

To: 2024 Montana State Candidates and Interested Parties
From: Montana Conservation Voters Education Fund
Date: March 2024
RE: State Candidate Messaging on Conservation and Democracy



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Conservation in Montana is the cornerstone of our way of life, and ensuring the continued stewardship of our lands has never been more critical. Our state constitution recently celebrated its 50th anniversary, with one of its most significant elements being our right to a “clean and healthful environment.” This right continues to safeguard Montanans' access to clean air, clean water, and public lands.

With staff across the state, the mission of the Montana Conservation Voters Education Fund is to educate, engage, and empower all Montanans to protect our clean air, clean water, public lands, and democracy.

This memo contains information on the landscape of conservation in Montana, the conservation and democracy issues that matter most to Montanans, effective ways to discuss those issues with voters, and ideas for incorporating them into your campaigns. One consistent truth when engaging with voters is the significance of discussing local issues. While this memo does not address issues specific to each community, we encourage you to personalize and localize how you discuss various conservation issues using the guiding principles in this document. It's crucial for people to understand how statewide policies will impact them, their friends, and families.

We look forward to nurturing our relationship with you, collaborating to prioritize conservation and democracy issues in your campaign, and ensuring that Montana’s elected leaders are steadfast champions for conservation. The MCV Education Fund offers expertise in policy, politics, field organizing, and communications, and we are eager to serve as a resource for you.

I. Conservation and Democracy Issues that Matter to Montanans

Montanans have a profound connection to our state's land and water; it's part of our identity, our way of life, and it fuels Montana's robust tourism and outdoor recreation economies. In a state boasting some of the most beautiful public lands, forests, rivers, and wildlife in the world, Montanans understand the importance of protecting and conserving our outdoor spaces for future generations.

We are continually reminded of the importance of outdoor access in our state, for residents and visitors alike. In 2022, 92 percent of Montanans visited state lands such as Montana wildlife management areas, state parks, and fishing access sites at least once,¹ up from 89 percent in 2020. Additionally, 93 percent of Montanans visited national public lands in 2022, with more than one-third visiting public lands more than 20 times. These figures solidify what we already know: Montanans love public lands and value strong access laws for public lands and waters, which are crucial to our way of life in the Treasure State.

Montana also boasts the second-highest percentage of individuals identifying as hunters and anglers in the nation, with 61 percent saying they hunt and/or fish², and 73 percent self-identifying as conservationists.³ This makes clean air, clean water, and public lands among the most unifying issues in our state.

According to the latest Colorado College Conservation in the West poll, 87 percent of Montanans say that an elected official's stances on clean air, clean water, open spaces, and public lands are important considerations in voting, with nearly half identifying it as *the most important* factor.⁴ While Montana voters overwhelmingly support the conservation of fish, wildlife, clean air, clean water, and open spaces, there are a few areas that stand out.

For example, 85 percent of Montanans say that development sprawling into what were once ranches or open lands is a serious issue, and 77 percent say that the changing character of the state is a serious issue.⁵ In fact, 97 percent of Montanans think that the loss of family farms and ranches is a problem.⁶ In a time of rapid population growth and housing crises, it is important to ensure that solutions to these problems do not create additional challenges for fish, wildlife, agriculture, open spaces, and the quality of life that Montanans cherish.

Water continues to be a serious concern for many Montana voters, with 90 percent saying that low levels of water in rivers are a problem.⁷ In a year where all of Montana is experiencing record-low snowpack, water issues are likely to be heightened, making it essential to know how to communicate with voters about these issues.

¹ University of Montana Crown of the Continent and Greater Yellowstone Initiative, "2022 University of Montana Statewide Survey," April 2022, crown-yellowstone.umt.edu/voter-surveys/2022/22018-university-of-montana-survey-interview-schedule.pdf

² Colorado College. (2024). 2024 Western States Interview Schedule STATES Combined [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/_documents/2024-poll-data/2024%20Western%20States%20Interview%20Schedule%20STATES%20Combined.pdf

³ Colorado College. (2023). 2023 FINAL Western States Interview Schedule STATES COMB [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/_documents/2023-poll-data-and-graphics/2023%20FINAL%20Western%20States%20Interview%20Schedule%20STATES%20COMB.pdf

⁴ Colorado College 2024

⁵ University of Montana 2022

⁶ Colorado College 2024

⁷ Ibid

Montanans understand that our state is unique, and residents support policies and investments that protect our way of life. Montanans recognize that protecting our outdoor spaces also safeguards and grows our robust outdoor recreation economy. According to a survey by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis for 2020, Montana topped the list for the largest outdoor recreation economy per capita, accounting for 4.3 percent of the state's GDP or \$2.2 billion.⁸ But the money extends across all aspects of the state's economy; for every \$1 million spent on conservation activities, between 17 and 31 Montana jobs are supported.⁹ Those investments support jobs in a wide range of industries, from retail to hospitality to high tech and countless others. Protecting our outdoor spaces makes dollars and sense for our small businesses.

Maintaining a stable and robust democracy is essential for ongoing protections for clean air, clean water, and public lands. In Montana, our state constitution is highly protective of our natural environment, giving each Montanan a right to a "clean and healthful environment." This constitution guides lawmakers and the courts, ensuring that laws passed will not harm Montanans' abilities to enjoy clean air, water, and public lands. Attacks on our independent judiciary threaten this right by attempting to limit the power of this co-equal branch of government. Keeping our courts independent will ensure they continue to interpret the law to protect our constitutional rights.

Public Lands & Waters - Access and Funding

Overview: Montanans are highly aware of and deeply connected to our public lands and waters. With 30 million acres of public lands, 170,000 miles of rivers, 3,200 named lakes, over 300 public fishing access sites, 55 state parks, 15 wilderness areas, eight National Park Service units, ten national forests, and three national monuments, our access to the outdoors is unparalleled.

Montana's public lands and waters support \$7.1 billion in consumer spending, add \$2.6 billion annually to the state's GDP, and nearly 30,000 jobs accounting for \$1.7 billion in outdoor recreation wages.¹⁰ More than one-quarter of business owners in Montana stated that outdoor recreation, parks, and open spaces are the top reasons they do business in Montana.¹¹ Furthermore, 89 percent of Montanans recognize the importance of public lands to our state's economy.¹² In 2020, the state had 20.6 million visitors to public lands, which created 16,548 jobs.¹³ Between 2020 and 2021, the state's outdoor recreation economy grew by 29 percent.¹⁴

Montanans value our outdoors for business, jobs, and quality of life. Public lands and public lands access are consistently bipartisan issues among voters. Despite attempts by some legislators and politicians to limit public lands access, this is not popular among Montanans, with 70 percent saying that a loss of access to national forests, lakes, and other public lands is a serious issue.¹⁵ Ninety percent of Montanans say public lands have a positive impact on clean water, children's education on

⁸ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, "Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2020," Nov. 2021, www.bea.gov/news/2021/outdoor-recreation-satellite-account-us-and-states-2020

⁹ MT Office of Outdoor Recreation, "The Montana Business Landscape," 2020, business.mt.gov/Outdoor-Recreation

¹⁰ Business for Montana's Outdoors. "By the Numbers: Montana's economy and future depend on our outdoor assets." <https://businessformontanasoutdoors.com/research/>

¹¹ Ibid

¹² University of Montana 2020

¹³ MT Office of Outdoor Recreation 2020

¹⁴ Business for Montana Outdoors 2023

¹⁵ University of Montana 2022

nature, and overall quality of life.¹⁶ In fact, Montanans participate in all outdoor activities at a higher rate than residents of almost any other western state.¹⁷

One of the most significant current issues relating to public lands and access in Montana is the battle over funding for Habitat Montana. In 2020, voters overwhelmingly voted to legalize recreational marijuana with the understanding that a portion of the tax revenue would go towards public lands funding through Habitat Montana. During the 2021 Legislative Session, this funding was allocated in a smaller amount than voters originally intended, yet still dedicated 20% of recreational marijuana tax revenue, or millions of dollars, to Habitat Montana. However, this came under attack in the 2023 Legislative Session, with several bills attempting to divert funding from Habitat Montana dying in the process. The bill that ultimately gained the support of the Legislature included funding for Habitat Montana as well as county roads, addiction services, veterans, and non-game wildlife. However, this bill was vetoed in the final moments of the legislative session in a manner that did not allow legislators to vote on a veto override, and its fate remains unknown.

Habitat Montana is an incredibly popular program. In a 2022 poll conducted by the University of Montana, 82% of Montanans agreed that recreational marijuana tax revenue should continue to go to Habitat Montana at the percentage agreed upon by the 2021 Legislature.¹⁸ Habitat Montana was established because it was recognized that keeping priority wildlife populations abundant through conservation of key seasonal habitats while providing compatible outdoor recreation is essential to supporting Montanans' way of life. In fact, 93% of Montanans think that conserving wildlife habitat and migration routes is an important conservation effort.¹⁹ Habitat Montana accomplishes this by purchasing land for Wildlife Management Areas, where the primary purpose is the protection of wildlife and their habitat. Additionally, Habitat Montana provides funding for the purchase of conservation easements. Conservation easements are important tools for both wildlife conservation and Montana's rural lifestyles. Farmers and ranchers can place conservation easements on their property to protect it from development while helping cover expensive land ownership costs, providing twice the benefit to Montanans.

Habitat Montana is Montana's premier public lands access tool on top of providing significant benefits for wildlife habitat conservation. It is common for public lands purchases to open up access to thousands of acres of previously landlocked public lands. For example, the recently purchased 5,600-acre Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area opened up access to 100,000 acres of Forest Service land that was previously inaccessible. Considering that 91% of Montanans say that it's important to provide opportunities for hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation, this kind of program is crucial to protect. Moreover, it is essential to seek long-term, sustainable funding streams so that Montana can continue to make investments in its outdoor heritage.

Message Guidance:

- By wide margins, Montana voters believe that public lands are essential to the economy and

¹⁶ University of Montana 2020

¹⁷ Colorado College 2024

¹⁸ University of Montana 2022

¹⁹ Colorado College 2023

way of life, so focus on these values.²⁰

- They also strongly oppose privatizing or selling off public lands, so when possible and relevant, frame the opposition in this context and stand against these efforts.
- Be specific. Discuss hiking, biking, camping, fishing, hunting, and viewing wildlife. The more vivid the language, the more likely voters are to envision themselves using these lands and enjoying their benefits. Avoid generalizations such as “being in nature” because this means different things for different people.
- Montanans genuinely care about fish and wildlife. However, avoid vague references to “habitat.” Instead, specifically relate this to fish and/or wildlife habitat by discussing stream health, large landscape protection, protection of big game winter range and migration corridors, etc.
- Emphasize the importance of “access” to public lands and waters.
- Stress the need for children to spend more time outdoors. According to a recent Colorado College poll, 92% of Montanans believe that spending more time outdoors would help address increased rates of anxiety, depression, and mental health problems in children and young people, and 84% say that children not spending enough time outdoors is a problem.²¹

Clean Energy

Overview: Montana ranks among the top 10 states with the largest share of electricity generated from renewables, at about 53 percent.²² Montana's renewable portfolio standard (enacted in 2005 and repealed in 2021) required retail electricity suppliers to acquire at least 15 percent of the electricity sold in-state from renewable energy sources, starting in 2015.²³ Prior to the 2021 repeal, Montana consistently surpassed that goal.²⁴

Support for renewable energy is growing in Montana. In fact, a 2023 survey found that 58 percent of Montanans support expanding clean energy over extractive energy sources.²⁵ Montana's clean energy portfolio is continuing to grow, particularly in wind power. Currently, Montana wind projects produce over 1,100 megawatts of electricity, providing significant benefits to the state. Due to Montana's large potential for wind energy, there is significant economic opportunity to provide this energy to neighboring states like Washington and Oregon, which have much less potential and much higher demand.²⁶

Montana also has significant untapped solar energy potential. According to a report from Renewable Northwest, Montana has potential similar to Minnesota, which is already producing over 1,600 megawatts of electricity from solar. For comparison, Montana is producing 17 megawatts.²⁷

Even as Montana's wind and solar economies are just getting off the ground, these projects provided

²⁰ Headwaters Economics, “Montana's Economy, Public Lands, and Competitive Advantage,” August 2017, <https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/montanas-economy-and-protected-lands>

²¹ Colorado College 2024

²² U.S. Energy Information Administration, “U.S. Energy Information Administration Independent Statistics and Analysis Montana,” www.eia.gov/state/?sid=MT#

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Colorado College 2023

²⁶ Renewable Northwest. (n.d.). Renewable Northwest: Montana Factsheet [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://renewablenw.org/sites/default/files/Reports-Fact%20Sheets/RNW_MT_Factsheet_Final-web.pdf

²⁷ Ibid

\$101 million in revenue to state and local governments between 2006 and 2021. The vast majority of these payments came from Montana’s growing wind industry. These funds help offset local property taxes and are used to support local schools and critical county and city services.²⁸

Despite this promise of renewable energy, Montanans have been saddled with extremely high energy bills. Last year, the Public Service Commission approved a 28% rate increase for residential customers of NorthWestern Energy - Montana’s monopoly utility that is supposed to be regulated by the PSC. This rate increase is only necessary because NorthWestern continues to put money into outdated energy production and refuses to move towards renewable energy sources. NorthWestern and the PSC have consistently ignored concerns from customers about rising energy prices in favor of investments in fossil fuel infrastructure that will continue to pollute our air, despite overwhelming support for expanding our clean energy economy in Montana. In fact, 70% of Montanans have expressed concern over the impact of oil and gas drilling on our land, air, and water.²⁹ Further, 76% of Montanans think that we can increase both the production of clean energy while also preserving natural areas, wildlife habitat, and the character of communities, rather than having to choose between the two.³⁰

This support for renewable energy sources comes despite attacks in the legislature to limit municipalities’ abilities to enact solar-ready stretch codes,³¹ attempts to devalue rooftop solar, and the failure to pass legislation that would allow community solar programs with investor-owned utilities.³²

These attacks at the State Legislature come despite historic investments available to the state through the Affordable Clean Energy Plan. The Inflation Reduction Act and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act provide unprecedented new provisions that will enable tax-exempt and governmental entities, such as states, local governments, Tribes, territories, rural electric cooperatives, and nonprofits, including places of worship, to take an active role in building the clean energy economy, lowering costs for working families, and advancing environmental justice.

Additionally, funding from the Affordable Clean Energy Plan provides ample opportunity for state and local governments to accelerate the transition to clean energy. Grant and direct pay opportunities for state and local governments include technical assistance for the adoption of building energy codes, charging and refueling infrastructure grant programs, clean heavy-duty vehicle grant and rebate programs, qualified commercial clean vehicle tax credits, environmental justice block grants, climate pollution reduction grants, clean energy investment tax credits, clean electricity production tax credits, energy efficiency upgrades, and air pollution monitoring and screening grants.³³

For example, the Solar for All grant program through the EPA provides opportunities for states to receive grant funding to enhance solar usage for low income and disadvantaged communities. Given

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Colorado College 2024

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ State of Montana. “An act providing that the state and local governments cannot require that buildings be constructed to have solar panels, batteries, or electric vehicle chargers; and amending sections 7-1-111 and 50-60-203, mca.” leg.mt.gov/bills/2023/sesslaws/ch0578.pdf. 2023 Legislative Session, HB 241, passed.

³² State of Montana. “An act establishing community solar and utility requirements; providing for transmission interconnection for community solar energy facilities; distinguishing community solar customers from net metering customers; providing rulemaking authority; providing definitions; and providing an immediate effective date.” leg.mt.gov/bills/2023/billpdf/SB0399.pdf. 2023 Legislative Session, SB 399, died.

³³ “Explaining the Affordable Clean Energy Plan.” League of Conservation Voters. www.lcv.org/clean-energy-policy-maker-resources/

that Montana’s residential sector has the highest per capita energy consumption of any state, these types of programs and transitioning to clean energy at the local and residential levels are key.³⁴

As we transition to clean energy, oil and gas leasing of public lands continues to be a polarizing issue. While the majority of Montanans (73 percent) support stopping or limiting oil and gas development on public lands, it remains at the forefront as gas prices continue to rise.³⁵ Messaging on this can be difficult.

Montana’s relationship with the fossil fuel industry has been front and center for many voters this year with the historic *Held v. Montana* case. The 16 youth plaintiffs were successful in suing the state for their role in the climate crisis by continuing to permit and encourage growth of the oil, gas, coal, and mining industries. The decision in this case also struck down two laws that limited the state’s ability to consider greenhouse gas emissions when conducting environmental reviews of mining and other state approved permits. The provision in our state constitution that allowed this lawsuit to be successful grants every Montanan the right to a “clean and healthful environment.” Some Legislators were prepared to attack this right during the 2023 Legislative Session, but never did so because of the strong opposition from the public. The *Held* case has now been appealed to the Supreme Court by the state, despite broad public support for Montana officials to consider the impacts of greenhouse gas emissions.

65% support only allowing oil and gas companies the right to drill in areas where there is high likelihood to actually produce oil and gas.

67% prefer that leaders place more emphasis on protecting water, air, wildlife habitat and recreation opportunities over maximizing the amount of land available for drilling and mining.

93% support requiring oil and gas companies, rather than federal and state governments, to pay for all of the clean-up and land restoration costs after drilling is finished.

Message Guidance:

- Stress the need for “SOLUTIONS,” not “bans.”
 - Solutions supported by Montanans include only allowing oil and gas companies to drill in areas of public land with a high likelihood to actually produce oil and gas (65 percent support), requiring oil and gas companies to use updated equipment to prevent leaks of methane and other pollutants (94 percent support), requiring oil and gas companies to pay for clean up and land restoration costs post drilling (93 percent support).
- The oil and gas industry has spent millions of dollars on a PR campaign regarding how safe and beneficial oil and gas is for Montana and has subsequently softened its image. Focusing on our ability to move towards a clean energy future with safe and healthy communities is key.
- Note that well over a majority (71 percent) of Montana voters support increasing the royalty fee that oil and gas companies pay for drilling on public lands to 25 percent.³⁶
- Focus on the fact that we need a level playing field, and the oil and gas industry currently has

³⁴ U.S. Energy Information Administration www.eia.gov/state/?sid=MT#

³⁵Colorado College. (2022). 2022 Combined Western States Interview Schedule [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/documents/2022/2022%20Combined%20Western%20States%20Interview%20Schedule%20.pdf>

³⁶ Colorado College, “Conservation in the West,” 2020, www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/conservationinthewest/2020/2020-conservation-in-the-west-poll-data/2020%20Western%20States%20-%20Interview%20Schedule_COMBINED.pdf

too many advantages and is working only for itself, not for the people of Montana. The Held v. Montana case is a concrete example of how Montanans have felt that the oil and gas industry has had unfair advantages to continue polluting our state.

- Voters are supportive of clean energy. However, when discussing a transition to clean energy, it is consistently better to discuss *moving toward* clean energy rather than discussing *moving away* from fossil fuels.
- Focus on “enforcement” against polluters and the lack of resources to adequately do so - a majority of voters view the term “corporate polluters” unfavorably.
- Cite health and safety issues with oil and gas drilling first - 70% of Montanans think the impact of oil & gas drilling on our land, air, and water is a problem.³⁷
- Never use the term “green jobs,” it’s too vague and unknown by voters - “clean energy jobs” is a much more favorable and concrete term.
- “Clean energy” or “renewable energy” are stronger terms to use than “alternative energy” or “green energy.”³⁸
- Focus on jobs, innovation, and growing our economy. For example, a report entitled “Montana Wind Jobs” found that Montana ranked 48th out of the 50 states for the number of jobs in wind energy production, despite being fifth in the nation for land-based wind potential.³⁹ Additionally, the median wages in wind energy are 34 percent higher than those in coal mining and are comparable to those in fossil fuel electricity generation.⁴⁰

Climate - Water, Wildfire

Overview: The vast majority of Montanans, 72 percent, believe climate change is a serious problem, with 64% saying that the effects they’ve seen in the last 10 years have been significant.⁴¹ The most significant impacts that concern Montanans are clean air, clean water, and wildfires. This winter, we have seen record low snowpack in all parts of the state, sparking fears about water availability and wildfire season during summer 2024. Recent polling shows that 67% of Montanans feel worried about the future of land, water, air, and wildlife, with 73% indicating that inadequate water supplies in our state are a problem.⁴² Water supplies impact agriculture, municipalities, constituent water utility bills, and Montana’s vast outdoor recreation economy, making this a statewide issue.

An additional statewide issue is wildfire season. Montana has experienced its fair share of catastrophic wildfires in recent years from the mountains to the prairies, which is represented in the fact that 92% of Montanans say that uncontrollable wildfires that threaten homes and property are a problem.⁴³ Legislation supporting forest management, support for wildland firefighters, and ensuring communities and homes are prepared have gained traction in recent years.

Broadly, the numbers of voters regardless of political affiliation, who said they were worried about

³⁷Colorado College 2024

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Renewable Northwest, “Montana Wind Jobs,” June 2021,

[https://renewablenw.org/sites/default/files/Reports-Fact%20Sheets/MT%20Wind%20Jobs_JUN2021%20\(Final\).pdf](https://renewablenw.org/sites/default/files/Reports-Fact%20Sheets/MT%20Wind%20Jobs_JUN2021%20(Final).pdf)

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Colorado College 2024

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

environmental problems worsened by climate change jumped significantly in the last decade.⁴⁴ Despite the shared concerns by many, the issue is still incredibly polarizing, both in Montana and across the country.

Message Guidance:

- Emphasize the impacts. 92 percent of Montanans say that wildfires that threaten homes and property are a serious problem, 90 percent see smoke during fire season as a problem, and 79 percent describe water shortages in the west as a problem.⁴⁵
- Address the costs of inaction in terms of damage to homes and infrastructure, public health, and the economy.
- Use terms like “clean energy future” or “energy freedom” rather than “climate change” or “global warming.” Additionally, use “carbon pollution” instead of “climate pollution,” as the latter terminology drops support with voters.⁴⁶
- Highlight Montana’s outdoor way of life and economy. 71 percent of Montanans believe that reducing greenhouse gas emissions would help protect Montana’s outdoor heritage.
- Focus on impacts to health, clean air, clean water, and outdoor recreation. The outdoor industry relies on predictable and stable seasons for skiing, snowmobiling, and other winter activities, as well as clean air and water, and healthy landscapes.
- Highlight local and state solutions. Montanans are more supportive of solutions at the state and local levels rather than federal solutions. They feel that they can have a more direct impact at these levels.

Access to Democracy

Overview: Montana has faced numerous challenges to its democratic processes, ranging from legislative measures to local government actions. In the 2021 Legislative Session, 18 bills aimed at restricting voting access were introduced, with some successfully passed, including those limiting mail-in voting. Although courts overturned the most egregious bills, ongoing assaults on democracy persist, targeting not only voting rights but also the independence of the judiciary and redistricting commission.

In the 2023 Legislature, attempts to partisanize currently nonpartisan elections, such as for the Supreme Court, were defeated, reflecting Montanans’ overwhelming support for nonpartisan justices. In fact, 71 percent of Montanans believe that Supreme Court Justices should remain nonpartisan positions, with nearly 90 percent of Montanans saying that Supreme Court Justices should not be making decisions based on political party considerations.⁴⁷ Keeping our courts nonpartisan and independent is key to maintaining protections for our best in the nation constitutional protections. In fact, 90 percent of Montanans agree that having three distinct branches of government is the best way to protect Montanans’ constitutional rights and freedoms.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Missoula Current, “Poll: Climate Change, Water Loss, Habitat Top Concerns of Montanans, Western Voters,” 21 Feb. 2022, <https://missoulacurrent.com/outdoors/2022/02/habitat-western-voters/>

⁴⁵ Colorado College 2023

⁴⁶ Andrew Bauman, Global Strategy Group, “Messaging on Climate, Energy and the Environment in the Era of Trump,” April 2017, <http://www.globalstrategygroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Climate-March-Memo-F04.26.17.pdf>

⁴⁷ Montana Public Interest Research Group, League of Women Voters, HELPS Lab. (2023). Montana Constitution Survey 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.mtpirg.org/23survey>

⁴⁸ Ibid

Further democratic challenges emerge from partisan gerrymandering attempts. Montana’s independent redistricting commission provides a nonpartisan, public way to draw fair election maps and 81 percent of Montanans think that it should maintain its current level of independence from the legislative and executive branches. Despite this, there were numerous attempts to change the makeup of the commission or the way commissioners were appointed during the 2023 legislative session. Outside of the jurisdiction of the redistricting commission are the maps for the Public Service Commission. The Legislature passed maps for these districts during the 2023 legislative session that split interest groups, large communities, and counties in order to maintain a one party majority. These gerrymandered maps are currently in court as they are a clearly anti-democratic move.

Message Guidance:

- Stress the importance of access to democracy and the integrity of our elections.
- Highlight the threat that dark money and partisan attacks on nonpartisan election administration pose to our democracy.
- Emphasize the need for transparency and accountability in our elections.
- Focus on the importance of protecting the right to vote and ensuring that every eligible Montanan has the opportunity to participate in our democracy.
- Frame attacks on access to democracy as attacks on the fundamental principles of our democracy and the rights of all Montanans.
- Highlight the bipartisan support for protecting access to democracy and the need for elected officials to work together to strengthen our democracy.

II. Effective Communication Strategies

Speak to Shared Values

Montanans care deeply about our clean air, clean water, and public lands. When communicating with voters, it’s essential to speak to these shared values and emphasize the importance of protecting our natural resources for future generations. By framing conservation issues in terms of our shared values, we can build support across party lines and inspire action to protect Montana’s environment.

Tell Personal Stories

Personal stories are a powerful way to connect with voters and illustrate the importance of conservation issues. When talking to voters, share personal anecdotes about your own experiences in Montana’s great outdoors and how these experiences have shaped your views on conservation. Encourage voters to share their own stories and experiences as well, creating a sense of shared identity and purpose around conservation.

Provide Clear Information

When discussing conservation issues with voters, it’s essential to provide clear and accurate information about the challenges we face and the solutions that are available. Avoid jargon and technical language, and instead, use simple and straightforward language that everyone can understand. Provide concrete examples and data to support your arguments, and be prepared to answer any questions voters may have.

DO:

Evoke Future Generations

This concept “is one that voters volunteer organically as a reason for supporting conservation; moreover, voters who hear it consistently rate it as compelling. The economic downturn has done nothing to diminish the resonance of this time-honored rationale for conserving nature.”⁴⁹

Focus on Public Health and Safety

Voters’ hierarchy of needs starts with health and safety, not ecosystems or “the environment.”⁵⁰

Use Specific Examples of Things that Could Harm Us

“Case studies remain a powerful part of successful strategies.”⁵¹

e.g., “The federal government is trying to undermine or eliminate safeguards like the Clean Air and Water Acts that protect our health and, instead, allowing power plants to spew unlimited amounts of toxic pollutants like mercury, arsenic, and sulfur dioxide in our air and water.”⁵²

Emphasize the Solutions

People are far more likely to support action if they think it can make a difference.

“Explaining how voters will benefit from a policy beats describing how they will be threatened by its absence every time.”⁵³

Use Phrases that Imply Ownership, Inclusion and Shared Responsibility

Think “our” & “we” to attach personal meaning.

Use Powerful Validators and Show Local Effects

e.g., “Last year, ranchers faced one of the worst droughts in years – putting their livelihoods at risk and impacting Montana’s economy.”

Invoke a Moral Imperative

Be aspirational and future-oriented while avoiding being harsh or judgmental.

Use a Villain When Needed

“Corporate polluters” consistently tests well.

DON'T:

Get Trapped in “Economy vs. Environment” Debate

Instead, “voters see no reason why we cannot continue to protect land and water while maintaining the country’s economic strength...73 percent of business owners believe we can protect land and

⁴⁹ Bauman 2017

⁵⁰ David Metz, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates and Lori Weigel, Public Opinion Strategies, “The Language of Conservation,” April 15, 2013, <http://www.elkhornsloughctp.org/uploads/files/13824621782013%20Language%20of%20Conservation%20Memo.pdf>

⁵¹ Celinda Lake, Lake Research Partners, “Regulatory Enforcement: Winning the Debate,” 2016 <https://stateinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/LRP-Report-Enforcement-Working-Group-Public-Subset-121616.pdf>

⁵² Bauman 2017

⁵³ Metz et al. 2013

water and have a strong economy at the same time, while fewer than one in five believe that those objectives are even 'sometimes' in conflict."⁵⁴

Focus on Conserving Nature for Nature's Sake

Even if this is what compels you to prioritize conservation, "voters are increasingly telling us that the best reasons to engage in conservation are people-centric...a majority now say that benefits to people are the best reason to conserve nature."⁵⁵

Use the Word "Ban"

This is counter to voters' feelings of having freedom and independence.

Debate Whether Environmental Issues Should Be Our Top Priority

Instead, the question should be, how do we fix them?

Use the Word "Federal"

The federal government is viewed negatively. Refer to specifics, like national parks or national forests. Specific agencies are also popular, so "referring to 'lands overseen by the National Park Service or U.S. Forest Service'...is also a positive."⁵⁶

Don't Talk About "Regulations," Use "Enforcement" of "Safeguards"

"The call for tougher, fairer and increased enforcement (with penalties) beats their message of [regulations] killing jobs, increasing costs, and hurting small business."⁵⁷

Talk About Benefits of Nature or "Nature's Values"

"Few voters spend time visiting "ecosystems" – they visit forests, wetlands, rivers, deserts and mountains."⁵⁸

III: How to Incorporate Conservation and Democracy Issues into Your Campaign

There are several ways conservation issues could be incorporated into your campaign:

- Release policy platforms on key conservation and democracy issues.
- Tie conservation issues directly to economic issues, make the connection undeniable and dependant.
- Add sections on your websites outlining your platforms and plans on voting access, democracy, clean energy jobs, climate change, public lands and water.
- Think about ways to incorporate conservation and democracy issues into your stump speech when knocking doors or hosting a fundraiser.
- Visit sites that lend themselves to talking about conservation issues that affect those specific areas.

⁵⁴ Public Opinion Strategies, Montana Business Survey, 2013, static1.squarespace.com/static/592f175df7e0abbb80a1a4ce/t/59925136f14aa1d24631b734/1502761271761/2013.9.MT_business-survey.pdf

⁵⁵ Metz et al. 2013

⁵⁶ David Metz, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates and Lori Weigel, Public Opinion Strategies, "How to Communicate Effectively to Stop Takeovers of Public Lands," 30 Jul. 2015, twsorg.public.sharepoint.com/Documents/Messaging%20Recommendations%20Stopping%20PLT.pdf

⁵⁷ Lake 2016

⁵⁸ Metz et al. 2013

- Attend events held by the conservation community, and connect with those groups' members.
- Tell stories about conservation issues. These issues have powerful validators (e.g., firefighters on climate change, nurses on public health, blue-collar solar installers, etc). Find ways to incorporate these messengers into your campaign and various messages.
- At a time when many Montanans have property taxes, housing affordability, and population growth top of mind, stress that these issues can be solved in a conservation friendly way. Stress the importance of responsible development and infill to avoid taking over public outdoor spaces and agricultural land while also stressing the job and wage benefits of public lands, and the clean energy economy.

IV. Conclusion

Conservation is a fundamental part of Montana's identity, and protecting our clean air, clean water, and public lands is essential for our state's future. By engaging with voters on conservation and democracy issues, we can build support for policies that protect our environment and ensure that Montana remains a great place to live, work, and play for generations to come.

Thank you for your commitment to conservation, and we look forward to working with you to protect Montana's environment and democracy.