

GOP COALITION PUTS SUPPORT BEHIND TESTER

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FILE - In this Friday, June 8, 2018, file photo, U.S. Sen. Jon Tester speaks with a supporter during an event at the Tester campaign headquarters in Billings, Mont. Republican Matt Rosendale is hoping to unseat two-term incumbent Tester in November. (AP Photo/Matthew Brown, file)

As the volatility of American politics scrambles traditional party lines, several Montana Republicans have publicly chosen to vote cross-ticket this November.

U.S. Sen. Jon Tester's campaign introduced the "Republicans for Tester" coalition Tuesday, a group of prominent conservatives, including former Republican party officials and appointees, who have publicly endorsed the Democrat from Big Sandy in his race against state auditor Matt Rosendale.

In a press call Tuesday, Republicans for Tester explained their position as a defense of Montana values, a vote for Tester's character and a commitment to issues — namely veterans affairs, small business and agriculture, and public lands — important to the state.

The announcement came two days before President Donald Trump, a vocal critic of the senator, is set to arrive in Billings for a planned rally in support of Rosendale. Tester has drawn the president's ire over the past several months after he publicly called into question the professional conduct of White House physician Ronny

Jackson, Trump's pick to head the Veterans Affairs administration. Jackson withdrew his nomination to take over the VA following Tester's public skepticism, prompting the president to label the senator "Two-Faced Tester."

Tester praised the coalition of Republicans who are supporting his campaign for putting their "country first, not political party."

"These folks get it," he said, citing strong personal relationships with several in the group.

The coalition is led by five Republicans who have held some party or public office in the state, including Columbia Falls City Councilman Mike Shepard.

Shepard attributed his support to two issues that matter deeply to him: veterans affairs and conservation of public land, especially for recreation.

A lifelong Republican, Shepard said recent actions by Republicans officials left a bad taste in his mouth.

Many Republicans "are pushing for privatization of wildlife, and I don't agree with that as a sportsman," he said.

He said he has talked with Tester's office "repeatedly" over the last several months because "it's not just me, there's a number of people like me who do not like the stand the Republican party has taken on several issues and some of that is public lands."

Tom Boyle, a small business owner and veteran from Helena, said he voted for Donald Trump for president but supported Tester based on the senator's "ability to work on both sides of the aisle."

In his personal experience, Boyle said, Tester has "always been very, very approachable," and he "always respected [Tester] for taking so much time and interest in what I'm saying."

Tester had never asked Boyle his political affiliation, he said. "He only knows me as a constituent."

Mick Ringsak, former chair of the Silver Bow County Republicans and a regional administrator for the small business committee, attributed his support to Tester's ability to work with Republicans as a "prairie populist" and his work on behalf of small businesses, veterans and farmers.

"I think Jon's the greatest advocate for veterans in the U.S. Senate," he said, but what secured his cross-party vote is Tester's experience in agriculture. "We need to have someone in the U.S. Senate who understands agriculture," he said.

Martin Coleman, a self-described fiscal conservative and former chair of the Gallatin County GOP, attributed his shift to the Senator's bipartisan efforts — Tester has sponsored 18 bills signed into law by President Trump, with another on his desk — as well as his commitment to preserving public lands and the shifting priorities of the national parties. He believes the Republican party, in general, has "largely abandoned the conservation pillars of Theodore Roosevelt," adding that "Jon Tester is the only candidate committed to

conserving public land."

All three expressed disappointment in the Republican party at large, which they said doesn't reflect the priorities of Republicans of yesteryear.

Shepard said though there are "a lot of things that I don't agree on with the Democratic party," his commitment to veterans affairs and conserving public lands for hunting space leave him with "no qualms" about voting cross-ticket this November.

"I'm voting for Tester, period."



