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John Heenan Gets Nod for Progressive Policy & Electability

A Column for The Montana Post

by Evan Barrett

May 26, 2018

Recently several friends asked my opinion on the Democratic primary for Congress here in Montana – the right to run in the general election against Greg (body-slammer) Gianforte, now the [wealthiest member of Congress](#) and extremely out-of-touch with everyday Montanans.

You may have already voted your absentee ballot or are getting ready to cast that ballot ... or you may be getting ready to go to the polls on June 5 ...

Whatever the case, here's my perspective. We Democrats here in Montana are blessed this year with good candidates for Congress ... but **in my judgement John Heenan rises to the top.**

I strongly support John Heenan, both for **where he stands on the issues and on his electability.**

I first heard of John Heenan when he started running TV ads late last summer to introduce himself and his candidacy to Montanans. That's when I learned that John and his law partner had represented the people of Montana in court, at their own expense, in pursuing the dark money, illegal campaign coordination back in 2012 involving the National Right to Work Committee seeking to purify the Republican Party by purging moderate Republican legislative candidates. This nefarious effort is the subject of the award-winning documentary "Dark Money" by Montanan Kimberly Reed. It will be opening nationwide this summer after winning many awards on the film festival circuit.

The background reveals a lot. Over the years the GOP-dominated legislature has refused to provide enough money for our Commissioner of Political Practices (COPP), created in 1975, to hire attorneys to make sure the law is followed and the worst cases can be brought to court if needed. The most egregious case was against former GOP State Rep. & Senator Art Wittich of Bozeman, who refused to settle and ended up taking the case against him all the way to the Montana Supreme Court. The case needed to be pursued but COPP did not have the funds. So John Heenan and his law partner Gene Jarussi volunteered and became special deputy attorneys general to represent COPP and the people of Montana in court. They did so free of charge (Gene Jarussi is more featured in the film, but John Heenan devoted thousands of volunteer legal hours on the case in and out of court.)

This level of commitment to the public good and clean campaigns in Montana garnered my attention and I wanted to meet John Heenan. Well, after meeting with him, I really liked what I found. I liked him for his commitment to democracy. I liked him for his willingness and record of fighting powerful interests (like banks and insurance companies) against whom regular people were otherwise powerless. I liked his family background, and his position on issues of importance: his commitment to public education, better and affordable healthcare for all, access to public lands, protecting social security, Medicare and Medicaid, protecting

individual rights and fighting discrimination, his support for workers and organized labor, and more.

I also liked that he happened to have some personal resources to commit to the race and was raising excellent financial support from others – but without any corporate PAC money. I liked that he and his wife own a restaurant in Billings and, as a result, he had a small business background in addition to being an attorney for “little people.” Politically, I liked that he was committed to go out and work for votes in rural and eastern Montana, which he has done quite extensively.

Finally, I liked that he was from Billings, the home county of Montana’s largest number of voters overall and largest number of Democratic voters. History has shown that Democratic candidates from rural or eastern Montana are proportionally more successful at statewide election than those from urban western cities like Butte, Missoula, Bozeman or Helena. While Democratic candidates from those areas have occasionally won statewide, we have a record of many losers from those areas. On the other hand, Governors Schwinden and Schweitzer and Senators Melcher and Tester represent an electoral pattern worth considering. Seems like eastern and rural Democrats are able to pick up the western urban progressive vote but western urban Democratic candidates cannot pick up much of a vote from eastern and rural Montana counties. This “geographic argument” for John Heenan is solidly based on Montana political history. As far as I am concerned, the 2018 recipe for winning for Montana Democrats starts in eastern and rural Montana.

So, I am for John Heenan for practical political reasons. But I also support him for progressive policy reasons. And, based upon my family and political history I lean toward candidates and officials with a demonstrated record of fighting for the powerless against the powerful. That’s my kind of Democratic Party and Democratic candidate. Clearly that’s what we need in Washington DC these days where for decades the economic playing field has been tilted against the interests of regular people and towards the interests of large corporations and the super-wealthy. And we need truly populist members of Congress to counteract a president who is a pseudo-populist, not a real one.

I FIRMLY BELIEVE THAT JOHN HEENAN HAS EVERYTHING IN PLACE TO BE OUR BEST CANDIDATE FOR CONGRESS AND A GREAT MEMBER OF CONGRESS ONCE HE GETS THERE.

Evan Barrett, now retired and living on the Butte hill, is a regularly published political columnist in many Montana daily newspapers. Though never an elected official, Barrett’s political and governmental experience includes three years as Executive Director of the Montana Democratic Party and twelve years on the Democratic National Committee; senior staff positions with Governors Forrest Anderson, Tom Judge and Brian Schweitzer, Congressman Pat Williams and Senator John Melcher; and campaign management positions with Judge, Williams and Melcher. Barrett is a recognized Montana historian, teacher and award-winning chronicler of Montana’s progressive past.
