



Montana governor Brian Schweitzer based his agenda on conversations with ordinary citizens.

OFFICE OF GOVERNOR SCHWEITZER

The Progressive Frontier

The governor of the Big Sky state has important lessons to teach Democrats across the nation. *By Matt Singer*

LAST NOVEMBER², AS PROGRESSIVES watched state after state turn red in the presidential race—and in Senate races that were supposed to be close—something funny was happening in Montana: The state that went for Bush by 20 percent handed a solid victory to a new Democratic governor: 49-year-old rancher Brian Schweitzer. And, unlike other elected red-state Democrats, it quickly became clear he was not going to be alone at the top.

Along with the governorship, Montana Democrats seized three other important statewide executive offices: held their majority on the state's Public Service Commission; took a majority in the State Senate and fought

their way to a 50-50 draw in the State House.

Since then, Democrats across the country have turned to Montana for answers and hope. Some critics denigrate Schweitzer's victory, claiming that a red-state Democrat must simply be a Republican lite. But that analysis falls flat: Schweitzer is a strong proponent of choice, as well as an advocate for the environment and for middle-class Montanans. And those who have seen the outspoken Schweitzer challenge the Bush administration in the press lately realize: Real Democrats, not faux Republicans, won in Montana.

If Democrats can succeed this well in Montana, they can win anywhere. The question is how.

A decade ago, the Montana Democratic Party began a period of rebuilding. The Republican Party held the governor's office and controlled both chambers of the legislature by overwhelming majorities. The Democrats committed themselves to the basics: They engaged in a strategic planning process that defined clear, attainable goals. They focused on recruiting candidates who would work hard and win. And they trained candidates and volunteers in the organizing model of grassroots advocacy groups. Democrats soon started making gains in legislative races.

But 2000 was to prove a bad year for Montana Democrats. With Al Gore running, the Democrats lost the top-of-the-ticket race

by ²⁵ percent. Bush's coattails proved too much to overcome down-ticket and strong, experienced Democrats lost their races for the governor's office and for Montana's lone House seat.

But neither of these tested candidates made the best showing for a Democrat in Montana that year. That title went to Schweitzer, who at that point was an upstart rancher from northwest Montana who started his campaign for U.S. Senate with zero percent name recognition and ended it as the populist hero who took seniors to Canada for cheaper prescription drugs.

Meeting the man, it is clear how he grew in the public mind. Schweitzer is a big man, athletic, and ready with a handshake and a smile for anyone who greets him. He talks loudly, plainly and quickly, with ideas flowing out of his mouth at near breakneck pace. He works hard, sleeps little and is known for reading Montana's newspapers as they become available online in the wee hours of the morning.

When a reporter from an independent weekly newspaper visited his ranch to write a profile, Schweitzer took him shooting. After he won the gubernatorial election, Schweitzer threw a massive inaugural ball with three venues and more than ^{3,000} guests. When Butte, Montana's famous M&M bar reopened, Schweitzer stood in the middle of the bar at ¹⁰ a.m., downing a shot of Jameson's.

Five years later, when he is asked what he could have done differently in ²⁰⁰⁰, Schweitzer shrugs off the defeat. "That race against [Republican Senate opponent Conrad] Burns," he says, "was probably an unwinnable race because of how well Bush did." Nevertheless, he brought the race to within ⁴ percent and made a name for himself.

Closing the gap

Both Schweitzer and the Democratic Party walked away from ²⁰⁰⁰ realizing they would have to do more in order to win the big races again.

"We ran a good race and had good candidates," explains Brad Martin, the executive director of the Montana Democratic Party. "One thing that became clear was the impact of the presidential race on the state races. Essentially, our statewide candidates made up a ²⁵-point deficit. That means about ²⁰ percent of Bush's voters were

crossing over and voting Democratic in one of those races."

It became the party's job to narrow the margin in the presidential race. So, Martin says, the Democrats decided to make sure that their Montana candidates did not fall prey to national Democratic stereotypes. They sought out key constituencies by starting agriculture, small business and sportsman roundtables. The party hired a communications director to move beyond the basics of press releases. And the party recommitted itself to building its grassroots base—central committees and volunteers.

Montana Democrats realized they had another problem, according to Martin. Voters didn't know that Democrats had an economic plan. "The party did a statewide listening tour," he says. Legislative leaders crossed the state to meet with business and labor leaders and compile an economic plan. "We took it to small towns, large towns. We literally laid out a ²²-point plan."

Meanwhile, Schweitzer started running for governor virtually the day after he lost his race for the Senate. "For a year and a half," he says, "I read all the newspapers in Montana, read the letters to the editor. When I read a cool letter, I would write them a letter and tell them that. So many candidates think that two weeks before the election, they're somehow going to gin up people to write letters for them. We'd build relationships with people who already wrote letters rather than trying to get new people to write letters to the editor."

He drove across the state, meeting people in rural areas and asking what they needed from government. Those discussions resulted in an agenda that included healthcare reform, economic development and a new approach to higher education with an increased emphasis on community colleges and technical schools. Schweitzer then took his new issue agenda and crossed the state again, giving speeches that never fell into wonk speak. Instead, Schweitzer ran on values, delivering a talk about his family homesteading in Montana, building a church and a community with their friends and neighbors. He talked about being a Bobcat (a graduate of Montana State). He talked about talking to people.

Continued on page 37

Man with the PLAN

Brian Schweitzer's election as governor of Montana was preceded by years of work. The efforts included the development of a solid economic agenda, a coordinated communications strategy and the improvement of grassroots organizing. Now, some of the key architects of Schweitzer's victory are teaming up with other progressives on a new project to solidify gains at the state level.

The Progressive Legislative Action Network (PLAN) will soon launch in Seattle, to coincide with the annual meeting of the National Conference of State Legislatures. The new organization is devoting itself to providing solid public policy research to progressive state legislators. But PLAN is also going to take it one step further by providing assistance to legislators, their staffs and grassroots advocacy organizations to ensure that progressives achieve success at the state level.

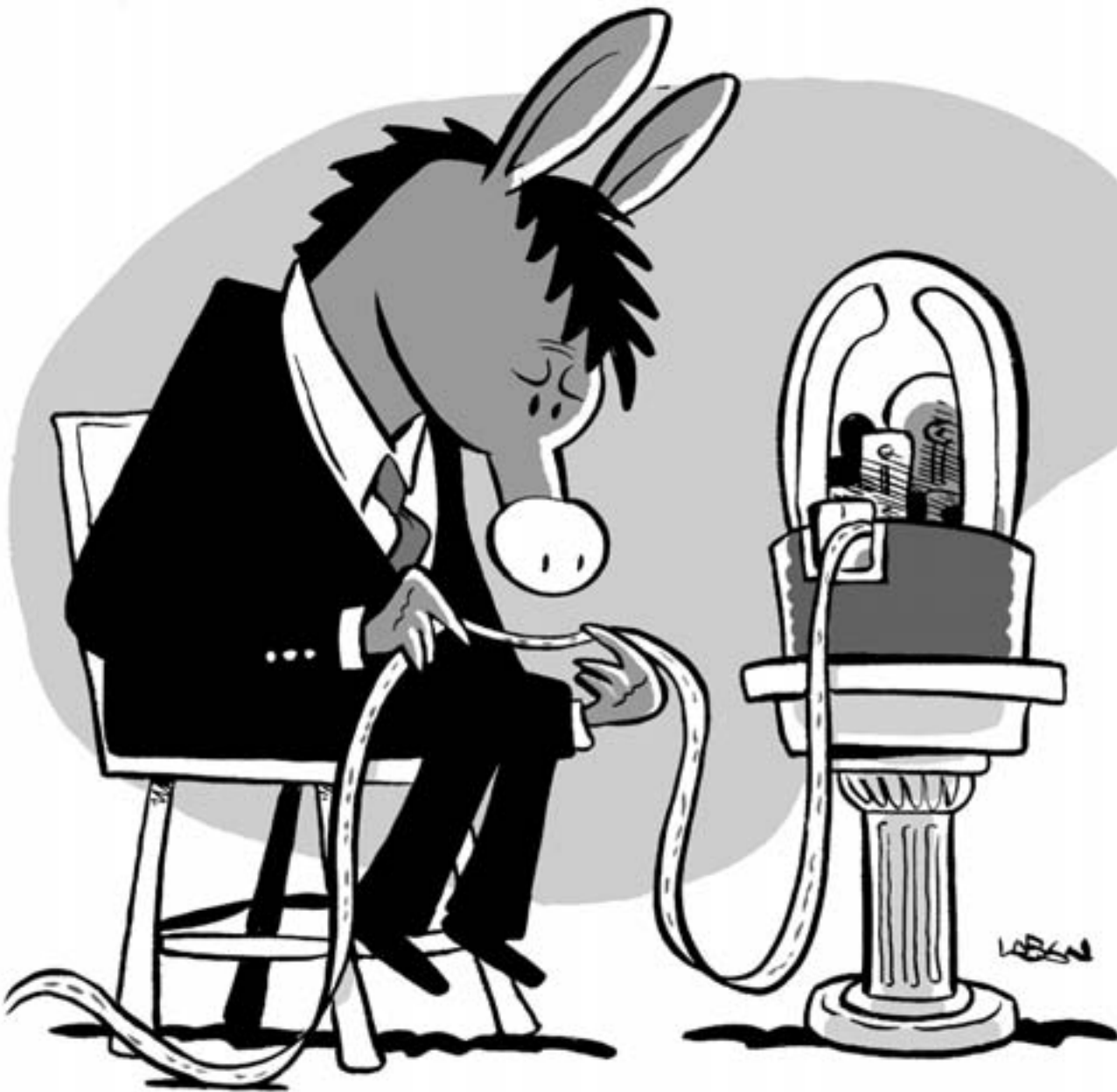
Schweitzer, along with former Vice Presidential candidate John Edwards and former San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, will be featured speakers at the inaugural event. In the wings, steering the organization, will be some of the same people who helped land Schweitzer in the governor's office.

"No one argues that we progressives need to be doing a better job of countering right-wing organizations like the American Legislative Exchange Council [ALEC]," the corporate-backed conservative action network for state legislators, says *In These Times* Senior Editor David Sirota, who worked on Schweitzer's campaign and is now co-director of PLAN.

Sirota says PLAN will work alongside other progressive organizations but focus more on aggressive advocacy, working side-by-side with legislators and state-based grassroots organizations.

"The key to this," Sirota says, "is getting outside of Washington, D.C., and really starting to use our state leaders as high-profile spokespeople. For too long, progressives have been marginalized by the insulated Beltway establishment that says the only place where action happens is in Washington, D.C. That's just not true. We have hundreds of incredible state legislators who are talented, driven and progressive—and it is time for their voices to be heard and their work to take center stage."

In addition to Sirota, PLAN's leadership includes Steve Doherty, a former Montana state senator; Dave McAlpin, a Montana state legislator who directed Montana Democrats' coordinated campaign in 2004; Joel Barkin, former press secretary to Congressman Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.); Adam Schafer, of the National Conference of Environmental Legislators; and Lisa Seitz Gruwell, political director for Andy and Deborah Rappaport.



The Case for a Democratic Marker

BY CHRISTOPHER HAYES

JOURNALIST AND HISTORIAN RICK PERLSTEIN'S NEW BOOK, *The Stock Ticker and the Superjumbo: How the Democrats Can Once Again Become America's Dominant Political Party*, begins with a "political parable" about the rise and decline of the American airplane giant Boeing. Founded in 1917 with a singular vision of cheap, accessible commercial air travel despite its huge risks, Boeing ultimately became one of the country's most successful companies by sticking to its ambitious vision through thick and thin. In the '80s, just as they were abandoning this long-term thinking for the quarterly profit-driven tactics approved by Wall Street, the upstart Airbus came onto the scene with their own long-term vision of the superjumbo. Boeing thought it folly, but it now appears that Airbus will get the last laugh—their new

plane, the world's largest passenger aircraft, made its maiden voyage in April. For Perlstein, author of *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*, this story serves as an analogy for the fortunes of the Democrats, who abandoned their own long-term project in the centrist '90s to please the "stock ticker" of the next election. Perlstein took time away from work on his forthcoming sequel to *Before the Storm* to talk about why Democrats must recommit to a long-term vision and stop playing by stock ticker rules.

You have this analogy between Boeing's multi-generational devotion to building the first jumbo jet and the Democratic Party's multi-generational commitment to insuring economic