

The Iron Curtain of the Montana GOP: Who Is Really Running the Circus?

A party that claims to defend freedom and capitalism now faces questions about consolidated power, repeated lawsuits, political loyalty tests, and whether grassroots Republicans still have a voice.

By Staff Writer

The Montana Republican Party has every right to promote its platform, expect candidates to understand and support its principles, and hold elected officials accountable when they abandon the promises made to voters. A political party that never enforces its principles eventually becomes little more than a label on a ballot.

But there is a difference between defending a platform and demanding unquestioning obedience. There is a difference between holding candidates accountable and punishing every Republican who disagrees with party leadership. There is also a difference between maintaining standards and building an internal political machine in which power is concentrated at the top, dissent is treated as disloyalty, and only dependable “yes” men and women are allowed into the approved ranks. That distinction is at the center of the growing controversy surrounding the Montana Republican Party.

Who Is Really Running the Montana GOP?

Deborah “Debbie” Churchill holds three influential positions within the Montana Republican Party: National Committeewoman, interim Chief Operating Officer, and Executive Director. Those positions represent different forms of authority. As National Committeewoman, Churchill represents Montana within the Republican National Committee and participates in the state party’s leadership structure. As interim Chief Operating Officer, she serves in the party’s central administrative chain of command, with influence over personnel, records, operations, resources, and budget-related decisions. As Executive Director, she oversees the party’s day-to-day operations, staff, communications, and programs. Unlike an honorary title, the executive director position is paid.

A report concerning the Montana GOP’s litigation over Republican state senators identified Churchill as the party’s interim Chief Operating Officer and a member of the party’s executive board. The report also stated that Churchill submitted a declaration in the litigation and that questions concerning her discipline for surreptitiously recording conversations at party headquarters were raised during courtroom questioning. NBC Montana

When one person holds three overlapping leadership positions, the issue is not merely personal ambition. It is institutional accountability. Who supervises Churchill? Who reviews her decisions? Who controls party records? Who approves legal expenses? Who oversees budget-related decisions? Who investigates complaints involving her? Who determines whether she must recuse herself from matters in which she is personally involved? The Montana GOP may have answers to these questions, but grassroots members should not have to guess.

The concentration of authority is particularly important because the executive director and chief operating officer can influence the party’s daily machinery, including staff, communications, financial administration, legal coordination, access to records, and relationships with county organizations. When the same person also sits on the executive board and represents Montana nationally, the lines between administration, governance, political strategy, and internal discipline can become blurred. That is where the conflict-of-interest concerns begin.

Is Art Wittich Running the Party—or Is Churchill Running the Machinery?

Art Wittich remains chairman of the Montana Republican Party. But formal titles do not always reveal where practical power resides. A chairman may serve as the public face and political leader of an organization, while an executive director and chief operating officer control much of its daily operation. The person who manages staff, communicates with county committees, handles internal records, coordinates legal matters, and directs party resources may exercise enormous influence, even when another person holds the title of chairman.

That raises a legitimate question: Is Art Wittich



directing the operations of the Montana GOP, or has practical control shifted to Churchill through the accumulation of multiple overlapping positions?

This is not a claim that Churchill automatically makes every decision. It is a question about the structure of power. When one person is simultaneously a national representative, executive-board member, chief operating officer, and executive director, she is positioned near virtually every major function of the organization.

If Churchill is involved in an internal dispute, her multiple roles could place her near the party’s operational response, public messaging, financial decisions, staff activity, legal strategy, and disciplinary processes connected to that dispute. Even if party officials believe each decision is proper, the arrangement can undermine public confidence when no independent person or body is available to review her conduct. A system in which one official can influence a dispute, administer the response, control information, and help determine the party’s legal or political position demands transparency and independent oversight.

The Anderson Disenfranchisement

The most serious matter addressed in this article is the disenfranchisement of Thomas Anderson. Anderson was a longtime Carbon County voter and Republican who intended to seek the chairmanship of the Carbon County Republican Central Committee. His voter registration had remained in Carbon County for more than a decade. Then, in September 2023, his registration was moved from Carbon County to Yellowstone County without his knowledge or consent. He learned of the change only after it had occurred.

The transfer was not politically neutral. It changed the county in which Anderson was registered, affected his eligibility to seek Carbon County Republican leadership, and removed him from the political contest he intended to enter. His wife reportedly remained registered in Carbon County, as did neighboring residents whose circumstances were said to be similar. The result was clear: Anderson was prevented from competing for leadership in the county where he had been registered and politically active for years.

Anderson maintains that Churchill was involved in communications surrounding the transfer. When he confronted Churchill, rather than ensuring that he received notice and a meaningful opportunity to challenge the change, she directed him elsewhere while the registration change remained in effect. This was disenfranchisement. Anderson’s voter registration was moved across county lines without his knowledge or consent, and the change directly prevented him from seeking local party leadership. The action benefited those who opposed his candidacy and deprived Anderson of equal participation in the political process.

Election-administration procedures exist to maintain accurate voter records. They must never be used as a political tool to remove a rival from a leadership contest. If a person knowingly causes a voter’s registration to be moved to prevent that voter from participating in a political contest, the conduct is not merely unethical. It may constitute a felony under applicable election law.

Platform Enforcement Is Legitimate. Political Purges Are Not.

The Montana Republican Party should expect Republican candidates to understand and support its platform. Candidates should not campaign as Republicans while deliberately promising voters the opposite of what the party stands for. Voters

deserve to know whether candidates support the principles under which they seek office.

But support for the platform must not become personal loyalty to party officials. A platform is a statement of principles, not a loyalty oath to a chairman, executive director, faction, or inner circle. A Republican legislator may agree with the party’s general principles while disagreeing with a particular bill, procedure, or leadership decision. A county chair may support the platform while criticizing the state party. A grassroots volunteer may believe party leaders mishandled a controversy without becoming an enemy of the Republican Party. That is not betrayal. It is political participation.

Republicans have always included farmers, business owners, veterans, social conservatives, constitutional conservatives, libertarians, populists, and independent-minded citizens who do not agree on every issue. That diversity is not necessarily weakness. It is part of a living political movement.

A party that requires total agreement on every question will eventually have no members left except those afraid to speak.

Founding-Era Warnings About Party Power

The concern over concentrated political power is not new. The founders understood that political parties could become dangerous when loyalty to faction replaced loyalty to principle. In *Federalist No. 10*, James Madison warned that faction could produce “instability, injustice and confusion” and allow a powerful majority to disregard the rights of a weaker minority. Madison did not argue that disagreement should be eliminated. He argued that a constitutional system must prevent any faction from using its power to oppress others.

George Washington issued an even stronger warning in his Farewell Address. He cautioned that political parties could become “potent engines” through which ambitious and unprincipled leaders might “subvert the Power of the People” and seize control for themselves. Washington warned that unchecked faction could eventually cause citizens to seek security under the absolute power of one individual, creating what he called “a more formal and permanent despotism.”

Those warnings remain relevant whenever party leaders treat disagreement as disloyalty, concentrate authority in a small inner circle, or use organizational rules to silence competing voices. A political party may establish standards and require candidates to support its platform, but it must never confuse principled accountability with personal obedience.

The Iron Curtain Metaphor

The phrase “iron curtain” describes the divide between those inside the approved circle and those outside it-between party insiders who are protected and grassroots members who are disciplined, excluded, or ignored. The comparison highlights a political danger: a movement that claims to defend liberty can undermine its own credibility when it responds to disagreement with exclusion, retaliation, or forced conformity. The historical comparison to Lenin and other communist leaders is not a claim that the Montana Republican Party is communist. It is a warning about the dangers of centralized power.

Political movements that begin by claiming to protect principles can become controlled by a small faction that demands loyalty, eliminates opposition, and treats independent thought as a threat. A party cannot campaign against authoritarianism while practicing authoritarian habits internally. It cannot defend capitalism while concentrating organizational power in fewer and fewer hands. It cannot denounce government overreach while claiming authority to control elected officials beyond what the law permits.

Most importantly, it cannot demand that voters respect elections while using internal procedures to override the political participation of people who challenge party leadership. The concern is not that the Republican Party has standards. The concern

is that those standards may be enforced selectively—strictly against opponents and leniently toward allies. That is how an organization moves from principled discipline to political control.

The Lawsuits Are Becoming the Message

The Montana Republican Party has repeatedly found itself in court over internal conflicts involving party leadership, elected officials, membership, bylaws, candidate qualifications, and participation rights.

One lawsuit involved Republican state senators who were blocked from participating in the election of party leadership. The dispute raised questions about whether party officials exceeded their authority and whether elected legislators were denied a fair opportunity to participate in party proceedings. Other litigation has involved challenges to party bylaws and allegations that internal rules give state party officials excessive control over local committees, elected officials, candidates, and members.

Lawsuits are sometimes necessary. A political organization has a right to defend itself when challenged. But repeated litigation over internal party disputes should cause members to ask whether the organization is being governed effectively. Every lawsuit consumes money, staff time, legal resources, and political energy. Those resources could otherwise be used to support county committees, recruit volunteers, communicate with voters, and help Republican candidates win elections.

When party money is repeatedly used to fight internal opponents, grassroots members deserve to know who approved the litigation, how much has been spent, whether officials involved in the underlying dispute participated in approving the legal response, and whether anyone was required to recuse themselves.

These financial questions are especially important when the party’s chief operating officer and executive director also hold positions within its governing structure. If one person has influence over party operations, budget-related decisions, internal disputes, and legal strategy, independent review is necessary to ensure that party resources are not being used to protect a faction or retaliate against political opponents. Those questions are not attacks on the Republican Party. They are basic standards of financial and organizational accountability.

The Churchill Controversy Over Surveillance Equipment at GOP Headquarters

A separate concern involves secret recording at Montana Republican Party headquarters. During courtroom questioning, an attorney asked whether a witness knew that Churchill had been disciplined for surreptitiously recording conversations at party headquarters. The witness testified that she did not know about the discipline. The report does not provide the complete disciplinary record or establish every detail concerning the equipment, the recordings, or whether criminal charges were filed.

The public deserves to know whether the recording involved audio, video, or both; who authorized the equipment; what was recorded; who had access to the recordings; and whether any recordings were used in internal party disputes. The issue is especially important because Churchill was serving in an operational leadership role while also sitting on the party’s executive board. If the party disciplined her, members should be told who conducted the investigation, what findings were made, and whether the same standards would have been applied to an ordinary volunteer or political opponent.

Churchill is an attorney. She should understand the legal and ethical concerns surrounding private communications and undisclosed recording. If ordinary grassroots members would face discipline for similar conduct, party leaders should not receive different treatment. That is the concern reflected in the phrase, “rules for thee, but not for me.” Whether that phrase accurately describes the party’s internal culture is a question the MTGOP must answer through transparency and consistent enforcement. A political party that claims to defend privacy, constitutional rights, and due process should not treat secret surveillance as a trivial workplace disagreement.

Due Process Cannot Depend on Political Loyalty

Grassroots members have raised broader concerns about selective enforcement of party rules, precinct membership, county central committees, voter-registration disputes, and

the treatment of political opponents. Some disputes involve claims that conservatives were aggressively challenged or removed while allies of party leadership received more favorable treatment.

The Anderson matter demonstrates why those concerns cannot be dismissed out of hand. When a voter’s registration is moved from one county to another without his knowledge or consent, and the result is to prevent him from seeking local party office, the matter is no longer merely a disagreement over party rules. It is a question of political rights.

Due process requires clear rules, notice of the alleged violation, an opportunity to respond, a fair hearing, consistent enforcement, and a written decision. Anyone personally involved in the underlying dispute should be required to recuse themselves from the investigation or final decision.

No member should be removed from party participation through secret accusations, undisclosed evidence, or decisions made by people who are also political opponents. The party cannot demand loyalty from its members while denying them the fairness it expects from government institutions. It cannot insist that public officials follow the rule of law while operating its own internal affairs through unwritten rules, selective enforcement, and personal retaliation.

Dissent Is Not Disloyalty

The MTGOP’s platform should matter. Candidates should be expected to support it honestly. But supporting a platform does not require surrendering independent judgment. An elected Republican official may agree with the party’s general principles while disagreeing with a specific bill or leadership decision. A county leader may support Republican candidates while criticizing the state party. A grassroots volunteer may believe the organization mishandled a controversy without becoming a Democrat. That is not betrayal. It is the exercise of political freedom.

The word “dissent” should not be treated as a synonym for disloyalty. In a constitutional republic, dissent is one of the ways leaders are held accountable.

No one should be sent to the political “gulag”—expelled, blacklisted, publicly denounced, or deprived of party support—simply because they ask questions or refuse to repeat the official line. The party must distinguish between abandoning its platform, supporting an opposing party’s agenda, engaging in misconduct, expressing an honest policy disagreement, criticizing party leadership, and exercising independent judgment as an elected official. Those categories are not interchangeable.

A Better Definition of Party Unity

The Montana Republican Party can defend its platform without alienating its grassroots. It can give candidates the platform in writing and ask them to explain where they agree and where they differ. It can inform voters when candidates depart from Republican principles and endorse candidates who faithfully represent the party’s stated values. It can promote unity without eliminating healthy disagreement. It can resolve internal disputes through transparency, due process, and open debate rather than endless lawsuits and political retaliation. The choice is between a party of principles, and a party of control seeking power through authoritarian methods reminiscent of communist movements across the world.

But it must also provide fair procedures. Members accused of violating party rules should receive

notice and a meaningful opportunity to respond. Officials personally involved in a dispute should recuse themselves. Legal spending should be transparent, and party finances should be reported to the membership. County committees should retain meaningful authority, and elected officials should not be treated as though their first obligation is to party administrators rather than the voters who elected them.

Most importantly, the party should protect good-faith dissent.

That would be real party unity—not enforced silence.

The real test of a political movement is not whether it can force conformity. The real test is whether it can tolerate disagreement while remaining united around legitimate principles.

The Choice Before the Montana GOP

The Montana Republican Party says it stands for freedom, individual responsibility, limited government, capitalism, constitutional rights, and the rule of law. Those principles cannot exist only in campaign speeches. They must also govern the party’s internal operations.

When a party concentrates authority in a small leadership circle, treats dissent as betrayal, uses internal procedures to eliminate political competition, and repeatedly turns to the courts to defend its own internal power struggles, it risks becoming the very kind of political machine its members claim to oppose. The greatest danger is not disagreement within a political party. The greatest danger is when one faction gains enough control to punish disagreement, manipulate participation, and convince members that obedience is the same thing as unity. That is how free movements lose their freedom—not all at once, but one silenced voice, one closed meeting, one selective enforcement action, and one concentrated office of power at a time.

Deborah Churchill’s simultaneous positions make these concerns especially urgent. Her combined authority raises questions about who controls party operations, personnel, records, budget-related decisions, legal strategy, communications, internal discipline, and the party’s response to complaints involving its own leadership. Those questions should not be dismissed as disloyalty. They should be answered.

The Montana GOP does not need an iron curtain separating party leadership from the grassroots it claims to represent. It needs open meetings, transparent finances, fair hearings, independent investigations, consistent rules, and leaders who understand the difference between platform fidelity and personal allegiance.

The choice before the Montana Republican Party is not simply between competing personalities. It is between two different models of political organization: a party of principles, where leadership remains accountable to its members, or a party of control, where power is consolidated at the top and loyalty to the ruling faction matters more than loyalty to the people.

The Montana grassroots is watching. It is asking whether the party still belongs to its members—or whether members are now expected to serve the party leadership. The answer will not be revealed by speeches about freedom and capitalism. It will be revealed by whether the Montana GOP is willing to practice those principles inside its own walls. So many good Republicans are sick of the shenanigans of the MT GOP Leaderlesship. The grassroots are sick of the Republican Party and leaving it in droves.

Maybe it’s time for a Tea Party. 🇺🇸

