

Trump poses tough decisions for Montana GOP stalwarts

BOBBY CAINA CALVAN 3:14 p.m. MDT July 7, 2016



(Photo: Mary Altaffer / AP)

HELENA — In the landscape of presidential politics, Montana has been solid Republican territory. But fissures are developing in the state's conservative bedrock, as Donald Trump's bid for the White House jolts the party establishment.

Former Montana Gov. Marc Racicot last week expressed what few are willing to share publicly as the state GOP tries to rally around Trump.

In an [op-ed appearing Friday in the Washington Post \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/americans-can-choose-better-than-trump/2016/06/30/1db143c0-3efc-11e6-84e8-1580c7db5275_story.html\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/americans-can-choose-better-than-trump/2016/06/30/1db143c0-3efc-11e6-84e8-1580c7db5275_story.html), the two-term

Republican governor and former head of the Republican National Committee under George W. Bush said he could neither endorse nor support Trump. He said the New York businessman lacked leadership and the conservative principles to be a true standard bearer for the GOP. And he prayed for a miracle during the party convention in Cleveland later this month.

Racicot did not say what he would do.

Faced with their choices, other prominent Montana Republicans are confronted with tough decisions — including the possibility of sitting out the presidential election because of such intense distaste for Trump and Hillary Clinton, the presumptive Democrat nominee.

Montana Republicans have strong libertarian and populist streaks. That played out in 1992 when a fourth of Montana voters chose third-party candidate Ross Perot, allowing Democrat Bill Clinton to win the state against the Republican incumbent George H. Bush. But the state has been reliably Republican, voting for Democrats just twice since 1952. Lyndon B. Johnson won the state in 1964.

Already, Montana Republicans are struggling to keep their party unified. In recent years, philosophical differences have spawned a power struggle between hardliners and moderates.

"It's totally unprecedented in my lifetime that we have a candidate like Donald Trump. I can't believe how divided people are," said Betti Hill, a member of the state's delegation to the Republican National Convention.

She and her husband, Rick, a former U.S. Congressman and the Republican nominee for Montana governor four years ago, have been involved in Montana politics for more than four decades. Months ago, Rick Hill began expressing alarm over Trump's candidacy.

"At this stage, I've made a decision I'm not going to vote for Mr. Trump. And obviously, I'm not going to vote for Hillary Clinton. I think they are, unfortunately, really two bad choices," he said.

Clinton faces problems of her own because of ongoing questions over her private email servers. Many voters view her unfavorably. But Trump's negative ratings are even worse, according to recent polls.

The state's Republican Party Chair, Rep. Jeff Essmann, is confident the party faithful will rally behind Trump. "Republicans need to recognize that united we stand, divided we fall. Now is the time to unite." He called Trump a candidate befitting Montana's populist traditions.

Like so many other Republicans, State Rep. Theresa Manzella, who supported Ted Cruz until the Texas Senator dropped out, is not totally convinced about Trump. But the alternative — a Hillary Clinton presidency — would be far worse, she said.

"We have to deal with reality. What we've been dealt is a choice between Mr. Trump and Hillary Clinton," said Manzella, who is chairing the state's convention delegation.

Montana Attorney General Tim Fox said he's not endorsing anybody for president.

But other high-level Montana Republicans, including U.S. Sen. Steve Daines and U.S. Rep. Ryan Zinke, have now thrown their support behind Trump, but waited until the last minute to do so. When Trump visited Billings in June, the GOP's nominee for governor, Greg Gianforte, didn't even mention Trump by name in a press release welcoming "another visit by a 2016 presidential candidate to Montana."

Disaffected Republicans do have choices, said Jeremy Johnson, a professor of political science at Carroll College. They could rally behind the libertarian candidate, Gary Johnson.

"Some voters not thrilled with the top of the ticket may skip voting altogether on election day which of course affects everyone on the ticket," said Professor Johnson. "Clinton and Trump both are less popular than most major party nominees but the problem appears to be more acute for Trump."