

Voter Mobilization:

Montana Income Support Coalition

With Montana ranking last nationwide in wages, and first in poverty growth and number of people working more than one job, progressive groups were inspired to take coordinated action in the 2000 elections.

The Montana Income Support Collaboration (MISC) is made up of three grassroots groups: Working for Equality and Economic Liberation (WEEL), Montana People's Action (MPA) and Women's Opportunity and Resource Development (WORD). This strategic alliance formed to address income support issues, to further economic justice in Montana, and to encourage a progressive network of activists and allies. The 2000 election work was our first major coordinated effort. We worked extensively with other partners including Montana Women's Vote 2000 Project (focused on mobilizing women voters), Youth Vote 2000 and the Native Vote efforts of Indian People's Action and Native Action.


MISC's focus was voter education and voter turnout. MISC created and distributed 40,000 voter education tabloids that addressed where the candidates stood on issues important to low-income Montanans such as healthcare, economic opportunity, quality childcare, food and housing. Using census data on low-income households, MISC targeted eleven low-income precincts in five cities across the state for voter turnout and education efforts. Canvassers knocked on doors, engaged voters in issue-focused discussions, distributed candidate comparison leaflets, offered absentee ballots (which create greater accessibility to the voting process for many low-income people) and provided information on rides to the polls. In addition, MISC coordinated phone banks and conducted poll watching in our targeted precincts.

Extending our voter outreach efforts further, groups in the collaboration — together with

Indian People's Action and Native Action — sponsored traditional Indian Taco Feeds in Missoula and Helena, where we distributed voter education resources. Other groups compiled candidate positions in a leaflet titled "Why Should I Vote?"

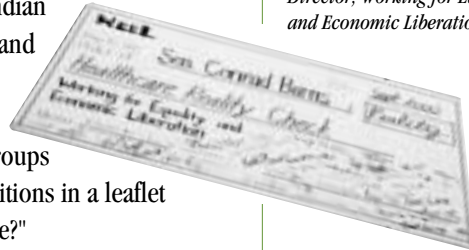
WEEL seized an opportunity to hold US Senator Conrad Burns accountable after he made the comment that "any uninsured Montanans are uninsured by choice." WEEL members went to his office and presented him with a "reality check" and current data on the number of uninsured Montanans. Voters reinforced the importance of WEEL's agenda by nearly handing Burns' Senate seat to political unknown Brian Schweitzer, who championed pharmaceutical reform and health care issues. While the elections meant little change in the makeup of the Governor's office, the congressional delegation or the legislature as a whole, we successfully injected our issues and the concerns of our constituencies into candidate debates.

Additionally, the political participation of low-income, urban and rural Native Americans, and women in the political process increased. Key precincts saw a 5% rise in voter turnout which was our goal. In some rural precincts or our work increased voter turnout by 20-25%.

Elevating low-income issues and increasing voter turnout had a significant impact, given the unprecedented amount of money funneled into Montana races for campaigns and advertising. Montana's low-income allies may not be in office this term but the issues are clearly defined. It is clear that due to innovative efforts such as MISC's GOTV work, we are making progress. 

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By Kate Kaban
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501(C)(3), (C)(4) Resources

Is the tax exempt structure and its regulations a convenient method for restricting the political power of community-based organizations?

The clout of certain churches, associations, and other larger institutional players (who happen to be tax exempt) demonstrates that nonprofits can be effective in the political arena. It's a matter of understanding the law and staying within it, while refusing to be silenced or marginalized.

(C)(3)s, (C)(4)s & PACs: A Primer on Political Activities and Tax-Exempt Organizations

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