primary races were decided by between 36 and 171 votes. In these races, every vote truly counts.

While there are multiple competitive primary races at the federal level across Montana, those elections will be decided by thousands of votes or more. It's an unfortunate reality that while every vote matters, some votes have an outsized influence on who represents you. When taken as a percentage of all votes cast, your vote in critical legislative primaries matters more than your vote in a congressional or

US Senate primary.

Is this ideal? Far from it, which is why both of us have advocated for a fully open primary system, where voters can vote for any candidate they choose, regardless of political party. For now, please open the primary ballots available to you, see if there is a competitive legislative primary in your district, research the candidates, and vote for the one that will best represent you. Your vote just might make the difference.

Bruce Grubbs is a former Republican Legislator from Bozeman and Mary Sexton is a former Democratic Teton County Commissioner and Chair of the Montana Democratic Party.

GUEST VIEW

Blocking party politics is exactly the point of CI-132

A recent letter to the editor (Missoulian, April 9) arguing that CI-132 would "block needed reform" is wrong about exactly



C. BURT CALDWELL

what we need to be blocking. CI-132, a constitutional initiative that ensures our judicial elections remain nonpartisan, blocks political parties from interfering in judicial elections. It blocks judges from being elected purely because of their party

affiliation, not their experience and commitment to the Constitution. Montanans want judges that rule solely on the basis of our Constitution, not a political platform. CI-132 will ensure that our judges stay impartial, with no ties or commitments to a certain plaintiff, defendant, or legal counsel just because they represent a certain political party.

Voters know how to do their research and choose the candidate whose record and experience reflects their own beliefs in how justice should be served. Putting a party label on the ballot for our judicial elections

doesn't tell us whether someone is a good judge, it just tells us that they're beholden to one political party.

In his recent letter (Missoulian, March 24), Robert Natelson argues that political parties should be able to influence our judicial elections because other states do it. Since when does Montana do things just because other states do them? He also argues that "Democracy has suffered under special interests' influence." I agree! And it's our political parties that open the gate for dark money from special interests to influence our

elections. Let's not let that infect our judicial elections, too.

I wonder if Mr. Natelson is concerned about our courts because he thinks they have a political bias that is different than his own. Is injecting more political bias into the system really the solution? I doubt Mr. Natelson would agree if the tables were turned. Let's take a longer view of our judicial elections and instead continue removing political party influence from our judicial elections, not add it in.

CI-132 preserves how we've run judicial elections in Montana

for over 90 years. It prevents candidates from getting elected due to political party influence. We all want courts to apply the law without bias as much as possible and to rule justly based on the Constitution without fear of retribution from a political party. A "yes" vote on CI-132 ensures exactly that.

C. Burt Caldwell is a U.S. Marine, retired director of manufacturing in the automotive and space industries, a member of local boards and councils, and has been active in Montana politics for over a decade. He lives in Missoula.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Our community needs another River House

It would be totally awesome to have a day treatment center like the former River House, that would provide services for folks who have mental illness, addictions or co-occurring disorders. This would give them regular contact with others and to have activities.

Too many people are living in isolation and they really need a lot of help. There are people who have mental illness, who can live independently and others who would benefit from living in a structured environment. There should be both short term and long-term group homes for people to live in. People who have mental illness, addictions or co-occurring disorders would have the structure that they need, housing would be affordable for the people who would live there and they could give a woman, who are vulnerable to sexual predators, a safer place to be. Room and board could be paid on a sliding scale based on people's ability to pay. Medical compliance, clean time and sobriety are essential and participating in the programs, is very important. If a person doesn't like being there, the person would be at liberty to move out.

River House had a lounge, a snack bar, would serve a lunch every day and had some good support groups and activities. A lot of "higher functioning" people have been referred to vocational rehabilitation and have been able to find and keep employment.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness is a good organization of advocates for the mentally ill and I would like to encourage people to get involved!

David Cockrell,
Missoula

Stop the spring bear hunt

We've received the letter from Missoula Public Health about the requirement to switch to a bear-resistant garbage can.

To be clear, we fully support this move to help avoid human-bear conflicts in the Missoula area. And yet, it's not good enough and we must do better "to protect bears," as the issue is much larger than urban human-bear conflicts.

Every year, trophy hunters

kill 1,600 black bears, about half during the spring bear hunt starting mid-April, when bears emerge from their dens, many of them mothers with cubs, who are entirely dependent on their mother for survival. When bears emerge from their dens, they're often sluggish, weak and extremely hungry; the mother bear leaves her cubs behind in the den or hides them behind bushes or up in trees. Then, while preoccupied with searching for food, the mother bear gets shot. How many bear cubs wait in vain for the return of their mother — their lifeline — before they suffer a prolonged death of starvation and dehydration? Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, while profiting handsomely from selling bear kill licenses, doesn't track the added mortality among bear cubs too young to fend for themselves.

FWP pretends to care about human-bear conflicts in Missoula but promotes the annual murder of 1,600 bears. In human terms this is saying we care about the health and safety of Missoula urban residents but not about rural residents. This would be easily recognized as incongruous and blatant discrimination. Why are we not applying the same moral standards?

Anja Heister,
Missoula

Jacobsen must stand with ranchers, not billionaires

Secretary of State Christi Jacobsen is running for Congress to represent me and 580,000 other Montanans in the western half of the state. I don't know much about Jacobsen, but I do know that she holds 20% of the vote on Montana's Land Board, the governing body tasked with making and approving decisions that impact the state's trust lands, our Department of Natural Resources and Conservation lands.

She'll soon cast a vote to help decide the fate of a proposed land swap being pushed by the non-resident billionaire owner of MPG Ranch. The exchange would take the state land my family has leased for grazing for decades, and provide no new public access in return. The lands MPG is trying to trade for are already publicly accessible, some 20 miles away, are half as valuable per acre and way less productive. There's a reason

MPG wants this.

Not only would this fail to add one single acre of public access, it'd force my fourth generation ranching family off of our livestock lease and may force us out of business. MPG does not run livestock and this exchange will further remove production agriculture from the landscape, exacerbating the loss of Montana ranching families while nonresident billionaires expand their playgrounds.

If Christi Jacobsen expects to represent me in D.C., she better side with Montana ranchers over non-resident billionaires, and oppose the Cramer Creek land exchange.

David Maclay-Schulte,
Lolo

When the powerful break the law, who speaks up?

Has any GOP candidate ever run for office without promising to be tough on crime? We have two GOP senators and two GOP congressmen representing Montana today and Kurt Alme wants to be our next one. Can't watch a half hour of TV without Mr. Alme reminding you he stands with Mr. Trump and will be tough on crime.

Funny isn't it, none have objected to the crimes of today's Washington.

Who has objected to the murders of peaceful demonstrators in Minneapolis? Or to the rush to judgment that smeared them with lies about their characters?

Who has objected to the illegal destruction of government property — the East Wing of the White House, the reflecting pools in front of the Lincoln Memorial? Who has objected to the no-bid contracts for the work underway, grossly over budget?

Who has objected to the failure of this administration to release all the Epstein files as required by law?

Who has demanded the president face Congress at the 60-day mark after the initiation of the Iran war? Or the war crimes committed by this president by threatening to destroy civilian populations?

Anyone can be tough on crime when it amounts to putting low level thugs in jail. It's the rich and powerful thugs stealing our country and our future it takes courage and determination to fight. Think Kurt Alme will break from the Trump mold or

will he do as he's told, as Daines, Sheehy, Zinke and Downing have done?

Suzanne Parson,
St. Ignatius

Billionaire money is distorting Montana's elections

As a Montana voter, I'm getting tired of wealthy interests and political insiders trying to shape our elections.

On one side, you have billionaire-backed money helping prop up a disc jockey turned candidate. On the other, billionaires, dark money and insider influence boosting a lobbyist. Different parties, same unsettling pattern.

That should concern all of us.

Montanans like to think for ourselves. We respect candidates who show up, answer questions, do the work, and earn support directly from voters. What's harder to stomach is the growing sense that powerful people behind the scenes think they should decide who has "momentum."

If wealthy donors and political insiders are investing this heavily in certain candidates, voters should be asking why.

Who's paying for the messaging? What do they expect in return? Why do they want them to win? And if these candidates do win, who are they really accountable to?

Montana elections should belong to Montana voters, not billionaires, dark money groups, or political insiders trying to engineer outcomes or even worse, creating manufactured candidates.

Robyn Wright,
St. Ignatius

Medicare gaps leave too many behind

Regarding the recent guest view piece by Greg Cook and Kirk Bodlovic (Missoulian, May 5) singing the praises of Medicare, I feel the need to make some comments. While, in my opinion, everyone should have medical coverage, Medicare does not supply it properly. I have Medicare A & B plus Humana supplemental. Yet last year my out-of-pocket additional expenses were over \$6,000. Fortunately, I was able to cover them. But what about people on a limited income? When I lived in Europe, I never saw indigent people camped on sidewalks

and I never received a medical bill, because care for all is paid by income tax. While the tax rate varies widely from country to country, the average European income tax is 17.2%. The average rate in the U.S. is 14.5%, yet proper medical care is not provided. I'd have no problem seeing a 3% increase, so that everyone is medically protected. God forbid we should learn from other countries!

While I can almost understand the need to spend money on explosives so that we can bomb Iran, or build a ball room at the White House, I think the health of our people is far more important. Come on politicians, get your act together and take care of the population!

Sidney Mehlschmidt,
Hamilton

You might have been a Republican...

If you believe in smaller government, if you believe that justice should apply to the great and the small equally, if you believe that we shouldn't be in foreign wars and entanglements; if you believe in the emolument clause of the Constitution, if you believe in freedom of the press and due process of the law, if you believe in the separation of powers in the U.S. Constitution and etc., you might have been a Republican.

Gerard Weber,
Missoula

Stop invading our mailboxes

Dear politicians of all sorts, We see you and get your message on TV, phones, road signs, newspapers and in person. Must you also invade our mailboxes? Paying for the printing and mailing of cardboard advertisements is a waste of money, materials and postal clerk time. For most people they go directly in the trash. Please stop.

Bonnie Cushing,
Hamilton

Find a middle path forward

It is very helpful to see who President Trump, Steve Daines, Bernie Sanders and AOC have endorsed. I know who I am NOT voting for.

There is a necessary middle path forward.

Jim Conkle,
Missoula