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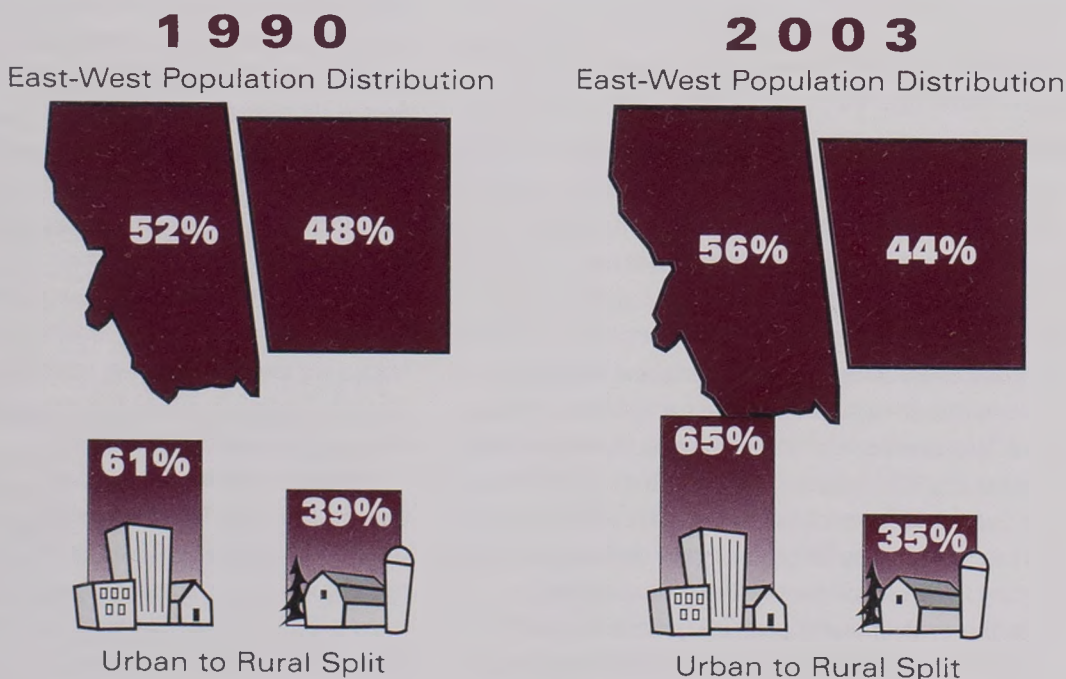
Montana's Agenda

ISSUES SHAPING OUR STATE

The Contours of Montana Public Opinion

By Craig Wilson
and Joe Floyd

Since its inception in 1989, the MSU-Billings Poll has regularly surveyed 400 adult Montanans and charted their political opinions. To accurately assess Montanans' views, the poll's sample has mirrored the state's changing gender and urban-rural mix, some of which is reflected in the chart below.



As Montana's population has changed, so have its attitudes and politics — becoming increasingly conservative in most, but not all, aspects. The period 1991 to 1993 was the last time the poll found a greater number of self-identified Democrats than Republicans. This was also the last time — prior to the 2005 legislative session — that the Democratic Party controlled at least one legislative chamber. In the decade ending in 2004, the mean

partisan self-identification of respondents was 37 percent Republican, 34 percent Independent, and 29 percent Democratic. But the fact that Democrats won some statewide races between 1993 and 2005 indicates that political factors other than partisanship motivate Montanans.

The influence that news sources have on Montana public opinion also changed. In 1991, 56 percent claimed television and 28 percent a newspaper as their primary news source. Last year the respective figures were 64 percent and 15 percent, with 8 percent relying mostly on the Internet.

Sixteen years of the MSU-Billings Poll make it clear from the data that public opinion is the seed bed of political campaigns and public policy in Montana. Because politicians want to serve their constituents and get reelected, they pay attention to the grassroots. The MSU-Billings polls tell us that Montana should not be colored red or blue. The poll's findings reveal more pragmatism than ideology and tell us that we should not be surprised that our policymakers are cautious and adjusting. They are merely reflecting the opinions of Montanans. The following information gleaned from polling data is instructive on these points.

Elected officials' performance. Every MSU-Billings Poll evaluates the job performance of the President. Given the Republican Party's recent numerical advantage in Montana, it is not surprising that the poll rated Presidents Bush I and II more positively than President Clinton. Between 1989 and 1992, the first President Bush's highest positive evaluation (74 percent) occurred at the time of the Gulf War and his lowest (50 percent) just before his defeat in 1992. President Clinton's highest positive evaluation (54 percent) came in 1998 and his lowest in late 1993, when 58 percent gave him a negative rating. The second President Bush's highest positive evaluation (87 percent) came two months after the 9/11 attacks. His lowest approval rating (56 percent) was in October 2004, when 91 percent of Republicans viewed him positively and 83 percent of Democrats viewed him negatively.

In Montana, men tend to view Republicans more positively and women favor Democrats. But Republican Gov. Marc Racicot was viewed more positively by a cross-section of Montanans than any

other Montana chief executive. His lowest rating (71 percent positive) was in his first year in office in 1993, while his highest rating (86 percent) came in 1996. In the 1996 poll Racicot received positive ratings from 92 percent of Republicans and 81 percent of Democrats surveyed.

Satisfaction with the job performance of Montana's two U.S. senators, Max Baucus and Conrad Burns, also was surveyed between 1993 and 2003. Baucus received positive evaluations in all 10 surveys, his highest approval rating (62 percent) coming in 1998, and his lowest (50 percent) in 1994. Burns received his lowest rating (56 percent negative) in 1993, his first year in office. His highest rating was in 2002, when 63 percent gave him a positive evaluation.

National security. The MSU-Billings Poll says that Montanans are highly supportive of U.S. military actions. It also says that more Republicans than Democrats and more men than women back the use of military force. Such support does not appear to stem from Montanans' feelings of vulnerability. In 2001, after the terrorist attacks, 96 percent said they felt safe or very safe. In 2004, 59 percent said there had been no change in their personal safety since 2000.

Poll respondents have more strongly supported the military actions of Republican presidents than Democrats. While 76 percent backed President Reagan's decision to shoot down two Libyan fighters over the Gulf of Sidra and 74 percent backed President Bush's ouster of Nicaragua dictator Manuel Noriega, 71 percent opposed President Clinton sending forces to Bosnia and 60 percent opposed sending troops to Haiti.

Montanans have voiced strong initial support for war. In February 1991, 71 percent supported the Gulf War (37 percent of women respondents and 21 percent of men respondents opposed the war). The same poll found that 62 percent favored assassinating Saddam Hussein (in 1993, 60 percent gave the same response). The poll after 9/11 found that 83 percent of Montanans backed the use of force in Afghanistan and 74 percent thought that the U.S. would succeed against terrorism. In the October 2004 poll, 53 percent backed the Iraq War (79 percent of Republicans and 56 percent of Independents were supportive and 79 percent of

Democrats opposed). Age and gender shed further light: 72 percent of 18-to-39-year-old males backed the war and 53 percent of females of the same age opposed the war.

Environmental issues. During the 16 years of the MSU-Billings Poll, opinion surveys conducted by interest groups portrayed Montanans as either conservationist or pro-development. But the MSU-Billings Poll concluded Montanans hold moderate opinions on many environmental issues, with Democrats, women, and urbanites being more preservationist and Republicans, men, and rural residents being more pro-development. Eight polls asked about wolves in Yellowstone Park. A majority or plurality twice supported reintroduction, and a majority or plurality were opposed six times. Only once did support or opposition exceed 54 percent. Five polls asked whether there was enough wilderness in Montana. Each time a majority or plurality said that Montana had “about the right amount.” Three surveys asked about buffalo wandering out of Yellowstone Park; each time a majority said that buffalo had to be controlled to protect cattle from brucellosis.

Lifestyle issues. The MSU-Billings Poll has routinely asked Montanans about personal matters. In the 1991 poll, 24 percent said that they had been seriously addicted to drugs, food, work, or relationships at some point in their lives. The same survey found that 24 percent gambled more than once a week. In the 1997 survey, 59 percent said that they had not consumed any alcohol during the last week, but 8 percent had taken between six and ten drinks and 6 percent more than ten. That poll also discovered that 48 percent had “eaten out” one or two times during the past week and 22 percent three or more times; only 21 percent had exercised vigorously. The 2004 poll found that only 16 percent of Montanans sport a tattoo (but 33 percent of females ages 18 to 39 did).

Religious beliefs. Montanans, according to the MSU-Billings Poll, are a religious people. The 1994 poll used a scale of 1 to 10 to gauge spirituality (1 being “not spiritual at all” and 10 being “very spiritual”). The mean spirituality response was 7.0.

The 1999 survey determined that 42 percent attend church at least once a week and 29 percent never attend church. In the 1997 poll, 85 percent said they “definitely believed in a higher power;” 92 percent gave the same response in the 1998 poll.

Law and order. The MSU-Billings Poll has found that Montanans do not take a hard line on crime control. In five polls, a majority or plurality supported physician-assisted suicide (ranging from 63 percent in 1990 to 46 percent in 1997). The poll has also charted declining support for the death penalty: 83 percent in 1989, 81 percent in 1996, and 72 percent in 2002. Montanans have been increasingly open to early release of nonviolent felons: 85 percent were opposed or strongly opposed in 1995, but 53 percent in 2002. Montanans appear to be more supportive of gun control than usually portrayed. In 1989, 57 percent supported making handguns more difficult to buy. In 1996, 70 percent felt that gun-control laws were too lenient or about right. In 2000, 60 percent believed trigger locks should be mandatory. In 2002, 79 percent supported conducting background checks on handgun purchasers.

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As the first issue of *Montana's Agenda* detailed in an article on the state's demographics, Montana's population is changing. Some of that population shift is reflected in the evolution of public opinion. While the MSU-Billings Poll has found significant breadth and diversity in the opinions held by Montanans, those views have not always been predictable or consistent. Regardless of the reasons for Montanans' changing opinions, the state's political leaders pay close attention to their constituents' beliefs and try to reflect those changing points of view in their policy making.

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