

Montana Republicans Deserve Real Primaries — Not Pre-Arranged Succession

By Lisa Bennett

In the span of just a few days, two major federal races in Montana were reshaped in ways that have left many grassroots Republican voters asking a pointed and increasingly urgent question: were the outcomes decided before the public even knew there was a race?

The first development came when Ryan Zinke announced he would not seek reelection to Montana’s western congressional seat. His decision created an immediate opening in one of the state’s most significant federal positions. Almost as quickly, Zinke endorsed conservative radio host Aaron Flint as his preferred successor.

Flint entered the race with remarkable speed, backed by an already organized campaign and a growing list of endorsements. However, questions soon emerged among grassroots activists regarding the timeline of events leading up to his candidacy. Public records show that Flint changed his voter registration to Flathead County on October 22, 2025—months before Zinke’s retirement was made public. For many Republican voters, that detail has raised concerns about whether the transition had been planned well in advance, out of public view.

Compounding those concerns, Donald Trump also issued an endorsement of Flint within minutes of his entry into the race, reinforcing the perception among some activists that key decisions may have been coordinated ahead of public announcements.

Before those concerns could settle, a second and even more dramatic development unfolded in Montana’s U.S. Senate race.

On the final day of candidate filing, an unusual and highly strategic sequence of events took place. At 4:52 p.m.—just minutes before the 5:00 p.m. deadline—former U.S. Attorney Kurt Alme filed to run for the Senate seat currently held by Steve Daines. Shortly before the filing window closed, Daines withdrew from the race entirely.

Within minutes, the Republican field was effectively sealed. When the deadline passed, Alme stood as the only Republican candidate. Daines promptly endorsed him as his successor.

Compounding the perception of coordination, Donald Trump issued an endorsement of Alme within minutes of his filing, a move that further intensified concerns among grassroots voters that the outcome had been carefully orchestrated in advance.

The result was unmistakable: grassroots Republicans were left without a competitive primary in a race that would typically draw significant interest and participation. Even critics outside the party described the maneuver as an effort to shape the field before voters had a chance to engage.

These rapid developments have also placed scrutiny on the leadership of the Montana Republican Party, particularly Chairman Art Wittich and party official Debbie Churchill. Their roles in these events—whether active or absent—have become a central point of concern.

Two possibilities now confront party observers. The first is that party leadership was aware of these strategic moves in advance but did not inform grassroots voters. If true, such a scenario would represent a serious breach of trust between party leadership and the activists who form its foundation.



The second possibility is that party leadership was unaware of the timing and coordination of these decisions, suggesting that key races are being shaped by a small group of powerful figures operating independently of the state party apparatus. Many observers find this explanation more plausible, especially in light of a recent Montana GOP mailer promoting a fundraiser for Daines and Zinke that appeared to have been prepared before their withdrawals were publicly announced.

If party leadership was indeed unaware, the implications are equally troubling. It would suggest that the official state party structure is not directing the political process in Montana, but rather reacting to decisions made elsewhere. In that case, grassroots Republicans are left to ask what role, if any, the party leadership truly serves.

At the center of these concerns is a broader perception that a small circle of influential figures—including Daines, Greg Gianforte, and Zinke—now exerts outsized control over Republican politics in the state. Each brings significant fundraising power, name recognition, and national connections. But when major races appear to transition seamlessly from one insider-backed candidate to another, often within hours or even minutes, the appearance of a predetermined outcome becomes difficult to ignore.

For grassroots voters, this is not a minor procedural issue—it strikes at the core of political participation. These are the individuals who knock on doors, organize local meetings, donate small sums, and turn out consistently in elections. When they begin to believe that candidates are effectively chosen before a primary ever occurs, the consequences can be severe.

Volunteer engagement declines. Small-dollar donations dry up. Voter turnout weakens. And a more fundamental question begins to surface: why participate at all if the outcome appears prearranged?

Against this backdrop, two candidates have emerged as alternatives to what many perceive as an insider-driven process: Dr. Al Olszewski for Congressional District 1 and Charles Walking Child for the U.S. Senate. Supporters

describe both men as true grassroots candidates—individuals not elevated by party insiders, but by direct engagement with voters and local communities.

Their candidacies, advocates argue, represent a test of whether Montana Republicans still have a meaningful voice in choosing their nominees, or whether those decisions are increasingly made behind closed doors.

Political parties ultimately depend on trust. Once voters begin to believe that the process is controlled by insiders rather than shaped by open competition, restoring that trust becomes extraordinarily difficult. The recent sequence of withdrawals, endorsements, and last-minute filings has already sparked widespread debate across Montana.

While some may view these moves as strategic, politics is not defined by legality alone. It is also measured by legitimacy—by whether voters believe the system is fair, transparent, and worthy of their participation.

At this moment, many grassroots Republicans are openly questioning whether that standard has been met. Until those concerns are addressed with clarity and transparency, the credibility of the process—and the enthusiasm of the voters who sustain it—will remain at risk.

For many conservatives, the response to these developments is becoming increasingly direct. They argue that the most effective way to challenge what they see as a preselected process is not disengagement, but participation. In that view, a true conservative protests at the ballot box—by voting in the primary for candidates they believe represent grassroots principles rather than establishment-backed selections.

Supporters of this position warn that if conservatives do not step up in this primary, the consequences could extend well beyond a single election. They argue that failure to push back now risks cementing a system in which insider influence dominates future races, effectively ending meaningful competition in Republican primaries in Montana. 🗳️