

## **Grassroots Democracy Program**

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**May 23, 2024**

The Grassroots Democracy Program is the political arm of our network. It is a regional coalition of rural vote projects and Native vote organizations that work together to elect candidates to champion issues that support rural, Indigenous, and BIPOC communities. We do this by identifying and training our member leaders to run for office, holding elected officials accountable throughout the year, and passing smart public policy to advance our issues at the state, local, and federal levels. We are working to build permanent infrastructure that stays strong and consistent throughout election cycles to help build a bench of elected officials across our region to champion the policies our network prioritizes.

I do not need to remind any of you how important the election is this year and what is at stake. We know that what happens this year will gravely impact the people, places, and values that make our region special. We know that our communities are worth fighting for and that our work during election years and outside of them is critical to protecting and fighting for them. The Grassroots Democracy Program has been tirelessly working to meet the moment of 2024 and execute programs to secure wins this year and build for the long term.

### **Sandy Burch joins the WORC Team!**

The first goal of the Grassroots Democracy Program in 2024 was to fill the newly approved Political Campaign Coordinator position. We were able to quickly fill this position by hiring Sandy Burch. Sandy had spent three election cycles with Northern Plains and Montana Rural Voters as Canvass Director and was excited to expand her role and join WORC's team. Sandy's focus this year has been executing our expanded Montana field program, including a winter clean energy canvass with Northern Plains and launching Montana Rural Voters statewide rural field program for Senator Tester's reelection.



### **New Opportunities in North Dakota**

Dakota Resource Council and North Dakota Rural Voters are working on creating a plan to start community engagement and base-building work around the goal of reducing rural opposition to renewable energy. This is in response to the new Rural Energy Builders project that started after Jane Kleeb won the 2023 Climate Breakthrough Award. The Rural Energy Builders campaign will be initiated in North Dakota, Michigan, and Illinois with \$400,000 allocated to each state for the next three years. DRC has started by forming a coalition that includes organizing allies, lawyers, and wind industry folks who are all coming together to create a statewide plan. A portion of the \$400,000 is allocated for c4 activities and North Dakota Rural Voters are working on determining what work they can do to support the overall statewide goals.

North Dakota Native Vote and the Grassroots Democracy Program have been collaborating on creating a strong plan to elect more Indigenous legislators this year. In response to NDNV's work to secure more Native majority legislative districts through redistricting and subsequent

lawsuits, there have been consistently more Native candidates running for the legislature than before. In early March, the NDNV board and staff and Leah came together for a one-day campaign planning session and since then have been working together to get ready to launch their candidate-specific election work in July.

### **Using Canvassing to Advance Clean Energy in Montana**

Montana Rural Voters and Northern Plains Resource Council collaborated on a clean energy canvass program this winter. It started with a clean energy survey where the canvass team made 5,993 phone calls and had 397 conversations with Montana voters asking them to rate their support for clean energy. They found that 75% of people had a positive rating of 5 or



higher. They used this initial survey data to launch a Clean Energy Deep Canvass which continued through March. These conversations started the same way, with a survey asking people to rate their support for clean energy and then canvassers used deep canvassing techniques and personal stories to have a conversation with Montana voters about the importance of clean energy. After a total of 10,112 attempts, they had 663 deep

canvass conversations and found that 83% of people rated their support for clean energy at 5 or higher. The third phase of the canvass program is a clean energy benefit canvass focused on educating and connecting voters with the new funding available for energy-efficient upgrades to their homes. All told, this winter we found 581 Montana voters who are interested in follow-up, whether that means learning more about Northern Plains, signing up to volunteer, or attending an educational event about the home energy rebate program.

### **All Eyes on Montana's Packed Ballot**

We all know that re-electing Jon Tester to the United States Senate is of the utmost national importance, and is also locally critical for family farmers, ranchers, small businesses, and working families in Montana. But the election extends past the Senate as well. Montana's Supreme Court is poised on a knife's edge, with two of our best current Justices vacating their seats next year. Replacing them with two new Justices who will uphold our landmark state constitution is vital for us to protect many of our most threatened rights and freedoms, including our right to a clean and healthful environment, our privacy and reproductive rights, public lands, public schools, Indigenous sovereignty, and more. 2024 also presents a golden opportunity to end the GOP's legislative supermajority in Montana – a crucial step to taking action on climate, reauthorizing Medicaid Expansion to keep 100,000 Montanans from losing their healthcare and preserving the foundations of our democracy. With newly drawn legislative maps, Montana also has the opportunity to flip as many as 15 legislative seats, which would be a landmark historic shift that creates major new public policy opportunities.

Both Montana Rural Voters and Western Native Voice are planning to execute their largest electoral programs to date. Leah worked with WNV staff early in 2024 to support their orientation, training, and planning of their field program and is continuing to support their state-level expenditures throughout this year.

### **South Dakota Energized for Elections**

Dakota Rural Action and WORC are working together to relaunch South Dakota Rural Voters, which has been inactive since 2014. We are working on an analysis of voter registration and turnout to determine how we can best work to change the electorate in South Dakota and start making progress on electing more champions on our issues. In the coming months, we will be working to form a steering committee, finalize campaign goals for 2024, and begin strategizing for 2025.

Since the December meeting, Western Native Voice, WORC, North Dakota Native Vote, Dakota Rural Action, and local Native leaders in South Dakota have been working to determine how to build stronger infrastructure for civic organizing in Native communities. As a result of that work, the He Sapa Voter Project is expanding past Rapid City to do statewide voter registration drives. They are also working on formalizing their organizational structure and have applied for their own 501c4 status.

### **Long-sought wins in reach in Colorado**

Cycle after cycle, Colorado Rural Voters has been working to elect good candidates to the Garfield County Commission, which is critical to advancing local oil and gas campaigns. In 2022, two Western Colorado Alliance members ran and lost by slim margins of only a couple of percentage points. Because Garfield County doesn't have term limits for County Commissioners, 2024 is the first year in decades that there have been open seats without incumbents running. Colorado Rural Voters are gearing up to take advantage of this opportunity and run a strong independent expenditure campaign this cycle. We are also exploring opportunities to protect some of our champions at the legislature that are running in newly drawn competitive districts. In the coming months, we will be bringing together leaders and staff to finalize our plans for this year.

### **Improving Compliance and Financial Systems**

As the Grassroots Democracy Program has grown over the last handful of years, we have also been working to improve our financial and compliance systems. Specifically, this has looked like creating a compliance manual for each Rural Voter project that outlines what is required of us at the state and federal level for reporting and campaign compliance, as well as an implementation plan that operationalizes these requirements. Part of the implementation plan was securing a FEC compliance consultant, Lebin & Yates Consulting, who will be doing our FEC reports for Montana Rural Voters this year. In response to the board's vote in December, we have opened additional bank accounts for each of the Rural Voters projects so that we can house specific dollars that we can support or oppose candidates with and match these accounts with our reports.