



In a race that may end with a vanishingly thin margin of victory, the state's Native Americans and union members are playing a central role. Photographs by Alexis J. Hagestad for The New Yorker

On the cool, drizzly last Saturday of September, Montana's governor, Steve Bullock, spent yet another afternoon on the road, travelling from the capital, Helena, to the western part of the state for a string of appearances. A former state attorney general and onetime Presidential candidate, he is challenging the freshman Republican senator Steve Daines in a race that could very well flip the Senate in the Democrats' favor. Bullock was trailing or leading in the polls by a point or two, depending on the week. As a sitting governor, his handling of the coronavirus pandemic has been on trial: his spring shutdown earned high praise, but case numbers have recently soared. To win, Bullock needs every vote he can get from Montana's traditional Democratic coalition, which is composed of seniors and conservationists and, above all, Native Americans and union workers. Which is why, on that Saturday, he made sure to visit a union headquarters and a tribal reservation.

In a small office in Kalispell, a northwestern town best known for its proximity to the sublime Glacier National Park, Bullock greeted a few of the seven hundred nurses who recently formed a union at Kalispell Regional Healthcare, a local hospital network. Purple stickers and “WE SUPPORT KRH NURSES” yard signs seemed to be everywhere, along with whiteboard flowcharts and children’s toys. Molly Moody, an organizer with the Service Employees International Union, gave Bullock a hug—they’d first met twenty years ago, when he was a labor lawyer. Bullock listened to the nurses describe their fight for a first contract, then made his way an hour south, to a coronavirus-safe, drive-in rally on the campus of Salish Kootenai College, on the Flathead Reservation.

Under darkening clouds, a long line of mostly trucks and S.U.V.s turned past a highway billboard reading “PLEASE WEAR A MASK / PROTECT OUR ELDERS” and into a giant parking lot. In Montana, as in the rest of the country, Native communities have suffered more sickness and death owing to COVID-19 than their population numbers would predict. A prerecorded drum circle played over loudspeakers as a jumbotron projected the names and head shots of Democratic candidates for local, state, and federal office. One after another, eight politicians climbed a dais and unmasked at the mike. Bullock spoke last. “I’ve learned from you. I’ve grown with you. I’ve respected the government-to-government relationship,” he said, teeth chattering, to a barrage of supportive honks. “There’s a real choice here—Indian country should never be an afterthought.”

Steve Bullock, Montana's Democratic governor, is challenging Senator Steve Daines in a tossup race that could tip the Senate.

Native Americans are the largest minority group in Montana and, from the perspective of the Democratic Party, as presumptively reliable a voting block as Latinos in the Southwest or Black voters in big cities and the South. In 2018, when Montana's other Senate seat was on the ballot, Native voters, concentrated among late-count absentees, were widely credited with securing a third term for the Democrat Jon Tester. But they are not a monolith. Ian I. McRyhew, a Jicarilla Apache citizen and student at Salish Kootenai, told me at the rally, "I don't identify as a Democrat or a Republican. Some of my views fall more into Libertarian." In 2016, he voted for Donald Trump, he whispered—a fact he rarely discloses. But "I'm definitely voting for Bullock," he said.

This year, the Senate race in Montana, population one million, could be decided by a vanishingly thin margin. Bullock's fate, and perhaps the nation's, may rest on the ballots of around forty-five thousand voting-age Native Americans and forty-six thousand union workers, half of whom belong to the Montana Federation of Public Employees.

Every election, in every state, invokes its own peculiar imagery and slogans and categorically "American" tests of authenticity. In Montana, candidates must wear the worn blues of old jeans, along with belt buckles, cowboy boots, and rugged fall jackets. They must pose in various outdoor settings, lift guns in the air, and speak of "access to public lands" in lieu of climate change. They must distance themselves from candidacy-killing concepts like a sales tax, friendliness with China, or a ban on the Keystone XL pipeline, while promising health care, jobs, and tribal sovereignty. Republicans like Daines, a wealthy businessman from Bozeman, hope to benefit from their association with President Trump and Vice-President Mike Pence, who won the state in 2016 by a margin of twenty per cent. Meanwhile, Democrats like Bullock avoid gratuitous references to "Chuck and Nancy"—Charles Schumer, the Senate Minority Leader, and Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House.

Montanans pride themselves on voting independently. Since I moved here, in early August, for a journalism fellowship at the University of Montana, several people have used the same gesture by way of explanation. Holding an imaginary pencil, they start at the top of a ballot and move down in a series of left-right zigzags: Democrat, Republican, Democrat, Republican. The statewide and federal offices currently abide by this logic: a Democratic governor (Bullock), a Republican congressman (Greg Gianforte, famous for body-slamming a *Guardian* reporter), a Democratic senator (Tester), a Republican senator (Daines), a Republican secretary of state, and a Republican auditor. The question is: Will this purple pattern hold four years into the Trump era and in the thick of an ever-worsening pandemic?

At the end of March, Bullock shut down the state, drawing national admiration and surprise, perhaps on the mistaken assumption that Montana is Tea Party red. But, after he eased restrictions, businesses reopened, summer vacationers arrived en masse, and schools and colleges resumed in-person teaching—and the number of new daily COVID cases went from seven to seven hundred. In a debate between the Senate candidates hosted by Montana PBS, in late September, Daines criticized Bullock by pointing to "consecutive days of record positive COVID numbers." Montana now has one of the worst per-capita infection rates in the country.

Yet only a small minority of Montanans I interviewed, Democrat and Republican alike, told me that they were dissatisfied with Bullock's handling of the pandemic. A few people complained that Phase I had not lasted long enough. Several teachers said that the governor should have required masks in schools from the beginning of the summer, instead of adding that requirement much later. And some Native citizens regretted that the highways cutting through their land had not been closed to outside traffic. The Blackfeet Nation, for one, restricted access on the eastern side of Glacier National Park, even after the state began to move into Phase II. (About two-thirds of Montana's indigenous people live on reservation land.) "I supported Bullock's shutdown, also because tribes could then extend it," Alissa Snow, a Blackfeet citizen and director of the Native vote program for the Montana Democrats, told me.

The disproportionate impact of the pandemic makes Native outreach at once more necessary and more fraught. Snow is currently supervising twenty-four organizers across the state's seven reservations, where sovereignty, reproductive rights, health care, language preservation, domestic abuse, and environmental policy are core issues. But, given the well-documented history of discrimination against indigenous voters in the U.S., she explained, "voting feels foreign. It's new to Native people."

The tribal nations of Montana, a key voting bloc, recently raised their flags in a new pavilion outside the state capitol.

The vast distances of rural Montana, combined with the coronavirus pandemic, have made mail-in voting essential.

Jonathan Windy Boy, a longtime Democratic state legislator who supports charter schools and opposes abortion, represents a district that overlaps with two reservations. (Montana's "citizen legislature" meets for just ninety days every other year; a record seven per cent of its current members are Native American, on par with the state's general population.) Windy Boy, who is Chippewa Cree, believes that the Native vote could decide Bullock's race. "Whoever's going to win the U.S. Senate this round is going to be determined on the outcome of Indian country," Windy Boy told me. "If you take out the map that Tester had, Tester won by a narrow margin, three per cent or two per cent, and had overwhelming support from Indian country in the state."

Bullock has received endorsements from a handful of indigenous organizations, including the Fort Belknap Indian Community Council, the Chippewa Cree Tribal Business Committee of the Rocky Boy's reservation, the Fort Peck Tribal Executive Board, and Montana Native Vote; Daines (and Trump) have received the blessing of one tribal chairman, on the Crow Reservation. Many indigenous voters I spoke with were critical of the G.O.P. for having sued Bullock and Montana to block mail-in voting, which forty-five of the state's fifty-six counties voluntarily chose to implement. Nor was it lost on these voters that, in 2018, state Republicans successfully pushed a referendum prohibiting any individual from collecting and delivering more than six absentee ballots; the law was widely perceived as undermining minority-outreach efforts, because some tribal communities are nearly a hundred miles from the nearest county election office. But, in September, Montana Native Vote and the American Civil Liberties Union of Montana won a lawsuit striking down the ballot-collection law; a few days later, the state prevailed against the G.O.P. on the question of mail-in voting. Democrats felt buoyed by the verdicts.

Montana is often called a red state, but it has had a Democratic governor since 2005, and often elects a purplish mix of politicians.

Though most state and local candidates are counting on the energy behind Bullock (and [Joe Biden](#)) to translate downward, the only Native politician running for statewide office told me that he could send energy up the ticket. Shane Morigeau, the Democratic candidate for state auditor and a member of the Salish and Kootenai tribes, hopes to be a draw for indigenous voters and thus “increase Indian-country turnout” for everyone in the Party.

On a recent afternoon, surrounded by luminous red- and amber-tinted trees, I followed Morigeau; his wife, Jamie Iguchi; and his campaign staffer, Shibu Arens, to the members-only Deer Creek Shooting Center—four conspicuously nonwhite people in Missoula’s most conspicuously conservative gated compound. Next to the imposing front entrance, a big orange sign implored “BAN BULLOCK / SAVE YOUR GUNS.” Morigeau, who grew up hunting and fishing and owns twenty-two firearms, has identified, off and on, as an Independent. While in the state legislature, he sponsored bills that might be seen as “tough on crime” and at odds with the decarceral momentum among progressives. At the same time, he lobbied successfully for the state to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act—which Daines opposes—and continues to advocate for behavioral and mental health.

Morigeau often talks about his familial connection to these issues: he was raised poor, in the reservation town of Ronan. When he was in middle school, his sister committed suicide; he also learned that his grandmother was sexually abused at the Ursuline Academy, a local Catholic boarding school. If elected, Morigeau would oversee the insurance industry, allowing him to approximate certain provisions of the A.C.A. through regulation, even if the Supreme Court decides to repeal the law when it rules on it once again this term. A hundred and thirty thousand Montanans, more than a tenth of the population, rely on expanded Medicaid or the insurance exchange for health coverage.

As of mid-October, a hundred and eighteen million dollars had been spent in the “battle of the Steves,” making it the most expensive race in Montana history. The Wesleyan Media Project found that there were more television ads related to Bullock or Daines than in any other Senate race in the country this year. Despite this lavish outlay, both candidates have presented themselves as friends of the working class, acknowledging Montana’s past and present as a relative bastion of unionism. Montana was where, after an organizer with the Wobblies (the Industrial Workers of the World) was lynched and a hundred and sixty-eight miners were killed by an explosion in Butte, in 1917, unions of every kind rose up against the Anaconda corporation’s “copper kings.” Today, Montana’s union members are more likely to wear scrubs or a school lanyard than a hard hat, but they have managed to resist the imposition of a private-sector right-to-work law, unlike their peers in every neighboring state: Idaho, Wyoming, and North and South Dakota.

In the mining town of Butte, I met with Amanda Curtis, the most powerful union leader in Montana. (Some may also remember her as the whiskey-drinking radical in the Butte episode of Anthony Bourdain’s “Parts Unknown.”) Curtis is a career schoolteacher, longtime union activist, and former state legislator who, earlier this year, became the president of the twenty-three-thousand-member Montana Federation of Public Employees. Her ascent to the post as a young, progressive woman was a big deal in union and political circles: her predecessor, Eric Feaver, had been in the role for thirty-six years before retiring. Curtis now splits her time between the M.F.P.E. headquarters, in Helena, and the historic miner’s cottage that she shares with her husband, Kevin, a card-carrying Wobbly, and their seventeen-year-old dog.

Amanda Curtis leads the Montana Federation of Public Employees. The state's largest union is investing millions of dollars in this election.

Shane Morigeau, the Democratic candidate for state auditor and a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, hopes to attract Native voters.

M.F.P.E., thanks to a funding boost from national affiliates, has recently invested more than six million dollars in political organizing and advertising, much of it focussed on the races for governor (to prevent a right-to-work law and safeguard Medicaid), schools superintendent (to fend off charter schools), and the U.S. Senate. The union has endorsed a long list of candidates for local, state, and federal office—mostly Democrats, but also twenty-six moderate Republicans. “In our regular meetings, I try hard not to sound like an offended liberal,” Curtis told me. “I don’t want to alienate people who have conservative leanings.” She supports Bullock for his policies, but has an additional, personal stake in defeating Daines: in 2014, when Daines first ran for the Senate, Curtis was his last-minute challenger; the Democrats recruited her when their initial candidate was forced to withdraw in a plagiarism scandal. Daines won handily, becoming the first Republican in a century to occupy the seat and helping Republicans retake control of the Senate. (Daines’s campaign did not respond to my e-mails and calls regarding his current race.)

As part of M.F.P.E.’s effort to unseat Daines, Curtis hired a team of “member political organizers” to make calls, send texts, and knock on doors. A few weeks ago, I sat in on the group’s regular check-in meeting over Zoom. Most of the organizers were teachers, but there were also a few retirees and a prison guard. They were perhaps the Democrats’ best chance for focussed outreach—but all of them seemed to be maxed out. Peter Strand, a teacher in Bozeman, described seven-hour school-board meetings and colleagues who were scared to go to work because of the coronavirus. Erika McMillin, a school psychologist in Helena, cried as she gave her update: on top of the chaos of in-person teaching during the pandemic, a former student had recently died. And Bryan Blair, the prison guard, who lives and works in far-eastern Miles City, had been forced to quarantine, along with thirty other workers at the facility.

Nine hours west, an M.F.P.E. member who teaches at Glacier High School, in Kalispell, offered a very different view of the election. Chris Adamcyk, a native of Long Island, calls himself a “reluctant union member” who is “socially liberal” and “fiscally conservative.” Adamcyk told me that he voted for Trump in 2016, but plans to vote “à la carte” this year: Biden for President and Daines for Senate. “I like Steve Bullock,” he said, but “I’m probably going to pull the lever on Daines, because I don’t know if Montana needs two Democratic senators. The weight right now, it’s precarious. I would like to see the G.O.P. be the majority.”

Is Montana red or purple? Or merely populist? For white, working-class Montanans, the long shadow of the copper kings has engendered a general skepticism of power and outside influence. For those in Indian country, the history of attempted genocide and affronts to tribal sovereignty have produced apathy and a mistrust of electoral politics. Last I checked, the polls showed Bullock down by nine points one week, then up by two the next, back to a statistical tie. In order to prevail, beyond the margin of error, Bullock and every other Democrat in the state will need to persuade their traditional constituents not to follow Adamczyk's lead. The stakes for Montanans are too high, they say, to zigzag a ballot out of stubborn independence.

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