

Blue Organizing in Red States:

Voices from Wyoming, Idaho & Montana

by Holly Pruett
Views Editor

National election results don't reveal an accurate picture of progressive organizing in so-called "red states." To debunk some of the prevailing myths, Views spoke with Tom Throop from Wyoming's Equality State Policy Center; Jim Hansen with United Vision for Idaho; and Judy Smith of WORD (Women's Opportunity and Resource Development) in Montana.

"The national electoral yardstick is the wrong measure of what it means to have a progressive base in rural states."

— Jim Hansen

What's missing from the caricature of your state as a "red state"?

Judy: Bush may have won Montana — Kerry didn't even campaign here — but Montana is not a red state. We have one of the most progressive state constitutions in the country. Our environmental and women's movements are active and successful. Brian Schweitzer was the first Democratic elected Governor in twenty years, joining a full slate of statewide office holders from that Party. The Democrats took control of both the Senate and the House, after a cliff-hanger that gave a contested House seat to a Democrat by only one vote.

Jim: The last time Idaho voted "blue" in a presidential race was for Lyndon Johnson. But Idaho has elected a number of Democrats at the state and local level, particularly at the city level. For first time, progressives have formed a caucus within the Democratic Party. Activists have shied away from working within political parties, but now they have some electoral victories of their own to claim.



Tom: In Wyoming, the home county of Vice President Dick Cheney was the only county carried by the Democratic ticket (by 53–45). The Republican Party in the state has veto-proof majorities in both houses. Citizens register to vote with the dominant party in power so they can weigh in on the more interesting and meaningful primary elections. In these circumstances, philosophical diversity occurs within the party in power, not just between the two major parties.

Are "red" and "blue" meaningful distinctions in your state?

Tom: On both electoral and policy organizing, progressive activists in Wyoming work along philosophical lines, rather than along party lines. On many occasions, moderate Republicans have more

in common with Democrats than they do with conservative "commercialists" in their own party. To stop bad proposals and pass good legislation, activists in "red" states frequently work to build a majority on issues by working with both moderate Republicans and Democrats.

Jim: Our objective is to see a progressive worldview articulated, regardless of political party. Idaho is seeing an increase in the number of progressive Republicans. It takes real fortitude for them to make it through their primaries. In Boise, some Republicans are describing themselves off the progressive playbook: public investment in schools, health care, smart growth, protection of the environment. They sound like Democrats in other parts of the state.

Where did you see progressive gains in this last election?

Judy: In addition to the shift in political power among office holders, Montana saw progressive positions prevail in three initiatives. Voters defeated the repeal of a cyanide mining ban that passed as a citizen initiative four years ago. The mining industry tried to use the old jobs versus environment argument but it didn't work, even in Billings, which is our more conservative urban area. The mining industry is part of the old economy and voters know it. Montana also legalized medical marijuana and significantly raised the tobacco tax. Montana Women Vote and Montana Conservation Voters did a lot of work to turn out voters. Take Montana Back PAC worked in 13 races for progressive candidates. Redistricting made a difference: the Democrats were able to create competitive districts in most of the state.

Jim: When we have a critical mass of progressives, we have proven we can win. In Boise, for example, we're seeing the fruits of the seeds planted several years back, when we methodically built relationships among constituencies. Members of progressive groups had worked together on a legislative race (to elect Idaho Women's Network leader Betsy Dunklin to the State Senate), but never on a

city-wide campaign. In 2002, groups worked to pass an ordinance to preserve the foothills through a two-year tax. Since then, this same base has elected a progressive mayor and three progressive city council members. The number of progressive Republicans is also growing.

Tom: Progressive activists not only worked with Democrats throughout the election cycle, but also moderate Republicans in primary elections. During a General Election where the Vice President of the United States hailed from Wyoming, we were fortunate not to experience a shift in the philosophical make-up of our Legislature. Democrats lost three seats in the Senate and one in the House, but those losses were offset by increased numbers of moderate Republicans in both the state Senate and House.

How do you account for the differences between these victories and how people voted at the top of the ticket?

Judy: We are a very poor state and people are scared. That makes them receptive to the anti-tax, anti-government rhetoric promoted by the Republican Party.

Jim: In rural areas, the impacts of Republican disinvestment policies are hitting disproportionately. Folks feel isolated. No one is investing in finding leaders in these communities, in organizing them, and reframing how politics impact them. Absent that, national messages come in and shape the vote.

How can progressives build more power in a “red state” environment?

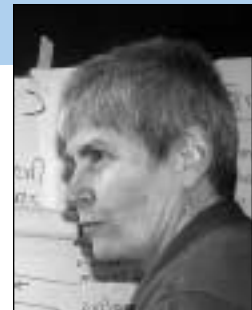
Judy: Having real resources available for community education and voter mobilization makes the difference. Progressives saw the biggest loss on same sex marriage, which lacked the resources of the other ballot initiatives. Even discussing gay marriage is a big step here. When asked during the campaign, our new Democratic Governor said he did not support gay marriage or civil unions.

Tom: To carve out “blue” victories in a “red” state, does the Democratic Party have to abandon progressive values or constituencies? Absolutely not. Our experience in Wyoming is that citizens

support the progressive values and positions on issues of both Democratic and moderate Republican elected officials and candidates. We may have to weather occasional conservative ideological land-slides, more prevalent during Presidential election years. But these are moderated by thoughtful and highly-organized campaigns on progressive issues that matter to working families and other rank and file citizens in the state. Carefully chosen issues enable progressives to make gains more readily in off-years when Wyoming’s five statewide offices stand for election.

Jim: How do we connect with Bush voters who vote for liberals further down the ticket? We need to reframe our message to unite our specific issues into a larger worldview that connects with the needs of rural and working people. Our challenge is to reach into Idaho communities without a critical progressive mass. There are teachers in these communities, and people who care about the environment. But the farther away members of progressive groups are from organizational decision-makers, the harder it is to involve them.

We are creating a nonpartisan 501(c)(4) arm of our coalition to recruit and train candidates around the state. It’s a big investment. You don’t just send missionaries. We need to build organizations in these communities. Toward that end, we created a social justice fund: The Fund for Idaho. Small grants of \$500–\$2500 help rural activists think of themselves organizationally. It sends a signal: you’re an important part of the movement, and worth investing in. We’ve been amazed at the numbers connected to Dean and MoveOn.org in rural Idaho: pockets that are quite sizeable and represent a potential statewide majority.



Last year, organizers in 14 states prevented passage of anti-gay amendments in their legislatures. Half of these were “red states.” As we went to press, the Idaho Senate failed to muster enough votes to place a ban on gay marriage and civil unions on the ballot.