

Gallatin elections are free and fair, so long as feds don't interfere

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Guest columnists

For 250 years, Americans have relied on elections to choose our leaders, resolve disagreements peacefully, and hold those in power accountable. Elections are one of the few recurring moments when every American stands on equal footing, with the same right to help shape the shared future of our communities, state and nation.

As members of Indivisible Bozeman, we believe that our democracy is worth protecting, and for it to survive, our elections must be free, fair and secure. That means every eligible voter can cast a ballot without intimidation, elections are administered securely and according to the law, and the results are accepted and trusted.

In Gallatin County, our elections live up to all of these standards — thanks to our county clerk, Eric Semerad, and all Gallatin County clerks who preceded him, Republican and Democrat. We're grateful to Mr. Semerad and his staff, and we stand in support of them and the tremendously important work they do to administer elections in Gallatin County.

Both the U.S. Constitution and the Montana Constitution make it clear that state and local officials are responsible for registering voters, maintaining voter rolls, administering elections, counting votes and preventing voting fraud. The record shows that Montana's counties have done a near-perfect job of keeping our elections secure. According to the conservative Heritage Foundation, there were a mere two confirmed cases of election fraud over 43 years ending in 2025.

Despite this near-perfect record, we're concerned the federal government might make false, politically charged claims of voter fraud and use them to interfere in our elections, including here in Gallatin County. That interference could come in a variety of ways: The federal government could attempt to purge voter rolls, restrict mail-in voting, send troops or law enforcement to polling locations, seize ballots and voting equipment, or challenge our election results. Our concerns are not based on speculation. They are based on actions taken in other states and threats already made by the president, members of his cabinet, and his supporters.

We believe Montana's voting system is strong enough to withstand these threats, as long as our state election officials don't break state and federal laws. Unfortunately, our current Secretary of State, Christi Jacobsen, has taken actions that cast doubt on her commitment to free, fair and secure elections. Last year, she provided voter records to the Department of Justice that may or may not have included confidential voter information, such as driver's license numbers and the last four digits of our Social Security numbers. To this day, she has refused to reveal what information she turned over to the DOJ.

We will pay close attention to Jacobsen's actions for the remainder of her term as secretary of state, and we will hold her accountable if she collaborates, or has already cooperated, with the federal government in any attempt to illegally interfere in our elections.

Moreover, we expect Gov. Greg Gianforte and Attorney General Austin Knudsen to uphold state and federal voting laws and defend Montana voters if the federal government attempts to interfere with our elections. We also expect them to call out the Department of Justice if it tries to disrupt our elections, as Wyoming Gov. Mark Gordon did after DOJ observers acted "aggressively" (according to Gordon) towards election officials in Cheyenne during the state's recent primaries.

We will also pay close attention to how local law enforcement responds if ICE or other federal armed forces appear at our polling places, something Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin has not ruled out. As the non-partisan Brennan Center for Justice notes, "Sending ICE or any other armed federal agents to the polls is illegal because federal law bans federal officers from interfering in elections. It's also illegal because federal law bans troops and armed federal agents from being deployed anywhere an election is held."

For now, we invite members of the community to join us in supporting the dedicated public servants who administer our elections fairly, securely, and transparently. We also invite you to stand up to outside threats that could wreak havoc on our election system and undermine our democracy. You can do so by joining Indivisible Bozeman's election protection effort at indivisiblebozeman.org.

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