

For some Montana office seekers, it's not about winning

By **BOBBY CAINA CALVAN** Associated Press | MARCH 20, 2016 — 12:40PM

HELENA, Mont. — Candidate Bill McChesney has been speaking out against big money in Montana politics, but he gave incumbent Gov. Steve Bullock a big financial favor just by entering the Democratic primary.

Bullock can now keep hundreds of thousands of dollars in contributions that he would have had to return if he had run unopposed.

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Nelson said no one forced him to run, though a few Republicans urged him to run.

Nelson, who chairs the GOP's Ravalli County Central Committee, is making his first run for statewide office. He said he's running to give voice to the concerns of western Montana and to raise his name recognition.

"I believe that my running would be a big long shot," he said, "but you've seen what Trump's been able to do in the primary."

While McChesney and Nelson say they're in it to win it, they both donated \$50 to the campaigns of their rivals before becoming candidates.

Nelson knows he stands little chance against Gianforte, a wealthy Bozeman businessman. But, he said, if Donald Trump can enthrall the masses despite throngs of early naysayers, why can't he?

Nelson's and McChesney's entries in the gubernatorial race — just days before the candidate-filing period ended March 14 — follows a common trend in Montana election cycles. Election watchers say both parties use token opponents to comply with state law.

Robert Saldin, a professor of political science at the University of Montana, said the law needs to be changed to prevent such "farcical situations."

"There is a pattern here in Montana of people jumping in like this. They jump into the race and they basically don't do anything. They don't even attempt to mount anything approaching a real campaign. They just file their paperwork then sit at home," Saldin said.

Former Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer acknowledged the practice of recruiting dummy candidates, as they are called in political parlance, and said it might be time for the Legislature to revisit the issue.

Few, if any, will fess up to being part of the charade, he said. And neither would he.

"Sometimes people get into these races so their opponents can raise more money, and it looks like it's happening in some of these races now. But there's nothing illegal about it," Schweitzer said.

Jonathan Motl, the state's Commissioner of Political Practices, defended the rule, saying it helps limit the role of money in campaigns and promotes robust debate.

"Primary elections are set up to allow for the opportunity for debate to occur without impacting the winner's chance to then face the other candidate in the general election," he said.

McChesney said he's in the race to make a statement, not to help Bullock.

"My filing for election will give Gov. Bullock the opportunity to carry his primary collections into the general election, although that was not my purpose," McChesney said. "And I hope that doesn't overshadow — in fact, I hope that it would emphasize — the necessity for campaign finance reform."

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