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**A Look Ahead**
The political influence of Mountain West states was evident in 2016. Montana, Colorado, and Nevada saw competitive statewide and congressional races that helped decide the state and national balance of power.

In keeping with its reputation for independence, the region went its own way. Nevada and Colorado saw hard-fought contests for Senate and president, with Democrats holding both states. In Montana, Donald Trump prevailed by 20 points, while a Democratic governor won reelection in a campaign of striking intensity. Arizona was talked about as a new swing state, but stayed in the Republican column, while New Mexico, a state with a Republican Governor and Democratic presidential leanings, was an eight-point Clinton win.

The biggest untold story in the West, however, was the rise of public lands and the outdoors as a wedge issue. In fact, public lands were a key issue in several important contests, including competitive races for governor and the U.S. Congress, playing a bigger role than at any time in recent memory.

It was even an issue in the presidential race. Donald Trump expressed his support for good stewardship of public lands, and repeatedly mentioned that his sons are sportsmen. Hillary Clinton heavily featured public lands in her efforts to motivate supporters in the battleground state of Colorado.

Natural resources have long played a role in Western campaigns. Energy development, either oil and gas or clean energy, are frequently discussed. The mountains and outdoor spaces of Colorado and
Montana have served as the backdrop for innumerable candidate campaign ads. But this year marked a key turning point in which candidate support for public control of American lands became a prerequisite for public support and statewide electoral success.

A right-wing movement to divest and transfer control of national public lands forced candidates to take a real position on public lands issues. The result saw competitive Republican candidates making it clear that they supported continued federal ownership of public lands, a reversal of the anti-federal sagebrush rebellion of prior decades. Meanwhile, Democrats tried to use the issue of public lands to take on Republicans in red-leaning districts, with mixed results.

At the Center for Western Priorities, we launched the Winning the West program to promote an understanding of the vital role that outdoor and conservation issues play in Western campaigns for Democrats and Republicans. In 2016, we conducted focus groups with swing voters, polled voters in Colorado, Montana, and Nevada, and disseminated our findings through ads that demonstrated the emotional impact of outdoor issues and imagery.

This report is the culmination of our work for the 2016 election cycle. We hope you will learn more and join us online at westernpriorities.org/winningthewest to continue the conversation.

Jennifer Rokala, Executive Director, Center for Western Priorities
The Center for Western Priorities retained national bipartisan polling firm Purple Insights to conduct large sampled surveys in Colorado, Montana, and Nevada, as well as focus groups in the key swing county of Jefferson County, Colorado. This research provides insights into the views of swing voters on specific policy issues and broad candidate profiles.

Voters across the political spectrum expect a balanced approach in managing conservation, recreation, and responsible energy development. Voters also rejected “third-rail” outdoor issues, including selling public lands for private development or handing federal management of public lands over to state governments.

In Colorado, voters consistently referred to the outdoors and conservation as key aspects of the local quality of life. Meanwhile, Nevada voters agreed that the outdoors could be a key future driver of the state’s tourism economy.

**FOCUS GROUPS:**
**What do you like most about living in Colorado?**

“I just think there are so many different things that you can do. You can go on the lake. You can go camping. You can go hiking, skiing, ice skating. It’s a beautiful state. We need to protect it. It’s outdoor people that live here.”

— Swing Independent

“One of the things that makes Colorado beautiful is the reason we have so much land. If you think about it, when you go to a park, everybody is happy at the park. We’re not all tied together. We can walk around.”

— Swing Republican

“It’s just really outdoor friendly with the mountains and lots of things to do.”

— Swing Democrat

**POLLING METHODOLOGY:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Margin of Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>1,083</td>
<td>+/-3.6% and higher for subgroups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>+/-3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>+/-4.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Democratic candidate who believes that the outdoors are what define Colorado; who will make protecting and providing public access to our land, water, and wildlife a top priority; who will support our recreation economy and ranching; and who believes that we can have energy development on Colorado lands if we manage it in a balanced way and prioritize wind and solar power.

A Republican candidate who believes states should be able to manage their own public lands, not federal bureaucrats; who supports selling some public lands to close the budget deficit; and who prioritizes expanding domestic oil and gas production to spur economic development and create jobs.

A Democratic candidate who will make protecting our land, water, and air a top priority and increase funding for environmental programs; who believes oil, gas, and coal should stay in the ground and be replaced by renewable sources, like wind and solar; and who says together we can create a cleaner future for generations to come.

A Republican candidate who believes that the outdoors are what define Colorado; who will make protecting and providing public access to our land, water, and wildlife a top priority; who will support our recreation economy and ranching; and who believes that we can have energy development on Colorado lands if we manage it in a balanced way and prioritize wind and solar power.

For additional results from Montana and Nevada, please see the attached polling report.
### A STRONG WESTERN LANDS PLATFORM

**A strong platform would touch on job creation, public access, and land and wildlife conservation**

Would the following public lands positions make you more or less likely to support that candidate?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>More Likely</th>
<th>Less Likely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SAMPLE SPLIT B:</strong> Protect access to outdoor spaces for hiking, hunting, and fishing</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SAMPLE SPLIT A:</strong> Protect access to the outdoors</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help create outdoor recreation jobs</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase protection of wildlife habitats</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase access to lands for mountain bikers, paddlers, and other outdoor enthusiasts</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help promote and expand our outdoor tourism economy</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase protection of public lands</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase funding for the National Park Service</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>17</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>More Likely</th>
<th>Less Likely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SAMPLE SPLIT B:</strong> Protect access to outdoor spaces for camping, hiking, hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SAMPLE SPLIT B:</strong> Help create outdoor tourism jobs</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SAMPLE SPLIT A:</strong> Help create outdoor tourism jobs</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase protection of wildlife</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SAMPLE SPLIT A:</strong> Promote outdoor tourism to help rural economic development</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SAMPLE SPLIT A:</strong> Protect access to outdoor spaces</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SAMPLE SPLIT B:</strong> Diversify our tourism economy beyond Las Vegas</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase protection of public lands</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>More Likely</th>
<th>Less Likely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help create outdoor recreation jobs</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SAMPLE SPLIT A:</strong> Protect access to outdoor spaces</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase protection of wildlife</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SAMPLE SPLIT B:</strong> Protect access to outdoor spaces for hunters and anglers</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase protection of public lands</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase funding for the National Park Service</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase access to lands for mountain bikers, paddlers, and other outdoor enthusiasts</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FINDING THE MIDDLE GROUND ON ENERGY

When it comes to energy development in Montana, Nevada, and Colorado, voters look for a middle ground.

Would the following energy positions make you more or less likely to support that candidate?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>MT</th>
<th>NV</th>
<th>CO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encourage the development of solar and wind projects on public lands</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue oil and gas drilling on public lands, but with additional environmental protections in place</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce over time the amount of coal mining allowed on public lands</td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban new coal, oil, and gas leases on public lands</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For SAMPLE SPLIT A: Prohibit energy development of any kind on public lands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MT</th>
<th>NV</th>
<th>CO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For SAMPLE SPLIT B: Prohibit energy development of any kind on public lands, including large scale solar and wind projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MT</th>
<th>NV</th>
<th>CO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For more detailed poll results and to see where Democrats, Independents, and Republicans fall on public lands—and energy-related candidate positions—please see the attached polling report.
STATE BREAKDOWN
Although Montana has trended red in past presidential elections, the state is known for its spirited state and local elections, which this year highlighted the importance of conservation and outdoor issues to Montana voters.

Voters across the Mountain West are supportive of their public lands, but the numbers in Montana set the standard. Ninety-one percent of voters say national parks, forests, monuments, and wildlife refuges are an essential part of Montana’s economy and way of life. Land and stream access for hunting, fishing, and recreation are of particular importance to Montanans.

Outdoor issues played a significant role in two of Montana’s higher-profile elections this year.
GIANFORTE VS. BULLOCK — PUBLIC ACCESS CLOSED THE GAP

Don’t Sell our Lands

Governor Steve Bullock, a Democrat, ran for reelection this cycle and won his second term.

During his first term as Montana’s governor, Bullock vetoed attempts to sell or transfer federal protected lands, pronouncing famously, “Not on my watch.” His challenger, Republican Greg Gianforte, was forced to stake out a position opposing the sale or transfer of public lands, promising to oppose anything that “jeopardizes keeping public lands public.” He staked out this position in response to attacks from the Bullock campaign for allegedly blocking recreation access by trying to remove a public access easement on his family-owned property.

Public lands management remained central to both of their campaigns all the way up to Election Day. Understanding how deeply Montana voters care about the outdoors and public access, the Bullock campaign focused on those issues to draw the race’s most central distinction between the two candidates.

Gianforte Stream Access Issue

Part of the reason land management remained so dominant in this race was due to a 2009 lawsuit filed by Gianforte’s family-owned company against Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks seeking to remove an easement that provided public access to the East Gallatin River which butts up against Gianforte’s property. The suit was
resolved in 2009, but its reemergence as a key issue in the gubernatorial race highlights Montanans’ growing outdoor voting bloc and their particular interest in public lands and land access issues.\textsuperscript{5}

Bullock used the lawsuit to portray Gianforte as a millionaire from New Jersey, whose outsider perspective is out of touch with Montana’s approach and appreciation of the state’s public lands. The Montana Democratic Party launched the website, NoAccessGreg.com, which shared details of the lawsuit and the candidate’s anti-public lands record and referred to Gianforte as “Montana’s Public Lands Enemy Number One.”\textsuperscript{6}

Gianforte’s camp sought to clarify the purpose and resolution of the lawsuit with a statement denying that he blocked stream access, but the damage to his campaign had already been done. The lawsuit and the question of Gianforte’s position on stream access on public lands dominated the rhetoric throughout the race, constantly forcing Gianforte to play defense on the issue.

Massive television ad buys from both camps were dedicated to the amplification of their public lands positions.\textsuperscript{7} In one anti-Gianforte ad, the lawsuit was cited as evidence that “Millionaire Greg Gianforte” would not represent Montana values, and noted the candidate was “not from Montana and not for Montana.”

Meanwhile, Gianforte ran 34,661 ads on broadcast television, more campaign ads than all other candidates in the country seeking to win statewide elections. Bullock aired more than 9,500 ads, putting him in the 15\textsuperscript{th} nationwide position.\textsuperscript{8} In total, $8.1 million was spent on ads in the Montana governor’s race by the two candidates and their PAC supporters in a state where just over 500,000 people voted.\textsuperscript{9}
JUNEAU VS. ZINKE —
A REPRESENTATIVE OF MONTANA’S VALUES

Montana has only one seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, which was held by Republican Representative Ryan Zinke. After the election, Zinke was nominated to serve as U.S. Interior Secretary, so his experience with public lands politics in Montana is of continued interest.

In 2016, Zinke was defending his seat against Democratic challenger Denise Juneau in what was expected to be a fairly easy win for the incumbent. But Juneau—who ran to be the first Native American woman elected to Congress and was Montana’s first openly gay candidate for federal office—turned the campaign for Zinke’s seat into a spirited contest, even though Zinke prevailed in the end.

In a race that drew attention outside of Montana and set state fundraising records, Juneau focused much of her campaign on questioning Zinke’s commitment to Montana’s outdoors values. She ran primarily on the issue of public lands and leveraged her pro-conservation approach to make her case to voters that she was the candidate most committed to representing the state’s interests.

Defining Montana’s Values

Juneau attacked Zinke’s record on public lands, accusing him of a lack of leadership on the issue and criticizing his vote in support of the Self-Sufficient Community Lands Act—a piece of legislation that would transfer the management of public lands and forests to the states. Juneau used this vote to paint Zinke as a supporter of public lands transfer, and to depict Zinke as a D.C. politician losing touch with Montana values.

Forced to Play Defense

To combat Juneau’s early attacks, Zinke took the dramatic step of distancing himself from the national and state GOP platforms which both support the transfer of federal public lands to the state. In July, Zinke resigned his position as a party delegate citing his disagreement with his party’s position on public lands as the reason for his resignation. During a debate in Great Falls, Zinke defended his
In the end, Zinke held onto his seat and defeated Juneau on election day. However, it’s worth noting that in an unexpectedly high profile race, Juneau broke fundraising records raising more money than any other Democrat ever running for Montana’s lone seat in the House of Representatives. She also attributed more than 70 percent of her contributions as coming from Montana supporters. Zinke accrued only 10 percent of his contributions from Montana voters.

Shortly after his re-election, Zinke was nominated to head the U.S. Interior Department. He was selected after the public consideration of several potential Interior Secretaries whose views on public lands issues tended more towards the fringes. Another candidate, Representative Cathy McMorris-Rodgers of Washington, was bypassed in favor of Zinke at the urging of Donald Trump Jr. because of her support for selling off public land.
The state of Colorado is no stranger to natural resource issues, but the growing importance of these issues came into sharper focus in this year’s elections where conservation gained more traction than expected in some high profile races.

**UNITED STATES SENATE**

In the race for U.S. Senate, Senator Michael Bennet won re-election and defeated Republican rival Darryl Glenn after
having been considered only a year ago to be one of the most vulnerable Democratic senators in the nation. 2016 forecasted this race to be one of the hardest fought in the country—a prediction that never manifested.

Bennet campaigned hard on his record of fighting for protected public lands, opposing the sale of public lands, and committing to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. During his campaign, Bennet ran advertisements that specifically promised an agenda committed to investing in renewable energy resources and the outdoor economy.

Meanwhile, Colorado’s other Senator, conservative Republican Cory Gardner has taken care to carve out more moderate positions on outdoor and conservation issues.

In 2015, Senator Gardner voted against a senate budget amendment that encourages Congress to “sell, or transfer to, or exchange with, a state or local government any federal land that is not within the boundaries of a National Park, National Preserve, or National Monument.” He voted in favor of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a conservation program that preserves public lands and ensures public access to the outdoors, and he continues to support the program’s permanent authorization. Gardner has also defended the strength of presidential authority under the Antiquities Act.

**ADVERTISING:**

Senator Michael Bennet’s advertisements promise an agenda committed to investing in renewable energy resources and the outdoor economy.

*‘FUELS US’ EXCERPT:*

**MICHAEL BENNET:** I teamed up with the Republicans and Democrats to pass the new laws we needed to help renewable energy grow, protecting the jobs we have and generating more for the future.

*‘THE RIVER’ EXCERPT:*

**KIRK KLANCKE:** I’m a registered Republican but I’m voting for Michael Bennet because he understands the importance that this environment has on the future of Colorado for generations to come.
In the race for the White House, both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump drew attention to outdoor issues when campaigning in the important swing-state of Colorado.

**Donald Trump**

At the beginning of the year, Trump suggested in an interview with Field & Stream magazine that he would be opposed to the transfer of federal lands, urging that he wants to “keep the lands great.”

He later said in an interview with the Outdoor Sportsman Group, “We’re not looking to sell off land.”

On the national stage, Donald Trump campaigned on bringing more jobs back to the coal industry and furthering efforts to invest in energy development. He was also skeptical of climate change referring to it as a “hoax” and calling for the repeal of the Clean Power Plan.

When the Trump campaign turned to Colorado, however, the candidate seemed to continue to support land preservation and public land access while still pushing for greater energy development. On behalf of his father, Donald Trump Jr.—an avid outdoorsman himself—spoke to a crowd in Grand Junction, CO during the campaign and promised to “keep public lands public and accessible.” Trump Jr. also said it was possible to have “the best of both worlds” by taking full advantage of natural resources while ensuring public lands are open for outdoorsmen.
Hillary Clinton

In August, at a campaign event near Denver, Hillary Clinton dedicated a portion of her stump speech to land conservation and told an audience of thousands, “We have a responsibility to protect our public lands.” She recognized early on that this was a hot-button issue in the state, insisting in her speech, “The outdoor economy, the recreational economy, is so important to so many places here in Colorado and elsewhere throughout the West.”

When a coalition of more than 40 wildlife, conservation, and sportsmen groups sent a letter to the presidential candidates asking for their positions on the transfer of public lands to states, Hillary Clinton was quick to respond and come out in support of the continued conservation of public lands. In September of 2016, she sent a letter to her supporters clearly defining her position when she noted: “If I am so fortunate to serve as president, I will pursue policies that ensure wise stewardship, increase access, and harness the immense economic potential of our outdoor economy.” The letter greatly emphasized the need to keep federal lands publicly accessible and she re-committed to growing the country’s outdoor economy. In fact, she proposed the doubling of the outdoor economy in ten years’ time by investing in recreation infrastructure.

Election Outcome

More than any other state in the country, Colorado forced the presidential candidates to articulate their positions on public lands and the outdoor economy. The incorporation of these issues into the campaigns’ pitches to Colorado demonstrates that in the Mountain West, the outdoor voting bloc can make a difference. And candidates—even candidates for President of the United States—must engage with and fight for the outdoor vote.

As the polls tightened in the fall, Donald Trump started campaigning more in Colorado, outspending the Democrats on TV advertising in the state. Ultimately, Hillary Clinton won Colorado with 47.4% of the vote, securing the state’s nine electoral votes. Donald Trump received 44% of the state’s vote.
THE RACE FOR COLORADO’S 3RD CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Representative Scott Tipton has held a firm grip on his seat in Colorado’s 3rd congressional district since 2010 when he beat three-term Democratic incumbent John Salazar. However, when Donald Trump and the rest of the Republican Party got off to a slow start in Colorado, Gail Schwartz emerged as a notable challenge for Tipton’s seat.

An Advocate for Public Lands

Gail Schwartz not only talked about public lands, but chose to base her campaign on those issues. As a candidate, she focused on priorities that resonate with the outdoor voting bloc of the state and constructed her campaign around the stark difference between hers and Tipton’s positions on public lands. In advertisements and speeches, she would declare her candidacy by asserting, “I’m Gail Schwartz and I’m running for Congress to stop the sale of public lands.”

Colorado’s 3rd district encompasses the Western Slope of Colorado and parts east to Pueblo, and serves as a year-round home to outdoors enthusiasts. The district includes headwaters for the Rio Grande, Yampa, White, North Platte, and Gunnison rivers, as well as long stretches of the Colorado River. It is home to some of the country’s most popular ski resorts, and roughly 35 percent of the land area is managed by the federal government. This is an area with voters who are keen on hearing how candidates will advocate for the outdoors, so much so that Tipton sought a waiver to serve on the House Natural Resources Committee for the 115th Congress.

For Gail Schwartz, she saw an opportunity to activate the outdoor vote and make a competitive run for a seat that has long gone red because of its rural tilt.

An Incumbent on the Defensive

As often as she could, Schwartz emphasized where the two candidates differed on everything from federal land management to energy regulation. Several of Schwartz’s advertisements focused specifically on her proposed platform of taking a balanced approach to the oil and gas industry in Colorado, with a measured approach to environmentalism and land conservation.
Since taking his seat in Congress, Congressman Tipton has won praise from the oil and gas industry for his work on energy development in Colorado. But he’s also taken a lot of heat for his close ties to the oil and gas industry, especially by opposing conservation protections for the Thompson Divide. As the Bureau of Land Management considered and ultimately cancelled improperly issued oil and gas leases in the Thompson Divide—an area of the Rocky Mountains often used for recreation and big game hunting—Tipton put up staunch opposition largely because one of the leases at stake was one of his biggest campaign donors.

Tipton has also been an enthusiastic supporter of policies to give states control over oil, gas, and other energy resources on federal lands. However, as the campaign against Schwartz unfolded, he was forced to reign in some of that enthusiasm and moderate his position. Tipton had to start defending his record, assuring his audiences and constituents that he does not support the sale or transfer of public lands.

**Lessons Learned**

Congressman Tipton won the election and kept his seat in the Congress. However, the competitiveness of the race and Schwartz’ fundraising totals—more than $1.5 million in contributions—indicate her campaign effectively tapped into a growing segment of voters who value concerted conservation efforts in Colorado.

In what has been viewed as a safe Republican district, Gail Schwartz proved that outdoor issues can define congressional races in the Mountain West and provide candidates a platform from which to make a deeper connection with voters.
Nevada is becoming a state in which outdoor issues are taking center stage with more and more frequency. Of all Western states, Nevada has the largest proportion of public land managed by the federal government. Nevada’s outdoor tourism and recreation economy has an even higher approval rating with voters than the state’s gaming industry.

Home to several recent and proposed national monuments, access, use, and protection of public lands has stirred controversy in Nevada. Mostly notably, an intense standoff in 2014 between rancher Cliven Bundy and federal authorities over more than $1 million in fees owed by Bundy for cattle grazing on national public lands adjacent to his property.\textsuperscript{32}

Here’s how public lands played in Nevada.
HECK VS. CORTEZ MASTO — THE LEGACY CONTINUES

During his tenure, Democratic Minority Leader Senator Harry Reid crafted a legacy in part defined by his work on land preservation in Nevada. In 2015, Reid personally lobbied President Obama to designate the Basin and Range National Monument spanning roughly 704,000 acres in central Nevada.\(^3^3\) From the time he took office thirty years ago, Reid expanded the scope of protected lands in his home state from roughly 67,000 acres to roughly 4.8 million acres.\(^3^4\) In the race to replace Reid, Nevada voters would decide whether his public lands legacy would be solidified or possibly rolled back.

Democrat Catherine Cortez Masto ran against Republican challenger Joe Heck. Although neither candidates’ campaigns focused extensively on public lands issues, the two candidates represented opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. Cortez Masto supports public land conservation and the development of renewable energy.\(^3^5\) She also campaigned on the promise of investing in the outdoor economy and conserving lands for outdoor tourism and travel. On the other hand, Heck opposes the federal management of public lands, the regulation of greenhouse gas emissions, and the designation of protected lands under the Antiquities Act.\(^3^6\)

When the opportunity presented itself on the campaign trail, Cortez Masto was quick to draw the line between her position and Heck’s on outdoor issues. For instance, when the Department of Interior announced in September that it would partner with Nevada’s Indian communities to help create green jobs and support the state’s renewable energy economy, Cortez Masto used the announcement as an opportunity to highlight her public lands position. In a statement she said, “Nevada’s tribal lands make up our state’s unparalleled natural resources, and it is critical that we partner with local tribes to maximize their benefits to help protect the environment and strengthen the economy.”\(^3^7\)

Cortez Masto’s victory not only cemented Senator Reid’s long fought legacy on public lands, it also ensured Nevada’s growing support for a balanced approach to outdoor issues will continue to be reflected in the state’s voice in the U.S. Senate.
KIHUEH VS. HARDY —
A NEW ERA

Another resounding victory for outdoors candidates in Nevada came out of the 4th congressional district in which Democrat Ruben Kihuen defeated the incumbent Representative Cresent Hardy.

In Nevada, where approximately 80 percent of its land is owned and managed by the federal government, Hardy staked out a position as an anti-public lands ideologue, staunchly opposing conservation efforts at every opportunity.

Earlier this year, Hardy offered an amendment to the Interior Department’s annual spending bill that promised to block the use of federal money to carry out the presidential designation of a national monument under the Antiquities Act in 17 counties across seven states.38

While in office, Hardy pushed a land transfer agenda saying, “The federal government has bitten off more than it can chew, and it cannot be trusted to serve as a responsible steward of our lands and resources.”39 In 2016, he campaigned once again on this platform, arguing the federal management of public lands is a form of federal overreach that ought to be rectified.

During the campaign, Hardy was criticized and attacked for his stance against federal land management, and was the subject of attack ads tying him to extremist rancher Cliven Bundy.40 The Kihuen campaign even launched a TV ad highlighting Hardy’s ties to Bundy and Trump,31 which elicited a lawsuit from Bundy claiming the ad falsely tied him to the death of two police officers.42 Investment in and proliferation of the message that Hardy was in cahoots with Bundy—the man responsible for a violent and unpopular standoff with federal land managers—indicated not only the sustained importance of public lands issues in Nevada, but also growing backlash against public land extremism.

Extreme positions on public lands placed Hardy well out of step with the views of his constituents. Ultimately, the election turned out in favor of Ruben Kihuen whose platform expressly promised he would “be a voice for keeping our public lands in public hands.”43
GOING TO EXTREMES
A Losing Strategy

This election cycle proved largely hostile to anti-government extremism fueling the movement to seize America’s public lands. Candidates who opted for more extreme positions on public lands saw early defeats in their races, confirming what polling has long held true: Western voters reject an extreme approach to the protection and management of federal lands.

For instance, Assemblywoman Michele Fiore ran to represent Nevada’s third congressional district and lost the primary race with only 18 percent of the vote, a distant third to her other opponents.44 Fiore made a name for herself by aligning with a fringe militia movement that has recently expanded efforts to seize national public lands that belong to all Americans. She publicly defended the Bundy family and other armed occupiers at the Malheur Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, calling the militia group “patriots.”45

There was also Idaho state Senator Sheryl Nuxoll, who sponsored a bill giving local counties power to declare public lands a nuisance46 and was ousted from her seat in the primary race.47

Idaho County Commissioner Jim Chmelik also endured a painful primary loss following a tenure on the commission that was almost exclusively dedicated to getting greater support for his mission to transfer federal lands to the states.48

These early losses show that, even in Republican primaries, the Western electorate is increasingly uninterested and unfriendly to extreme approaches to our public lands.
The 2016 election cycle served as a proof point for an emerging outdoor voting bloc in the Mountain West. More specifically, national, state, and local elections showed that voters are responding to and voting for candidates who favor a balanced, commonsense approach to the outdoors.

There were candidates who won their races in part by using their support for public lands as a wedge issue. There were candidates who focused their platforms on the outdoors and outpaced expectations in terms of financial support and votes. And then there were candidates who took their positions on outdoor issues to the extreme and faced stunning defeats as a result.

The trends, the polls, and the outcomes of these races indicate that a balanced approach to how public lands are used and protected is becoming a consensus issue in the Mountain West—voters want candidates who care about conservation and are willing to take positions that respect the Western way of life. What they do not want is land extremism which they overwhelmingly rejected this cycle and continues to be “third rail” in Western electoral politics.
With the new administration taking office and the federal legislative and executive branches aligning under single-party leadership, the outlook for public lands is uncertain. It’s possible we may see attempts to roll back recent policies that seek to balance the multiple uses of public lands and meet the need for sustainability and conservation. Efforts out of step with Mountain West values, including privatizing public lands and reversing the designation of popular national monuments and parks, may lead to an electoral backlash.

Key races in 2018 will demonstrate whether an emerging outdoors voting bloc will continue to take shape with the potential to swing close elections. Candidates running for office in Mountain West states will assuredly try to connect with voters and earn support by showing a passion and respect for the outdoors way of life. In several high profile elections—including Senate races in Montana, Nevada, and New Mexico and the race for Colorado Governor—public lands may end up playing a decisive role in the outcome.
REFERENCES


[5] Ibid.


REFERENCES


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[34] Ibid.


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