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Candidates: Stand with Montanans for a 28th Amendment

A Column by

Evan Barrett, retired history teacher, writer and activist, Butte; Jim Nelson, former Montana Supreme Court justice, Helena; John Bohlinger, former lieutenant governor for the state of Montana, Billings; Jeff Krauss, former mayor, city and county Commissioner, Bozeman; and C.B. Pearson, treasurer, Stand With Montanans, Missoula.

April 5, 2017

We, the people of Montana, have an unusual, unique and important opportunity to shape the path of our nation and improve our democratic electoral processes. For only the third time in our history, Montana faces a special congressional election where there will be debate and different views on many issues. However, all three candidates, and all Montanans, can come together on one overarching, urgent issue. Our congressman can and must stand with the people of Montana in support of a 28th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution to rid our elections of the corrupting influence of big money - the kind of money that is already pouring into Montana for this special election. For over 100 years, Montanans have insisted, at the ballot box, that we the people should govern – not money, nor corporations, nor wealthy donors, nor special interests. In initiative elections from 1912 to 2012, large majorities of Montanans have spoken clearly and agreed that reasonable limits on campaign contributions and election spending are necessary.

Today however, without a constitutional amendment, Montana cannot enforce the reforms we have approved for our state. This is because the U.S. Supreme Court wrongly struck down campaign finance laws, both state and federal, as violations of the “free speech rights” of corporations and the wealthy. Many of Montana’s current campaign laws either have been negated or are under attack.

Just as they did in 1912 when they voted in our Corrupt Practices Act, Montana voters overwhelmingly approved Initiative 166 in 2012, instructing Montana’s congressional delegation to work to pass a 28th Amendment. Montana voters established "a state policy that corporations are not entitled to constitutional rights because they are not human beings, and charge[d] Montana elected and appointed officials, state and federal, to implement that policy. With this policy, the people of Montana establish[ed] that there should be a level playing field in campaign spending, in part by prohibiting corporate campaign contributions and expenditures and by limiting political spending in elections."

This powerful people’s initiative not only received 75 percent of the vote, it passed handily in every one of Montana’s 56 counties and was upheld by our Supreme Court. Today, 18 states and nearly 800 cities and towns across America have followed Montana’s lead. As Wyoming’s former Sen. Alan Simpson recently said, “We need a constitutional amendment because the Supreme Court, in cases such as Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, has made a series of dangerously wrong

decisions that make effective reform virtually impossible without a constitutional amendment.”

Since our 2012 vote, the domination of big money and corporate interests has only gotten worse here and across America. The 2016 election was the most expensive ever, with billions of dollars in spending from few, often secret sources. Over \$200 million in super political action committee money came from just three billionaires alone, and money from corporations, the wealthy and special interests now makes up most of the political money in our system. Ordinary citizens of Montana and our country are overwhelmed and disregarded because of this tsunami of tainted money.

In this upcoming special election, we are asking that every candidate, of whatever party, stand with Montanans and pledge to work for a 28th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution to expunge corrupting money from our elections. We ask every candidate to comply with the very clear instructions of the people of Montana. And we encourage voters to support only candidates who pledge to follow Montana voters’ call for a 28th Amendment to put government back in the hands of the people.

Before you vote, we will keep you posted on how the candidates stand.

This opinion is signed by: Evan Barrett, retired history teacher, writer and activist, Butte; Jim Nelson, former Montana Supreme Court justice, Helena; John Bohlinger, former lieutenant governor for the state of Montana, Billings; Jeff Krauss, former mayor, city and county Commissioner, Bozeman; and C.B. Pearson, treasurer, Stand With Montanans, Missoula.