



Montana Voices: U.S. Senate race quickly takes the low road

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Over coffee after last week's primary, we were debating how long it would take for the U.S. Senate race between state Auditor Matt Rosendale and incumbent Jon Tester to turn negative. The answer: It already had.

The day before the primary, Sen. Tester was still sending out news releases touting the bills he had sent to President Trump's desk. The next day, as soon as Rosendale had been declared the Republican primary winner, Tester's campaign sent out a release that contained this sentence: "Matt Rosendale is an East Coast developer who looks out for himself."

The statement from the Montana Democratic Party began with the phrase "Wealthy East Coast developer Matt Rosendale." Get used to that phrase. As innocuous and insipid as it may seem, that appears to be the standard phrase we will be hearing about Rosendale from now until November.

To be fair, Tester scored some points. His campaign pointed out that Rosendale got two "[Pants on Fire](#)" ratings from Politifact, the Pulitzer Prize-winning fact-checking site. One was for the bizarre claim that Tester favors national gun registration that would require Montanans to get permission from the government to buy a gun. The other was for claiming that Tester got a raise in the last omnibus budget bill; in fact, congressional pay has been frozen since 2009.

Some of Tester's attacks had a looser shot pattern. In one release, Tester called Rosendale "an East Coast developer propped up by out-of-state billionaires with a history of launching false attack campaigns against elected officials with character, like Jon Tester." Another said, "A lot of politicians can count on millionaires and billionaires to spend obscene amounts of money to help them win an election — just ask our opponent. All they have to do is trade their votes and sell their souls."

In his own ads and statements, soulless Rosendale has criticized Tester for "shipping billions of dollars to the Iranian regime," for supporting "dangerous sanctuary cities" and for voting

“against tax cuts for Montanans while voting for trillions in more debt and taxpayer bonuses for [his] office.”

There is both truth and flim-flam in each of those statements, which is what makes election season so frustrating. Probably 80 percent of Montanans already know how they will vote in congressional races this fall. The millions of dollars that will be pumped into these races, many of them from people who don't care a whit about Montana, are all going toward persuading the unpersuaded 20 percent, many of whom are months away from even thinking about the races – if they ever do.

The rest of us have to sit through months of half-true or false claims when all we really want off TV are the baseball scores. Yet somehow it seems important to sort through at least some of the claims, even if only to provide some perspective.

For example, U.S. Rep. Greg Gianforte, R-Mont., sent out an email last week touting “good news” about the U.S. economy and noting, among other things, that the economy added 223,000 jobs in May. The number is accurate, according to government figures, and it is by all accounts a good number.

But the economy added that many jobs or more in at least 33 months of the Obama administration. I can't recall even once that Gianforte or any other Republican ever referred to job growth under Obama as “good news.” In fact, then-candidate Trump repeatedly referred to Obama's job numbers as “phony,” “fake” and “totally fiction.” He was either lying then or now; I can't think of a third option.

Sometimes slippery numbers slip onto Last Best News. In a comment last week, Dick Britzman said that “harboring illegal immigrants” was costing the United States \$113 billion a year, citing an outdated study by the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

Alarm bells went off in my head because (1.) these are really hard figures to compute, (2.) it seemed like a really big number and (3.) FAIR is a well-known advocacy group favoring strong restrictions on both legal and illegal immigration. That doesn't make its numbers wrong, but it does mean they require extra scrutiny.

Sure enough, it didn't take long to find sharply different estimates, not only from the usual suspects like Politifact but also from conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute.

This wouldn't matter if we were just wrangling over an ultimately unknowable number, but these figures can have policy implications. In a follow-up comment, Britzman said that ridding the country of illegals would free up billions of dollars to be used for our own citizens.

He wrote that unlike liberals, Republicans “realize that money doesn't grow on trees.” Here we go again. I have known a fair number of liberals and have never met one yet who thought money grew on trees.

If anything, it's Republicans who have abandoned their traditional fiscal conservatism for such pretty misconceptions as "tax cuts always pay for themselves" and "if we keep refusing to pay for government, we can eventually drown it in a bathtub."

Want to see the evidence? Or, with hundreds of negative ads to go before the first snowfall, does it really even matter?