-MT GOP Sues Itself-

By Dave Johnson

hat is in a name? A rose by any other name would smell just as sweet, William Shakespeare famously said. In the world of political organizations, names matter. They convey authority, legitimacy, and often, historical continuity.

When a Republican County Central Committee Chairman and another Republican County Central Committee State Committeewoman with over 17 years dedicated to helping the MT GOP, chose to use create a group to help central committees and named it the "Montana Association of Republican Central Committees" (MARCCO), the move sparked controversy, especially within the ranks of the Montana Republican Party (MT GOP). The MTGOP didn't call up their members and ask for details. Instead the MT GOP served them with papers and filed a lawsuit against MARCCO over their use of the term "Republican." The suit is likely to cost each side over \$120,000 to defend.

This lawsuit is especially interesting given that the Montana Republican Party prides itself on upholding the U.S. Constitution, yet through this lawsuit is violating the 1st Amendment rights of free speech and assembly of Republicans in the State.

What is also interesting is that no one on the MT GOP Executive Committee was aware the lawsuit was filed until months after the June MT GOP Convention. So, who at the MT GOP authorized the lawsuit-especially when it comes with a six-figure price tag?

An unsubstantiated claim that is circulating, states that Debbie Churchill, the MT GOP National Committeewoman and the MT GOP Executive Director, Danielle Tribble, who has since tendered her resignation-coordinated the lawsuit without consulting with the Executive Committee. However, as of press time, The Liberty Bell was unable to reach either woman for comment.

The lawsuit was filed in April of 2024, and around that time the MT GOP Rules Committee suggested a bylaw change requiring permission from the MT GOP prior to any group being able to use the word "Republican" in their name.

At the MT GOP Convention in Billings this



create its own independent group that does work to help the cause of republicans. In fact, several Political Action Committees (PACs) across the state and country use the term Republican in their name but are separate entities working independently of their state republican parties and by law they must so as not to run afoul of state and federal election laws.

The name "Association of Republican Central Committees" has been used in multiple states and at national levels to describe coalitions or groups that bring together Republican central committees from various counties or districts. These committees are responsible for promoting the republican cause and independently support candidate at the local level. The name has thus evolved to represent a broad, decentralized network of republican activists and organizers who coordinate at multiple levels, not just within Montana and not only with the "permission" of state level Republican Party Organizations.

Therefore, use of the name Republican in an organization representing central committees is not a usurpation of the Montana Republican Party's authority, but rather an adoption of a commonly recognized term used throughout the country. If the name was truly exclusive to the Montana Republican Party, it would be unusual for it to be applied across state lines in other jurisdictions. mission even if it does not align with the state party's leadership.

The party's attempt to restrict the name undermines the basic precept of free speech and freedom of association and smacks of despotism.

4. The Need for a Counterbalance to Party Establishment

In any political system, especially one as diverse as the Republican Party in the U.S., it is essential that there be avenues for reform and dissent. Activists use of the name "Montana Association of Republican Central Committees" could be viewed as an effort to create a more inclusive, grassroots-oriented organization that serves as a counterbalance to the established political elite within the Montana Republican Party. This is particularly important in a state like Montana, where local issues and political affiliations often have a unique character.

This initiative may be seen as a direct response to what many see as a failure of the current leadership to represent the interests of local party activists. It is not uncommon in political movements for new factions or organizations to adopt similar names to established ones, particularly when they seek to provide additional resources or a different direction for the party. History is filled with instances where factions within political parties—whether in the form of splinter groups or reform movements have used established names to challenge the status quo.

past June, Republicans from across the state gathered to specifically vote on this new bylaw without knowledge that a lawsuit had been initiated by the MT GOP.

The body overwhelmingly voted against the change, with its primary motivation to not waste the time or money of the organization enforcing such a rule; especially, since the state didn't have a trademark on the name and claimed it didn't have the resources to defend the redistricting map that favored the democrats which was a higher priority. So, why didn't the MT GOP drop their lawsuit after this vote?

The MT GOP wants the power to control who has authority to be able to use the word "Republican" to describe a group in the State of Montana. They claim using the word "Republican" without explicit permission from the MT GOP will confuse the public and lead the public to believe all groups using the word "Republican" are sanctioned MT GOP groups legally representing the MT GOP. Therefore, using the word "Republican" violates the MT GOP's intellectual property and legal rights-of which they have none because the name hasn't been trademarked.

However, upon closer examination, activists are justified in using the name for several reasons, including the broad historical context of Republican Party organizations, their lawful standing as political activists, and the legitimacy of state party operations under broader national party structures.

1. The term "Republican" Is Not Exclusively Owned by the Republican Party, let alone the MT GOP.

One of the core arguments made by the attorney for the MT GOP is the MT GOP believes it holds exclusive rights to the use of the term "Republican" within the state. However, any Republican has the freedom to

2. The Principle of Free Association in Political Movements

The right to use the name "Montana Association of Republican Central Committees" is grounded in the principle of free association, a fundamental aspect of American political discourse. Political parties and organizations are inherently decentralized, and individuals within the party have the freedom to organize and form alliances under names that reflect their goals and values. The Montana Republican Party may object to the use of the name, but its objection stems from a desire to consolidate authority rather than a legal or constitutional right to control the use of certain phrases or terms. The establishment is afraid of the grassroots having a voice and taking away its control over republican central committees.

3. The Right to Organize

Political movements often evolve when individuals or factions choose to organize separately from the established party structure, particularly when they believe that the current leadership does not adequately represent their interests. In this case, activists within the Republican Party in Montana, have a legitimate right to organize their own efforts, create coalitions, and choose a name that reflects their

By opposing the use of the name, the Montana Republican Party risks stifling the very principles of pluralism and internal democracy that underpin the broader Republican movement. The use of the name Montana Association of Republican Central Committees is justifiable on several grounds. First, the name is not an exclusive property of the Montana Republican Party but is rather a term widely used to describe coalitions of central committees across the nation. Second, the principle of free association supports the right to organize as activists see fit. Third, these actions are in line with broader national Republican infrastructure and precedents, and fourth, these efforts could provide an important counterbalance to the established leadership within the Montana Republican Party.

In a state where the MT GOP has limited resources and ability to hire staff to do the tremendous amount of work that is needed within the GOP in a state with such vast and unpopulated areas, the MT GOP should be working hand-in-hand with an organization that has the best interests of republicans at heart.

Rather than stifling this initiative, the Montana Republican Party would do well to recognize the importance of internal democracy and plurality, ensuring that all voices within the party can contribute to the ongoing conversation about the future of the Republican movement. By doing so, they would not only defend the broader party structure but also ensure that it remains dynamic and responsive to the needs of its grassroots supporters.