

## Committee puts \$240k behind moderate Republicans in legislative primaries

<https://montanafreepress.org/2024/05/31/conservatives4mt-committee-puts-240k-behind-moderate-republicans-legislative-primaries/>

Spending points to key districts for this year's iteration of the long-running tussle between the hardline and comparatively moderate wings of Montana's Republican party.

by [Arren Kimbel-Sannit](#) and [Eric Dietrich](#) 05.31.2024 Montana Free Press

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Credit: Eliza Wiley / MTFP

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A political action committee with a mix of national and state money has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on mailers intended to sway voters in a series of

bitterly contested Republican legislative primary elections that reveal the fissures in Montana's dominant political party.

As of this week, the PAC, Conservatives4MT, has spent roughly \$240,000 in more than two dozen contested GOP primary races for state House and Senate. The primary election is next Tuesday, June 4.

The group is at least tangentially affiliated with the group of state lawmakers called the Solutions Caucus, a loose coalition of Republicans known for working with Democrats — and against hardliners in their own party — on big-ticket legislation, especially in the areas of health care and fiscal policy. Several of the candidates that the PAC is supporting are guiding forces within the caucus, and the PAC's treasurer is avowed Solutions Caucus member [Rep. Ross Fitzgerald, R-Fairfield](#).

In 2019, at the peak of its power, the Solutions Caucus worked with then-Gov. Steve Bullock, a Democrat, to renew Montana's expanded Medicaid program, despite the opposition of Republican legislative leadership.

But in the years since, Republicans have seized the governor's office and expanded their legislative margins, reducing some of the negotiating leverage enjoyed by the Solutions Caucus. Meanwhile, several Solutions Caucus-style Republicans [have lost primary elections](#) to hardliners or opted not to run for re-election. And in 2023, a group of ultra-right lawmakers [launched the Montana Freedom Caucus](#), a sort-of foil to the Solutions group and its alleged lack of true conservative bona fides.

In an interview this week, Fitzgerald framed the PAC's work as "counter-insurgency," an organized effort to shore up the primary election chances "of some of our more logical folks."

"You got a bell curve in there, you've got the far rights and the far lefts and neither one makes any sense," Fitzgerald said.

The PAC is an independent expenditure group, meaning that while it legally cannot give directly to or coordinate with candidates, it can spend unlimited amounts on materials supporting or opposing a candidate.

Its list of expenditures offers a handy roadmap to a major factional divide in the infamously fractious Montana GOP. Candidates supported by the PAC include Conrad Rep. Llew Jones, often considered the leader of the Solutions Caucus, and Great Falls Rep. Ed Buttrey, who sponsored Medicaid expansion renewal legislation in 2019. Its targets, on the other hand, include outgoing House Speaker Matt Regier, R-Kalispell, and Freedom Caucus chair Sen. Theresa Manzella, R-Hamilton, who faces a primary challenge from state House Rep. Wayne Rusk, R-Corvallis. Indeed, many of the primaries the PAC is spending money in are in Ravalli County, the venue for some of the [fiercest intra-party conflicts in the Montana GOP](#).

The PAC has received the majority of its funding from a few sources, mostly out of state. In April, Guarantee PAC, a committee entirely funded by billionaire philanthropist John Arnold and his wife, Laura, donated \$80,000 to Conservatives4MT. Arnold, a former Enron executive, has also supported several progressive criminal justice and pharmaceutical drug pricing efforts. ([Arnold Ventures is also a major donor to Montana Free Press](#)).

Later that month, the PAC received \$75,000 from the Unite America PAC, “a philanthropic venture fund that invests in nonpartisan election reform to foster a more representative and functional government,” according to its website.

Unite America PAC has also donated substantial sums to Montanans for Election Reform, an organization behind [a pair of ballot initiatives](#) that would reshape Montana’s primary elections in a way that supporters say would create more competition. Those initiatives have attracted the support of some Solutions Caucus-adjacent Republicans. Former lawmaker Bruce Tutvedt, one of Montanans for Election Reform’s members, donated \$25,000 to Conservatives4MT earlier this year.

Other donors to Conservatives4MT include a PAC affiliated with the [Women’s Public Leadership Network](#), a centrist advocacy organization that “educates, organizes and inspires women to seek public office at all levels across the U.S. and become effective leaders once they’re there,” according to its website. The WPLN PAC donated \$100,000 to Conservatives4MT in May.

Spokespeople for Unite America and the WPLN PAC did not return requests for comment.

At the state level, the Montana Hospital Association's PAC has donated \$75,000 to Conservatives4MT. The MHA [supports Medicaid expansion](#). Montana's expanded Medicaid program will sunset in June 2025 unless lawmakers renew it in the 2025 legislative session, setting up yet another high-profile Medicaid vote that will likely pit Republicans against each other. Failure to renew the program would generate a seismic shift in Montana's health care landscape and threaten the coverage of tens of thousands of currently eligible adults.

Fitzgerald, the Conservatives4MT treasurer, said Medicaid expansion is one of several issues the PAC is focused on as it throws its weight in primary elections. That's already a live issue in some races. For example, Regier's primary opponent, Marquis Laude, [has said he supports Medicaid expansion](#), while Regier opposes it.

But the group's mailers touch on several issues. [A recent batch](#), for example, attacked [Rep. Steve Galloway, R-Great Falls](#), and others for supporting legislation in 2023 that would have stipulated that the Montana National Guard "may not be released from the state into active-duty combat" without a congressional declaration of war, a proposal that was opposed by GOP Gov. Greg Gianforte and ultimately failed. The mailer repeats the idea espoused by some opponents of the bill that its passage would mean the Montana National Guard would lose its federal funding.

"Galloway's plan to defund the guard is a slap in the face to our men and women in uniform," it says.

Fitzgerald said the PAC is fighting fire with fire. In the past, he said, shadowy groups have pumped money into primary elections and [made sweeping, often unsubstantiated claims on the campaign trail with the intent of supporting hardliners](#).

"The Freedom Caucus has been a little brutal; it's time to put some balance in the system," he said.

But the Montana Freedom Caucus' political operation in this election is decidedly less sophisticated than that of Conservatives4MT.



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By the end of April, the caucus’ PAC had spent less than \$5,000 in the primary, all in the form of direct — and thus, capped — donations to the campaigns of Manzella, Regier and others. (More recent spending data is not yet available for the PAC).

The caucus’ treasurer, state Sen. Barry Usher, R-Laurel, said the group is supporting about 20 candidates that caucus members collectively identified.

“We figured out who the conservative was and endorsed and supported that person in that race,” he said.

An issue like Medicaid expansion is not the caucus’ singular focus, he said, but he believes it’s a “defining factor” for the Solutions Caucus and their backers in the hospital association.

The name and purpose of the Conservatives4MT PAC is deceptive, he said.

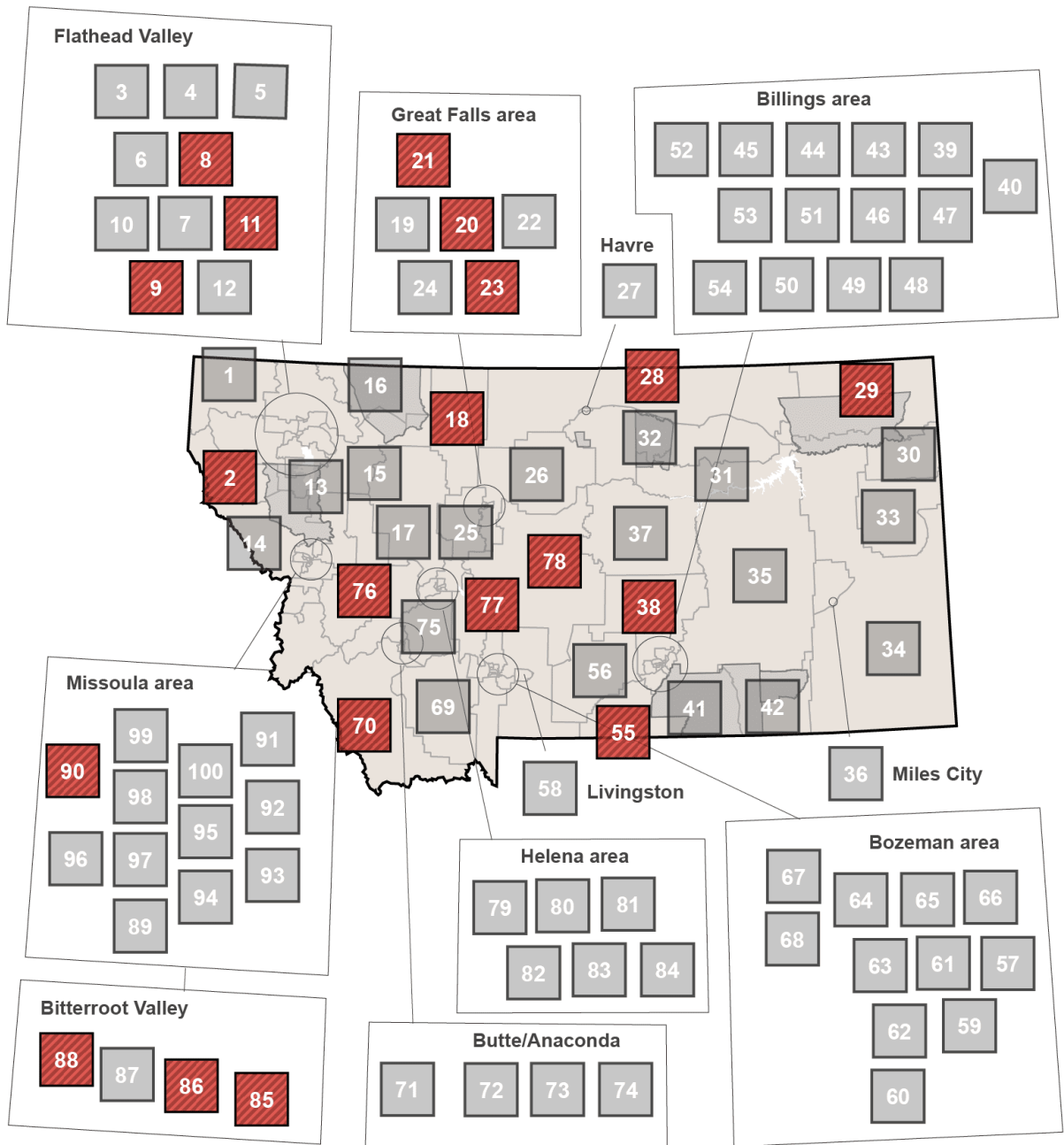
“They’re not conservative, and they know it,” he said, adding: “God says you should not lie and deceive.”

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The 27 House and Senate districts targeted by Conservatives4MT are scattered across the state. Here’s where the group is putting its support in Republican primaries:

# House districts with GOP primaries targeted by Conservatives4MT

Spending reported to the Montana Commissioner of Political Practices as of May 28, 2024.



Graphic: Eric Dietrich / MTFP

- **HD 2 (Libby)** → Thomas Jenkins over Tom Millett
- **HD 8 (northeast Kalispell)** → Rep. Tony Brockman over Lukas Schubert
- **HD 9 (south of Kalispell)** → Lee Huestis over Steven Kelly

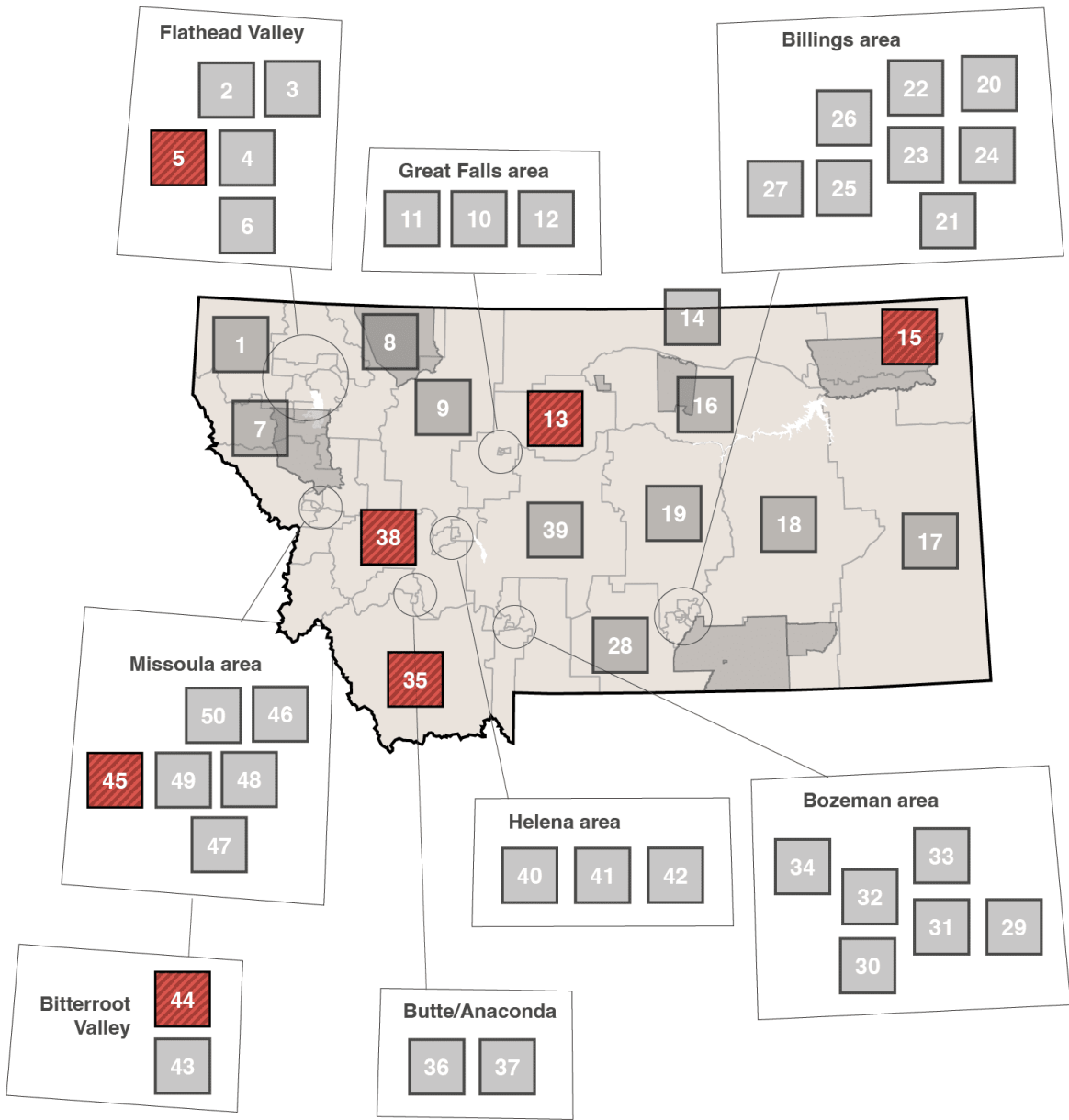
- **HD 11 (east of Kalispell)** → Rob Tracy over Ed Byrne
- **HD 18 (Conrad, Valier, Shelby, Dutton)** → Rep. Llew Jones over James Coombs. Jones chairs the House Appropriations Committee and has been a key Solutions Caucus leader.
- **HD 20 (east-central Great Falls)** → Melissa Nikolakakos over current Rep. Steven Galloway. Galloway's wife, Lola Sheldon-Galloway, is running for SD 13 and also has a Conservatives4MT-backed opponent. Nikolakakos' husband, Rep. George Nikolakakos, is running for re-election against James Whitaker in HD 22 but isn't on the committee's support list.
- **HD 21 (northwest Great Falls)** → Rep. Ed Buttrey over James Osterman. Buttrey, a longtime lawmaker, sponsored the 2019 Medicaid expansion renewal bill.
- **HD 23 (south Great Falls)** → Eric Tilleman over three other Republicans: Pete Anderson, John Proud and Josh Denually
- **HD 28 (Chester, Chinook, Malta and Opheim)** → Eric Albus over Mark Wicks and Wayne Stahl
- **HD 29 (Glasgow, Nashua, Scobey, Plentywood)** → Valerie Moore over Miles Knudsen. Miles Knudsen is the father of Montana Attorney General Austin Knudsen and the husband of Rep. Rhonda Knudsen, who is running this year in SD 15.
- **HD 38 (Roundup, Ryegate, Lavina, Huntley)** → Rep. Greg Oblander over Nancy Kemler
- **HD 55 (Red Lodge, Bridger, Joliet)** → Rep. Brad Barker over Mary Horman and Lisa Bennett
- **HD 70 (Dillon, Lima, Rocker)** → Mary Ann Nicholas over Shannon Maness and Mike Klakken
- **HD 76 (Deer Lodge, Philipsburg, Drummond, Seeley Lake)** → Rep. John Fitzpatrick over Dave Kesler III
- **HD 77 (Townsend, Wheatland, Manhattan, Winston)** → Kyle McMurray over Rep. Jane Gillette



- **HD 78 (White Sulphur Springs, Belt, Harlowton, Big Timber)** → Randyn Gregg over James Bergstrom
- **HD 85 (south Bitterroot Valley)** → Rep. Michele Binkley over Kathy Love
- **HD 86 (Hamilton)** → Rep. David Bedey over Robert Wallace
- **HD 88 (Stevensville, Florence)** → Greg Overstreet over Kim Dailey
- **HD 90 (Frenchtown, Alberton, Superior, St. Regis, Paradise)** → Curtis Cochran over Jeff Stanek and Steven Delisle

# Senate districts with GOP primaries targeted by Conservatives4MT

Spending reported to the Montana Commissioner of Political Practices as of May 28, 2024.



Graphic: Eric Dietrich / MTFP

- **SD 5 (south and west of Kalispell)** → Marquis Laude over Speaker of the House Matt Regier
- **SD 13 (Cascade, Vaughn, Fort Benton, Big Sandy)** → Rep. Josh Kassmier over Rep. Lola Sheldon-Galloway. Sheldon-Galloway is the vice-chair of the Montana GOP and the wife of Rep. Steve Galloway, who is running in HD 20.

- **SD 15 (Sidney, Scobey, Plentywood)** → Gregg Hunter over House Speaker Pro Tempore Rhonda Knudsen. Rhonda Knudsen is the mother of Attorney General Austin Knudsen and the wife of Miles Knudsen
- **SD 35 (Ennis, Dillon, Twin Bridges)** → Ray Shaw over Mark McGinley and Tony Tezak
- **SD 38 (Boulder, Deer Lodge, Philipsburg, Drummond)** → Rep. Greg Frazer over Sen. Becky Beard and Jeremy Mygland
- **SD 44 (North Bitterroot Valley)** → Rep. Wayne Rusk over Sen. Theresa Manzella and Brad Davis. Manzella is the leader of the Legislature’s hardline Republican Freedom Caucus
- **SD 45 (I-90 corridor from Frenchtown to Idaho border)** → Rep. Denley Loge over AnnaMarie White

Not every Solutions Caucus-aligned legislator facing or mounting a primary challenge is on the Conservatives4MT list. For example, first-term Rep. Courtenay Sprunger, a protege of former Solutions Caucus lawmaker Frank Garner, is facing a primary challenge from hardliner-backed candidate Shaun Pandina in central Kalispell’s House District 7, [according to reporting by the Daily Inter Lake](#), but is not backed by Conservatives4MT.

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