Center for Western Priorities

January 2023

WINNING THE WEST

ELECTION 2022

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The 2022 midterm elections confirmed what Western outdoor voters already knew — support for public lands is a winning issue in the West.

Senator Michael Bennet of Colorado was easily re-elected in what had been predicted to be a close contest, riding a wave of goodwill following President Joe Biden's designation of Camp Hale-Continental Divide National Monument in October. Bennet requested the president's help after years of legislative efforts stalled, and Biden credited Bennet's determination when he signed the monument proclamation. Similarly, new Congressman Gabe Vasquez successfully ran on a pro-conservation resumé to defeat incumbent Congresswoman Yvette Herrell in New Mexico's 2nd congressional district, a part of the state with significant oil and gas development.

Other Western contests saw anti-conservation candidates win by much smaller margins than expected. In Montana, former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke narrowly defeated environmental attorney Monica Tranel in a race that was not expected to be close but ended up taking several days to call. And in Colorado, the race between vocal anti-conservation Congresswoman Lauren Boebert and challenger Adam Frisch was too close to call for weeks in a district that Boebert was heavily favored to win.

The election outcomes reflect the results of our 2022 Winning the West poll in which President Biden's "America the Beautiful" initiative to protect at least 30 percent of lands and waters across the United States by 2030 received support from three out of four Western voters. Additionally, 80 percent of Westerners supported the infrastructure investments President Biden made in national parks and public lands to restore natural areas.

The Winning the West poll found there is urgency for more action. Voters expressed frustrations with politicians in D.C. being out of touch and not delivering on what they promised Western voters on the outdoor and public lands issues they care so much about.

The Center for Western Priorities' ad "Escape,"[1] released before the election, poked fun at how the debates among political insiders often overlook the concerns of real voters. Instead the ad encouraged candidates from all ideologies to break out of the beltway, get outdoors, and connect with voters on public lands issues.

Across the West, winning candidates seem to have taken the lesson to heart.

The election outcomes serve as clear guidance for President Biden and for members of Congress as they set their respective agendas for the next two years. With dysfunction all but certain to paralyze Congress, the president can use the next two years to build a solid conservation legacy using executive action, which remains overwhelmingly popular with the public. And members of Congress can know that voters see and appreciate their conservation efforts despite gridlock in Congress.

Jennifer Rokala
Executive Director,
Center for Western Priorities

CONTENTS

4 **Polling Results**

6 **Arizona:**
7 Governor: Hobbs vs. Lake
8 Senate: Kelly vs. Masters
9 AZ-02: Crane vs. O'Halleran
10 AZ-03: Gallego vs. Zink
11 AZ-06: Ciscomani vs. Engel

12 **Colorado:**
13 Senate: Bennet vs. O'Dea
14 CO-02: Neguse vs. Dawson
15 CO-03: Boebert vs. Frisch
16 CO-07: Pettersen vs. Aadland
17 CO-08: Caraveo vs. Kirkmeyer

18 **Montana:**
19 MT-01: Zinke vs. Tranel

20 **Nevada:**
21 Governor: Lombardo vs. Sisolak
22 Senate: Cortez Masto vs. Laxalt
23 NV-01: Titus vs. Robertson
24 NV-03: Lee vs. Becker

25 **New Mexico:**
26 Governor: Lujan Grisham vs. Ronchetti
27 NM-02: Vasquez vs. Herrell
28 NM-03: Leger Fernandez vs. Martinez Johnson

29 **Looking Ahead: 2024 Outlook**

30 **Photo Credits and References**

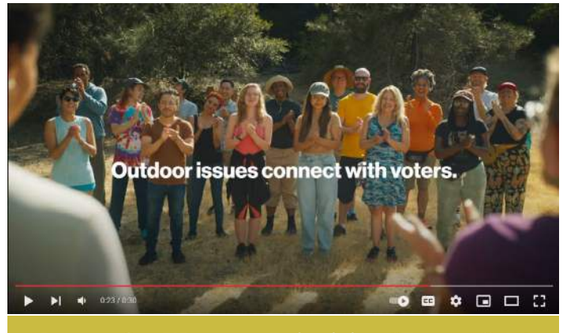
POLLING RESULTS

Voters ready for action on conservation in the West

The Center for Western Priorities' 2022 Winning the West poll[2] examined Westerners' positions on outdoor issues leading up to the midterm elections in the swing states of Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico.

As with previous election cycles, the results were unmistakably clear that the outdoors are central to Western voters and their way of life. Regardless of political party, Western voters said they highly value wildlife and public lands and they want to protect their region's outdoor spaces and access to hiking, hunting, fishing, and camping.

An overwhelming majority of voters surveyed (90 percent) said that national public lands, parks, and wildlife issues are important to them, and 81 percent of voters said that these issues would play a role in how they chose to vote. This finding held true across party lines, with 87 percent of Democrats, 81 percent of Independents, and 73 percent of Republicans reporting that conservation issues would impact their vote in November.



Center for Western Priorities "Escape" Ad

At the same time, voters said that elected officials in D.C. are out-of-touch and don't deliver on the outdoors and public lands issues that matter to them.

Overall, the results made it clear that despite inflation and other worries, conservation issues were still winning issues in the West. The poll is a reminder that Western leaders should not wait to act on a conservation agenda and that Western candidates can improve their electoral chances by making outdoor issues a central part of their campaigns.

What Western voters want

New national parks and monuments:

- 77 percent of Western voters are more favorable to an elected official who wants to designate new national parks and monuments.

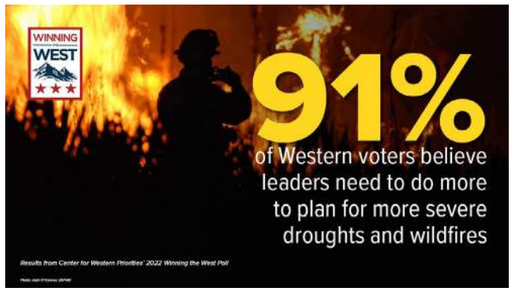
- 86 percent of Coloradans support the President taking executive action to protect the lands specified in the Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy (CORE) Act, which would protect over 400,000 acres of land in the state through new wilderness, recreation, and conservation areas.
- 80 percent of voters in New Mexico support proposals to preserve Caja del Rio, which would help preserve culturally significant sites and an important wildlife corridor.
- 77 percent of Nevada voters support a proposal to designate Avi Kwa Ame (Spirit Mountain) as a national monument.
- 68 percent of voters support the president using their executive authority to protect land because of its cultural and historical significance or unique, natural value by designating a national monument.
- 76 percent of voters approve of President Biden's America the Beautiful initiative, including 92 percent of Democrats, 75 percent of Independents, and 59 percent of Republicans.

Protecting existing public lands from development and exploitation:

- 88 percent of Westerners are more favorable to an elected leader who supports protecting existing national parks and national monuments (90 percent of Democrats, 88 percent of Independents, and 86 percent of Republicans).
- In Arizona, 60 percent of voters support permanently banning new uranium and other mining on public lands surrounding the Grand Canyon.

Efforts to address climate change, pollution, drought, and wildfire:

- 78 percent of Westerners are concerned that pollution is threatening rivers, lakes, and streams.
- 91 percent believe leaders need to do more to plan for severe droughts and wildfires.
- 74 percent of voters are concerned about the effects of climate change, like severe droughts and wildfires, on public lands.
- 75 percent of voters are concerned that overdevelopment is threatening our nation's rural areas, forests, and natural heritage.



More investment in renewable energy:

- 78 percent of voters believe that leaders need to do more to support the clean energy industries in their state, including 82 percent of Coloradans, 81 percent of Arizonans, 73 percent of New Mexicans, and 79 percent of Nevadans.
- 81 percent of voters believe that states in the West need better options for clean energy to suit the West's unique climate and landscapes.
- 74 percent of Westerners are more favorable toward candidates who invest in the renewable energy sector.

ARIZONA

Water proves to be a pivotal issue for Arizona voters

The 2022 midterms showed that candidates in Arizona had to address conservation issues in order to catch voters' attention. It's no surprise that water played an especially critical role in these races due to the historic levels of drought seen in the state over the past few years. Support for public lands and other conservation policies also helped candidates win votes in the state.

ARIZONA VOTERS AT A GLANCE

79% of Arizonans are favorable toward candidates who create new clean energy jobs.

62% of Arizonans support legislation to permanently ban new uranium mining on existing public lands surrounding the Grand Canyon.

81% of Arizonans believe that Western states need better options for clean energy to suit the West's unique climate and landscapes.

Support for crucial water policies helps beat extremist in governor's race

This year, Arizonans elected Secretary of State Katie Hobbs as the new governor over the Republican nominee Kari Lake. It was a tight race that ended up being decided by less than 17,000 votes. In terms of outdoor issues, both candidates focused on the drought and water crisis with Hobbs taking a more pro-conservation stance.

During her campaign, Hobbs created her Resilient Arizona plan[3] to address the water shortage and other conservation issues. In the plan, she proposed creating a Water and Energy Innovation Initiative for the state that would be tasked with securing water supply and advancing a clean energy economy. She also outlined detailed solutions to conserve water, modernize groundwater management tools, and ensure the water that Arizonans are consuming is clean and safe. Additionally, the Resilient Arizona plan included strategies to address wildfires, invest in open spaces and parks, and build a clean energy economy.

While Lake acknowledged that water is a critical issue for Arizonans, she also promised to push back against EPA "overreach and their absurd interpretation of their Waters of the U.S. rules that are making it impossible for farmers and ranchers to best utilize their lands."[4]

In the end, Hobbs' holistic support for and understanding of outdoor issues helped her win the governor's race in Arizona.

Katie Hobbs
@katiehobbs

"The future of our water infrastructure and supply is at stake this election. We need a proven leader who can deliver real solutions to end our water crisis. My Resilient Arizona plan will ensure that we have access to clean, safe, reliable water for generations to come."

October 15, 2022

KELLY vs. MASTERS

AZ SENATE

Water on the ballot in the Arizona senate race

In the Arizona senate race, Democrat Sen. Mark Kelly won re-election over Republican candidate Blake Masters. Kelly campaigned hard on climate change to help him secure a victory against Masters in a close race. He emphasized his support of scientific evidence to fight climate change and the negative effects it has on Arizonans.[5] Furthermore, he spoke about wanting to protect the environment for the next generation, including his granddaughter.[6]

Water, in particular, played a meaningful role in this race. Referencing the historic drought and low water levels of Lake Mead and the Colorado River, Kelly framed water as a critical issue on the ballot this year. He highlighted his experience working to address drought conditions and secure investments toward critical water infrastructure projects.[7] This helped Kelly stand out from Masters, who he claimed wanted to "privatize our water future and sell it off to the highest bidder."[8]

During campaign season, Kelly also ran a series of advertisements on social media in support of the Grand Canyon Protection Act. The bill, which Kelly sponsored, aimed to prohibit uranium mining near the Grand Canyon.

Masters rarely spoke about environmental or conservation issues during his campaign. The only mention of such issues on his website referenced "bogus environmentalist claims" that "sabotaged" the state's rural economy.[9] Kelly, on the other hand, highlighted the creation of "great-paying jobs" that resulted from the renewable energy projects[10] that he supported. He also spoke to ranchers' critical need for water to support their way of life.

Ultimately, Kelly was able to win in part by demonstrating that he understands the key issues on Arizonans' minds, including conservation.

Mark Kelly
@CaptMarkKelly

"If you care about our planet and want to protect it from climate change, register to vote right now at http://IWillVote.com/AZ. I'm determined to make sure the world my granddaughter grows up in is safe, but I can't do it alone — register to make your voice heard."

October 10, 2022

"We wanted to remind everyone how important it is that we work together to protect these treasures for future generations. That's something I think we can all agree on."

Mark Kelly Ad
"Arizona Natural Treasures"
February 14, 2022

CRANE vs. O'HALLERAN

AZ-02

Support for conservation helps close the gap between candidates

After Arizona's second congressional district was redrawn with a heavy Republican lean, Eli Crane defeated three-term Rep. Tom O'Halleran. Although the odds were stacked against the pro-conservation candidate, outdoor issues helped boost support for O'Halleran, making the race closer than expected.

O'Halleran leaned on his conservation record to garner support and spoke to both the scenic beauty and precious natural resources in Arizona that deserve protection. In an op-ed for *The Arizona Republic*, O'Halleran positioned himself as a level-headed policymaker who would be able to ensure that the state would have an adequate water supply.[11] He also discussed his support for "commonsense water protections," like the removal of non-native, water-sucking plants and a ban on new uranium mining near the Grand Canyon and the Colorado River. During his time in the state legislature, O'Halleran helped introduce Arizona's first comprehensive bill on drought management, and helped create a statewide water plan.[12] He also made a campaign stop at the Glen Canyon Dam Bridge to call attention to the low water levels in the canyon.[13]

While O'Halleran referred to water as the most pressing issue for Arizonans, Crane rarely spoke about the topic and said it "wasn't something he had researched yet" when asked about it. However, O'Halleran's focus on water ultimately wasn't enough to overcome the district's partisan preferences.

"As a bipartisan policymaker in Arizona for more than 20 years, I've learned that what Arizona families want from their elected representatives is honest, hard work to address the problems our state is facing.

They don't care about party politics; they care about finding solutions to the issues we face. And the biggest issue facing Arizona today is our uncertain water future.

Water is essential to our way of life, especially as our state's population grows and our economy flourishes – families want to live in Arizona, and we need to ensure we can continue to support this important growth."

Tom O'Halleran Op-ed
The Arizona Republic
October 15, 2022

Tom O'Halleran
@RepOHalleran

"This summer, my staff and I traveled to Glen Canyon Dam Bridge to see firsthand the stark white walls of the canyon where the water no longer flows. Our state needs drought solutions, and I'm working to deliver the funding needed to protect our most precious resource."

October 13, 2022

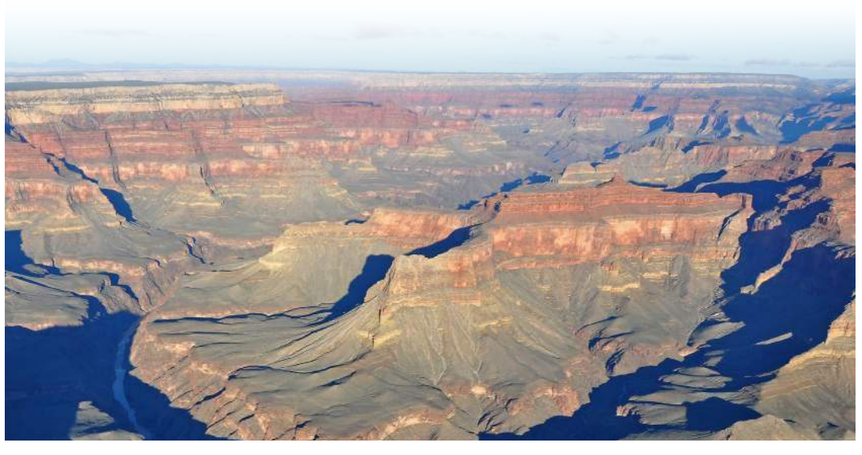
GALLEGO vs. ZINK AZ-03

Strong record on protecting public lands brings success

In a landslide victory, Rep. Ruben Gallego defeated Republican Jeff Zink in Arizona's third congressional district. Public land conservation helped Gallego secure re-election, with his campaign website stating that "environmental issues are one of his top priorities."[14]

Drawing on the urgency of climate change, Gallego highlighted issues such as excess urban heat and drought. Gallego acknowledged the significant water and drought funding that Congress has passed, but promised to do more for Arizonans. In October, he introduced the Domestic Water Protection Act of 2022, which aimed to put an excise tax on foreign companies or governments who grow crops in areas experiencing prolonged drought. He also emphasized his support for the Clean Water Act, saying it was important for both current and future generations.

While other Arizona candidates focused primarily on water issues, Gallego also campaigned on the importance of preserving public lands for future generations.[15] On National Public Lands Day, he emphasized the "education, recreation, and relaxation" that protected outdoor areas provide. Gallego's concern for and understanding of outdoor issues helped Arizonans see that he was the candidate who best aligned with their outdoor values.[16]



Ruben Gallego
@RepRubenGallego

> "Happy National Public Lands Day! Our public lands are a place for education, recreation, and relaxation. Today is a day to take advantage of FREE entry to all national parks, and remember we must preserve our beautiful country."

September 24, 2022

> "For half a century, the Clean Water Act has protected America's lakes, streams, wetlands, and tributaries from pollution.
>
> The politicians who want to gut this legislation are wrong.
>
> I will always stand against polluters to secure clean water for current and future generations."

October 23, 2022

CISCOMANI vs. ENGEL AZ-06

Close loss for the pro-conservation candidate in a Republican-leaning district

In Arizona's 6th congressional district, Republican businessman Juan Ciscomani defeated Democrat Kirsten Engel, a former state senator and environmental lawyer, in a very tight race for an open seat. This district was redrawn with a Republican lean, but the results ended up being closer than expected with Ciscomani taking 50.7% of the votes and Engel securing 49.3%.

While abortion and inflation were hot topics in this race, Engel also emphasized the importance of water in her campaign, saying that it was one of the "biggest unmet needs facing Arizonans."[17] If elected, Engel promised to advocate for building more water storage capacity, switching to less water-intensive farming practices, adopting water reuse and recycling programs, and retrofitting homes and businesses with water-efficient appliances. Furthermore, she advocated for other states that rely on the Colorado River as a water source to decrease their water use so that Arizonans wouldn't suffer disproportionate impacts as a downstream water user. During the campaign, she also highlighted her experience working on both sides of the aisle on Arizona's drought contingency plan in the state legislature.[18]

Even though Engel wasn't able to defeat Ciscomani, she was able to make a race in a new Republican-leaning district extremely competitive by focusing on water and other outdoor issues.

Kirsten Engel
@EngelforArizona

> "One of my top priorities in Congress will be addressing Arizona's water crisis. I'm proud to have worked across the aisle on our drought contingency plan in the State Legislature — but we need to make sure that every state is doing its part."

October 22, 2022

COLORADO

Support for new public lands is the key to electoral victory

In Colorado, voters showed their continued support for public lands and other outdoor issues during the 2022 midterms. Pro-conservation candidates were able to beat out climate deniers and other extremists in the majority of close races in the state, following the trends from previous years.

COLORADO VOTERS AT A GLANCE

82% of Coloradans believe that leaders need to do more to support the clean energy industries in their state.

82% of Coloradans support establishing the Dolores River Canyon Area as a national monument.

86% of Coloradans support the Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy (CORE) Act, which would protect over 400,000 acres of land in the state through new wilderness, recreation, and conservation areas.

True record on outdoor issues helps incumbent win big

No other race demonstrated the political value of outdoor issues more than this year's Colorado senate race. Although Republicans prioritized unseating Sen. Michael Bennet, he was able to defeat political newcomer Joe O'Dea.

O'Dea, a construction company executive, attempted to position himself as a moderate. He campaigned on "restoring America's energy independence," saying that the government should embrace American energy production of all kinds, including wind, solar, nuclear, natural gas, and oil.[19] He also emphasized the importance of smart regulatory and permitting approaches that would result in clean energy production and drive down carbon emissions to address climate change.

However, on protecting public lands, O'Dea took an extreme position. In an interview, he said if elected, he would push for handing federally owned public lands in Colorado over to state control, which could open those areas up to more industrial development.[20] O'Dea also did not support the CORE Act, which would have protected over 400,000 acres of land in the state.

On the other hand, conservation issues were a cornerstone of the Bennet campaign. Not only was Bennet the lead sponsor of the CORE Act, he also introduced legislation to protect a portion of the Dolores River Canyon[21] and frequently praised the climate protections included in the Inflation Reduction Act.[22] His social media often featured him enjoying Colorado landscapes with his family and highlighted the importance of public lands to Colorado's economy.[23]

During his campaign, Bennet created a series of ads that discussed conservation and stated that O'Dea was against protecting Colorado's public lands. "Reel Focused" featured a local angler and Bennet fishing together while talking about Bennet's record promoting forest and watershed health and supporting outdoor businesses.[24] Another advertisement discusses how he "stood up to Biden" 'to keep Colorado's solar economy strong.[25] After President Biden designated the Camp Hale-Continental Divide National Monument, Bennet highlighted his leadership and the work he did to get the monument protected in a fundraising email for his campaign.

While both candidates claimed to care about environmental issues, Colorado voters chose the candidate with a proven record of standing up for public lands and the benefits they bring to the state's economy.

Michael Bennet
@michaelbennet

"Colorado's public lands are central to our state's economy and identity. I've helped protect over 50,000 acres already this year and I'm still working to pass the CORE Act to protect even more public land in Colorado."

October 27, 2022

Joe O'Dea
@ODeaForColorado

"We can move our country to energy independence and protect our environment. It's not either, or. That's a false choice."

July 15, 2022

NEGUSE vs. DAWSON CO-02

Public lands support results in landslide victory for pro-conservation candidate

A pro-public lands stance helped Rep. Joe Neguse secure an overwhelming victory over Marshall Dawson in Colorado's 2nd congressional district. Neguse served as Chair of the Subcommittee on Public Lands in the House of Representatives during the previous Congress and is a firm believer in the urgent need to address the climate crisis.

During his campaign, Neguse spoke about the importance of public lands to Colorado's outdoor economy and way of life.[26] He was lead sponsor of the CORE Act in the House and promised to safeguard wildlife and biodiversity.

Neguse framed climate change as an existential threat and discussed the need for bold action to protect the state. He was appointed to serve on the Select Committee on the Climate Crisis and highlighted the issue of wildfires throughout his campaign. He also sponsored the Wildfire Response and Drought Resiliency Act, which aimed to bolster water reservoirs, address forest health, and more.[27]

Overall, Neguse's support for outdoor issues played a part in helping him win re-election for his third term in Congress.

> "Public lands are at the heart of Colorado's economy, our commitment to sustainability and our way of life. As the first Coloradan to serve as Chairman of the U.S. House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, Joe is committed to preserving Colorado's treasured public spaces, investing in our outdoor recreation economy, safeguarding wildlife and biodiversity and tackling western wildfires. Early in his tenure, he shepherded his public lands package — the Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy Act (CORE Act) — through the U.S. House, major Colorado wilderness legislation that would preserve 400,000 acres of public lands and honor Colorado's military legacy. Joe has also made wildfire resiliency and preparedness a top priority, serving as Founder and Co-Chair of the Bipartisan Wildfire Caucus, and securing tens of millions of dollars for wildfire resiliency and mitigation, to restore our lands and communities."
>
> **From Joe Neguse's Website**
> joeforcolorado.com

BOEBERT vs. FRISCH CO-03

Conservation support makes congressional race closer than expected

Rep. Lauren Boebert narrowly beat her Democratic challenger Adam Frisch in Colorado's 3rd congressional district. In a conservative district where public lands are critical to local economies, Frisch focused on support of outdoor issues in a race that ended up much closer than expected.

Frisch referred to himself as a conservationist on his campaign website and stated that he was committed to preserving natural resources that are critical to Colorado's way of life. He also specifically called out the need to protect public lands and pass on a healthy environment to the next generation.[28] Addressing the drought Colorado is facing, Frisch promised to secure water for the district through water conservation and resiliency projects and new supply options.[29]

Meanwhile, Boebert consistently referred to conservation efforts as "land grabs" and "water grabs," refused to support the CORE Act, and criticized the Biden administration's shutdown of the Keystone XL Pipeline project.[30] Recognizing the pro-conservation trend in her district, Boebert did announce her support for protecting the lower Dolores River Canyon.[31]

This race was much closer than expected and Frisch's strong support for conservation may have been one of the key factors in his ability to connect with voters in Western Colorado.

> "I am a conservationist committed to preserving our natural resources and our way of life. We need to be responsible stewards of our public lands, keeping them accessible and protecting them from wildfires and other threats. We need clean air and water—and lower emissions—while putting the local economy first. We need to bring business, agricultural, environmental, and government leaders together to find sensible solutions that protect our greatest natural resources and make sure we are passing on a healthy environment and planet to the next generation."
>
> **From Adam Frisch's Website**
> adamforcolorado.com

PETTERSEN vs. AADLAND CO-07

Conservation action wins over down-the-middle approach to outdoor issues

Both candidates in Colorado's 7th congressional district campaigned on a platform of conservation, but Democratic state Sen. Brittany Pettersen defeated her Republican opponent, former oil and gas executive Erik Aadland.

Aadland took a down-the-middle approach to outdoor issues, saying that he wanted to protect the environment while keeping energy costs low. He even dedicated a campaign ad to talking about sustainability and framed it as an issue that all Coloradans should care about regardless of political party preferences.[32] On his campaign website, Aadland discussed the natural beauty of Colorado's lakes, rivers, land, and air and stated that "We can protect the environment with smart regulations without throttling industry and productivity."[33]

Pettersen was able to point to her conservation record while working in the state senate. Previously, she sponsored legislation to create a comprehensive plan for the state to address the impacts of climate change, promote electric vehicles and electric scooters, and promote energy efficiency for buildings to reduce emissions.[34] Pettersen also spoke about the importance of public lands to Colorado's outdoor economy, an industry that she states has supported over 500,000 jobs. On social media, she talked about the need to protect wildlife and showed support for President Biden's designation of Camp Hale-Continental Divide as a national monument.[35,36]

In the end, Pettersen's action on outdoor issues and conservation was able to help her capture 56.4% of the votes and win the election.

Brittany Pettersen
@pettersen4co

"Yesterday was an important step in protecting our CO public lands. Thank you @potus for declaring #CampHale a national monument-preserving it for decades to come-as well as @SenatorBennet, @SenatorHick, @RepJoeNeguse & countless advocates https://bit.ly/3MAO6cY #CO07 #copolitics"

October 13, 2022

Erik Aadland
@AadlandforCO

"Man-made impact on the environment is real and may have long reaching consequences for the future of humanity. We must protect our planet through wise stewardship of our resources.

I'll fight for balanced regulations that safeguard the environment without hampering industry."

September 9, 2022

CARAVEO vs. KIRKMEYER CO-08

Pro-conservation candidate beats climate denier

Coloradans in the state's newly-created 8th congressional district elected Dr. Yadira Caraveo, making her the first Latina the state has sent to Congress. Caraveo ran a campaign focused on health care and climate change in order to score a narrow victory over the Republican candidate and climate denier Barbara Kirkmeyer.

A former pediatrician, Caraveo often spoke about the negative health impacts that climate change and pollution have on children. On social media, Caraveo emphasized the need to address climate change immediately and highlighted the work she did to promote a transition to clean energy in the state legislature.[37,38,39,40] She also spoke highly of Colorado's public lands and promised to fight for responsible stewardship so that outdoor spaces would be available for generations to come.

On the other hand, Kirkmeyer took a decidedly anti-environmental stance during her campaign. She denied climate change, saying that "the Earth has been gradually warming since the Little Ice Age," and suggested that there may not be any human-caused reasons for climate change. Additionally, Kirkmeyer is a vocal advocate for the oil and gas industry. Kirkmeyer's own advertising promoted the oil and gas industry in Colorado.[41] The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee funded an ad that positioned her as "too extreme" for Colorado and highlighted her desire to roll back air and water protections.[42]

At the end of the day, Caraveo's strong support for public lands and climate protection helped her defeat Kirkmeyer in the race for Colorado's 8th congressional district.

Dr. Yadira Caraveo
@YadiraCaraveo

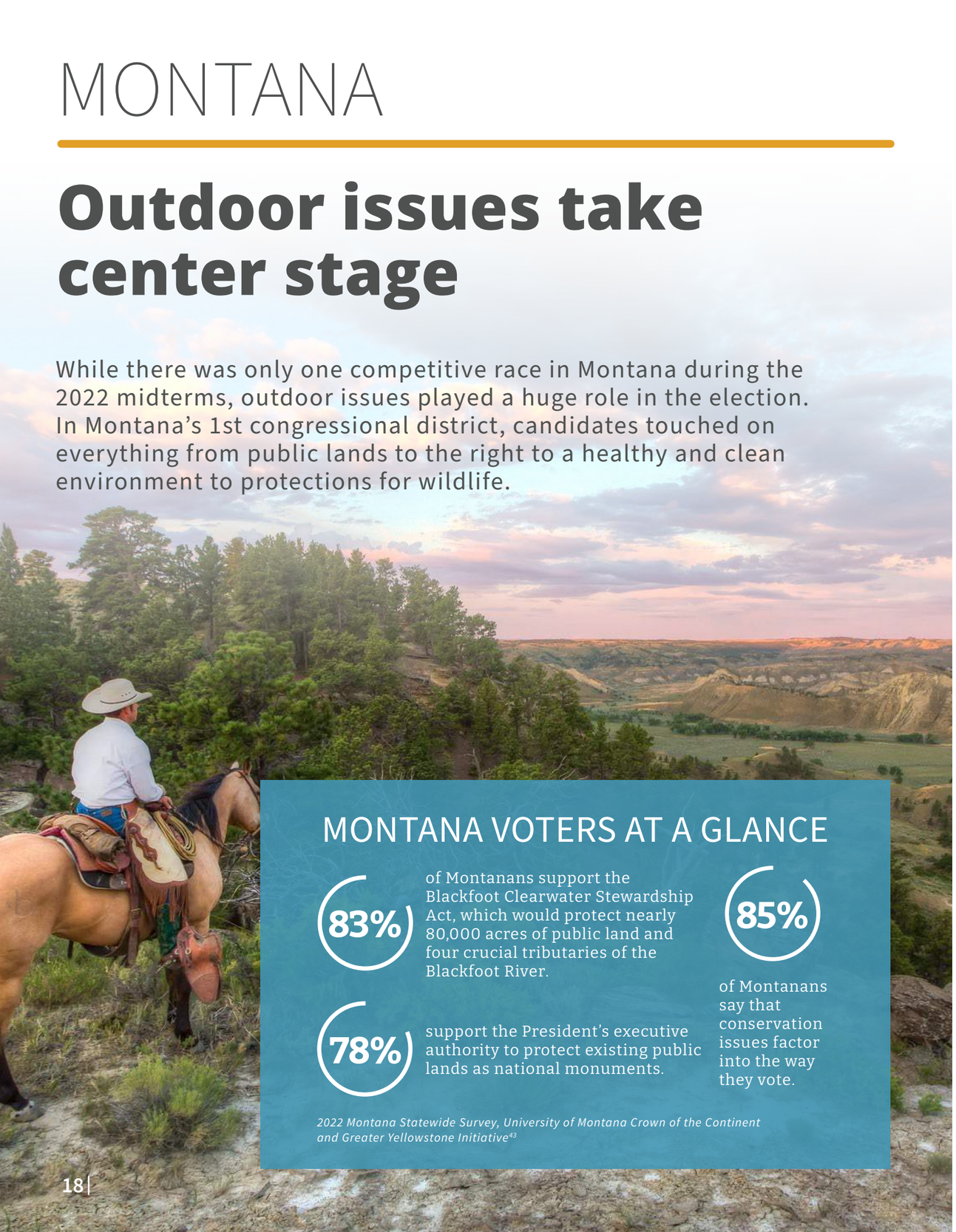
"Growing up in Colorado taught me to be grateful for the gift of our incredible public lands. In Congress, I'll fight for responsible stewardship so that they can be a part of our kids' inheritance for generations to come. #copubliclandsday #CO08"

May 21, 2022

MONTANA

Outdoor issues take center stage

While there was only one competitive race in Montana during the 2022 midterms, outdoor issues played a huge role in the election. In Montana's 1st congressional district, candidates touched on everything from public lands to the right to a healthy and clean environment to protections for wildlife.



MONTANA VOTERS AT A GLANCE

83% of Montanans support the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act, which would protect nearly 80,000 acres of public land and four crucial tributaries of the Blackfoot River.

78% support the President's executive authority to protect existing public lands as national monuments.

85% of Montanans say that conservation issues factor into the way they vote.

2022 Montana Statewide Survey, University of Montana Crown of the Continent and Greater Yellowstone Initiative[43]

ZINKE vs. TRANEL

Candidates square off on public lands

Former U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke defeated Democrat Monica Tranel in Montana's 1st congressional district. Despite overseeing the largest rollback of federal land protection in the nation's history, Zinke tried to position himself as a conservationist in this race and consistently referred to Tranel as a former "radical environmental lawyer."

Tranel, a two-time Olympic rower, often showed herself enjoying Montana's outdoor spaces in both her campaign ads and social media.[44] She also spoke about the importance of public lands to Montanans, pointing out that a right to a healthy and clean environment is enshrined in the state's constitution.[45] On Twitter, Tranel referred to public lands as the great equalizer, saying that they ensure that "everyone, no matter income, neighborhood, job, or education has equal access to hike, catch a trophy trout, or just take a deep breath."[46] Additionally, she advocated for the state to invest in clean renewable energy.

Meanwhile, Zinke highlighted his past support for the Great American Outdoors Act and his initiative to identify wildlife migration corridors.[47] Although Zinke served as Interior Secretary from 2017 to 2019, he resigned after coming under 18 ethics and criminal investigations, one involving his ties to a commercial development project. Despite his claims to the contrary, Zinke has a weak record on outdoor issues. Previously, he ended the Obama administration's moratorium on new coal leases on federal land; held the largest ever federal oil lease sale in the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska; weakened the Methane Waste and Prevention Rule; and oversaw the effort to shrink Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments.

While Tranel was the stronger candidate when it came to conservation, she wasn't able to overcome the demographics of the district and ultimately lost to Zinke in a closer-than-expected race.

Monica Tranel
@MonicaTranel

"Public lands are the great equalizer. Everyone, no matter income, neighborhood, job, or education has equal access to hike, catch a trophy trout, or just take a deep breath. It's up to us to ensure that right is protected for generations."

October 18, 2022

"When foreign companies wanted to mine Paradise Valley, Congressman Zinke said 'no way.'"

Ryan Zinke Twitter Ad

NEVADA

Public lands on the ballot

While outdoor issues were not the main focus of Nevada's 2022 midterms, they often played a role in many candidates' wins. Candidates who highlighted outdoor issues were often able to secure wins by discussing the effects of climate change, clean energy, and support for water conservation during their campaigns.

NEVADA VOTERS AT A GLANCE

76% of Nevadans are favorable towards candidates who invest in the renewable energy sector.

60% of Nevadans believe that oil and gas development on public land should only be allowed with strict limitations and regulations.

77% of Nevadans support a proposal to designate Avi Kwa Ame (Spirit Mountain) as a national monument.

Conservation candidate loses a close governor's race

In Nevada's gubernatorial race, the Republican challenger Joe Lombardo beat incumbent Governor Steve Sisolak, a Democrat in a nationally watched close race.

Throughout his campaign, Sisolak stressed the importance of both the economy and the climate, frequently talking about the need to create green jobs in the state. On his campaign website, he stated that protecting the environment and growing the economy go "hand-in-hand."[48] Sisolak also took to Twitter to celebrate Nevada's Public Lands Day and stress the need to protect state parks.[49]

As with many drought-stricken states out West, water played a large role in the Nevada governor's race. Sisolak stated that he has made addressing the state's water crisis a priority for years. He pointed to his time on the state's Colorado River Commission while he was a county commissioner and highlighted legislation that he supported to conserve and protect the state's water sources.[50]

Sisolak also argued that Lombardo doesn't have a plan to address climate change and protect Nevada's water sources. On his campaign website, Lombardo said that he is "committed to developing innovative plans to ensure Nevada has the water it needs for its current residents and for future growth," but did not list any specific proposals.[51]

In the end, Lombardo was able to walk away with a win, but Sisolak's record on conservation helped make it a tight race.

Steve Sisolak
@SteveSisolak

"Together, we're making strides to protect our water sources and we're not stopping anytime soon.

My opponent doesn't have a plan to address climate change."

November 1, 2022

CORTEZ MASTO vs. LAXALT

NV SENATE

Climate change, clean energy stances lead to victory in close Senate race

After days of vote counting, Nevada announced that Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto narrowly defeated her Republican opponent, Adam Laxalt. While outdoor issues were not the main focus of this race, Cortez Masto's support for public lands played a part in her victory.

Cortez Masto positioned herself as a leader in combating climate change by highlighting her support for a solar tax credit, wildfire legislation, and the Inflation Reduction Act, which included provisions to fight climate change and drought across the West.[52] Additionally, she spoke often about her work to secure clean energy jobs for the state and position Nevada as "the face of American clean energy."[53]

On social media, Cortez Masto praised the state's public lands and all the benefits they bring to Nevadans.[54] She talked about how she and her husband frequently enjoy Nevada's national parks through hikes and promised to protect and preserve these places. On Twitter, she celebrated the A grade that she received from the National Parks Action Fund.[55]

In contrast, Laxalt barely touched on outdoor issues and conservation during his campaign and was the subject of third-party ads attacking his connections to Big Oil.[56] This absence, alongside his ties to the oil industry, hurt him in the race and helped Cortez Masto take the win.

Catherine Cortez Masto
@SenCortezMasto

> "I am honored to receive an A from the @ActForParks

Nevada's public lands are so important to our state and our economy, and I'll always work to preserve and protect them."

September 21, 2022

TITUS vs. ROBERTSON

NV-01

Outspoken support for outdoor issues wins big

Rep. Dina Titus defeated Republican Mark Robertson in Nevada's 1st congressional district, a district made more competitive during the redistricting process. Both candidates acknowledged the negative effects of climate change, but Titus was more outspoken in her support for outdoor issues and public lands.

On social media, Titus spoke frequently about natural disasters, like wildfire and drought, that threaten the state.[57,58,59] She also emphasized the need to fight climate change by holding the biggest polluters accountable and pointed to her record supporting climate legislation, like the Inflation Reduction Act.[60] On National Public Lands Day, Titus praised the state's public lands for their "iconic flora and fauna, cultural resources, and outdoor recreation."[61,62] She also highlighted endorsements she received from environmental organizations like the National Parks Action Fund, the Sierra Club, and the League of Conservation Voters.[63]

On his campaign website, Robertson called all Americans "stewards of the planet" but argued for fighting climate change without limiting the freedom of other Americans. Nevadans ultimately chose the candidate with the stronger record on and support for conservation.[64]

Dina Titus
@repdinatitus

> "In Nevada we value our public lands for their iconic flora and fauna, cultural resources, and outdoor recreation. That's why we're fighting to create Avi Kwa Ame National Monument. Celebrating Public Lands Day with @ProgressForNV @getoutdoorsnv"

September 24, 2022

LEE vs. BECKER

NV-03

Outdoor vote pivotal in heated congressional race

In an extremely competitive race in Nevada's 3rd congressional district, Rep. Susie Lee defeated Republican challenger April Becker. While conservation was not a key issue in this race, Lee's support for outdoor issues was an avenue she used to connect with the concerns of Nevada voters.

Lee spoke often about climate change and water issues on social media, saying that the state is "ground zero for the effects of climate change."[65] If re-elected, she promised to improve the power grid, create clean energy jobs, and bring water back into Lake Mead for generations to come.[66] In the weeks leading up to the election, Lee joined Interior Secretary Deb Haaland on a tour of the proposed Avi Kwa Ame National Monument, reinforcing her strong support for public land protections.

Additionally, she highlighted her record on fighting climate change in Congress including sponsoring bills to combat drought and co-authoring the Water Data Act.[67] When Lee was endorsed by the Blue Green Alliance, she said that combatting the climate crisis was one of her top priorities.[68]

On the other hand, Becker hardly spoke about conservation and outdoor issues, if ever. Ceding the outdoor vote to Lee may have contributed to her loss in a very close race.

Susie Lee
@SusieLeeNV

"Nevada is at the epicenter of the climate crisis. I have made it a priority to combat drought in the West and ensure southern Nevadans have access to safe, clean water."

September 20, 2022

NEW MEXICO

Big wins for outdoor issues

Out of all three races that we tracked in New Mexico, the most pro-conservation candidate won in each one. Like many states out West, water played a large role in New Mexico's 2022 midterms. Climate change and renewable energy were also hot topics in the state with each winner voicing their support for solar or wind energy during their campaigns.

NEW MEXICO VOTERS AT A GLANCE

81% of New Mexico voters support proposals to preserve Caja del Rio, which would help preserve culturally significant sites and an important wildlife corridor.

73% believe that leaders need to do more to support the clean energy industries in their state.

60% agree that oil and gas development on public land should only be allowed with strict limitations and regulations.

LUJAN GRISHAM vs. RONCHETTI NM GOVERNOR

Strong stance on climate change wins incumbent reelection

In New Mexico, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham won re-election against Republican challenger, Mark Ronchetti, thanks in part to her strong support for outdoor issues.

Throughout the campaign, Lujan Grisham emphasized the conservation work she completed during her first term as governor.[69] She called climate change an "existential threat" and promised to always take "bold action" to protect the environment.[70] On Twitter, she listed five of the top things she has done to protect New Mexicans from the effects of climate change, including bolstering the state's clean energy economy, passing the Energy Transition Act, and strengthening pollution regulations.

While Ronchetti stated that he and his family enjoy spending time outdoors, he did not show strong support for conservation and outdoor issues during this race.[71] Not only did Ronchetti promise to increase oil and gas production in the state, but he also said that he does not believe that climate change exacerbates wildfires.[72] In an ask for campaign donations, Lujan Grisham highlighted Ronchetti's weaknesses in these areas and stressed that the state's natural resources deserve protection.[73]

At the end of the day, New Mexicans voted to keep Lujan Grisham in office so that she could continue to lead a strong fight against climate change.

Michelle Lujan Grisham
@Michelle4NM

"Protecting our natural resources can't be an afterthought. The same way we have invested in police officers for our safety and teachers for our education, we must continue to invest in the environment to protect our quality of life."

September 17, 2022

VASQUEZ vs. HERRELL NM-02

Public lands bona fides help flip seat

Democrat Gabe Vasquez unseated Republican Rep. Yvette Herrell in New Mexico's 2nd congressional district. While Vasquez made conservation and climate change a key focus of his campaign, Herrell chose to align herself with the oil and gas industry, which hurt her in the race.

During the campaign, Vasquez referred to himself as a conservationist, crediting childhood adventures with his grandfather for his admiration of and respect for the outdoors.[74] He is a vocal supporter of public lands, stating that they are "core to the state's identity" and has promised to "fight any efforts to sell off our public lands to the highest bidder."[75] Emphasizing benefits like hiking, biking, hunting, and fishing, Vasquez stressed the importance of preserving these places for the next generations and the state's outdoor recreation economy.[76] Vasquez also highlighted his previous work at an environmental nonprofit and as a staff person on Capitol Hill to protect New Mexico's natural resources. His campaign even designed an entire line of merchandise "inspired by love for our parks and public lands."[77]

Vasquez also spoke often about the risks of climate change.[78] Specifically, he discussed the need to address pollution, wildfires, water scarcity, and outdated energy sources. Citing some of the top-tier research facilities in the state, Vasquez said that he wanted New Mexico to "be leading the effort in new energy technologies and drought-adaptation strategies."

Herrell, on the other hand, aligned herself with the fossil fuel industry and refused to acknowledge the link between climate change and wildfires.[79] On her campaign website, she claimed that Washington was prioritizing "wolves and stringent environmental regulations over hardworking New Mexico families."[80]

Ultimately, Vasquez's vocal support for outdoor issues and New Mexicans' way of life helped him secure victory and oust Herrell from her seat.

Gabe Vasquez
@Gabe_NM

"Our public lands are worth protecting - on this National Public Lands Day, I'm excited to think of the future of our lands, our wildlife, and our traditions. But we must elect stewards of our lands who will safeguard these places for the next generation. #NM02"

September 24, 2022

LEGER FERNANDEZ vs. MARTINEZ JOHNSON NM-03

Conservation champion defeats pro-oil candidate

In New Mexico's 3rd congressional district, Democrat Teresa Leger Fernandez defeated Alexis Martinez Johnson, an environmental engineer who works in the oil and natural gas industry. While both candidates highlighted outdoor issues in their campaigns, Leger Fernandez took a stronger pro-conservation stance.

Leger Fernandez spoke about the risks of climate change often and framed renewable energy as the solution to many of these issues.[81] On her campaign website she highlighted problems like drought, heatwaves, and wildfires that threaten New Mexicans' way of life. She also spoke about wanting to work with ranchers and farmers so they could stay on their land and help build a green rural economy.[82,83] When discussing why she is running for Congress, Leger Fernandez mentioned her love for the planet, her desire to protect public lands for future generations, and her previous work to protect culturally significant sacred sites. Additionally, she created a campaign ad that highlighted the work she did as a former acequia commissioner to protect New Mexico's water from developers.[84]

During the campaign, Martinez Johson played up her experience as an environmental engineer and asserted that she had the knowledge needed to handle wildfire management.[85] On her website, she stated that she is for "environmental stewardship not environmental alarmism" and discussed her support of the timber and oil and gas industries.[86]

Leger Fernandez' solid record on water conservation and focus on renewable energy helped her beat out Martinez Johnson for the seat.

"I fought to protect sacred sites."

Teresa Leger Fernandez Ad

LOOKING AHEAD: 2024 OUTLOOK

The 2022 midterms demonstrated the power of outdoor issues when it comes to elections in the West. Recognizing the importance of conservation and public lands, candidates on both sides of the aisle spoke about these issues during their campaigns. Voters made their priorities known by electing politicians who showed strong support for the outdoor issues that are essential to the Western way of life. These results were consistent with previous poll results[87] that found that 86 percent of Western voters say issues involving clean water, clean air, wildlife, and public lands are important when deciding whether to support an elected official.

However, many of the races proved that simply talking about public lands is not enough to secure a win. While some candidates such as Joe O'Dea in Colorado and Alexis Martinez Johnson in New Mexico touched on environmental issues, they ultimately lost to their opponents—Michael Bennet and Teresa Leger Fernandez, respectively—who took stronger and more vocal pro-conservation stances.

As the outdoor voting bloc grows stronger, these voters have come to expect more from their elected officials. It is no longer enough to mention public lands in a campaign speech or to use outdoor landscapes in a political ad. Instead, voters are looking for candidates who either have solid, specific plans to protect the West's outdoor spaces or have a proven track record on conservation.

As climate and outdoor issues converge and the West continues to be affected by extreme weather events and severe wildfires and drought, voters will be looking for campaign messages to be translated into meaningful action. In a 2022 Colorado College poll[88], 75 percent of voters in the West said that climate change is an extremely or very serious problem in their state.

President Biden is moving his conservation agenda forward by designating the Camp Hale-Continental Divide National Monument in Colorado and pledging similar protections for Avi Kwa Ame in Nevada. The President's embrace of conservation as a winning issue was on full display when he wore a new Camp Hale-Continental Divide ball cap while calling candidates on election night to congratulate them on their victories.

Today, polling and election results make it clear voters are ready for more.

With a national presidential election and high-profile competitive U.S. Senate races in Arizona, Nevada, and Montana on the way in 2024, now is the time for politicians across the West to show that they are leaders on outdoor issues and ready to deliver on their conservation promises.

PHOTO CREDITS

***Cover:* Camp Hale-Continental Divide National Monument Designation Ceremony**
Aaron Weiss, Center for Western Priorities

Sonoran Desert National Monument, Arizona (1)
Bob Wick, Bureau of Land Management

Deschutes Wild and Scenic River, Oregon
Bob Wick, Bureau of Land Management

Winning the West 2022 Polling Results (1)
Center for Western Priorities

Winning the West 2022 Polling Results (2)
Center for Western Priorities

"Escape" Ad Screenshot
Center for Western Priorities

Sonoran Desert National Monument, Arizona (2)
Bob Wick, Bureau of Land Management

Lake Mead National Recreation Area
Andrew Cattoir, National Park Service

Grand Canyon DEIS Aerial, Colorado River Geikie Peak, Grand Canyon
National Park Service

Camp Hale-Continental Divide National Monument, Colorado
Mason Cummings

Upper Missouri Wild and Scenic River, Montana
Bob Wick, Bureau of Land Management

Basin and Range National Monument, Nevada
Bob Wick, Bureau of Land Management

Avi Kwa Ame (Spirit Mountain)
Road to 30 Postcards, Center for Western Priorities

Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, Nevada
Bureau of Land Management

Avi Kwa Ame (Spirit Mountain), Lake Mead National Recreation Area, Nevada
Ken Lund

Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument, New Mexico
Sherman Hogue, Bureau of Land Management

President Joe Biden Congratulates Candidates
@POTUS, Twitter

Dolores River Canyon, Colorado
Bob Wick, Bureau of Land Management

Politician Social Media Posts, Ads, and Headshots
Twitter, Youtube, Instagram

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