



PUBLIC LANDS

Wyoming chooses public lands at the ballot box

Voters finally felt the threat to public lands had reached a critical point, observers say.

The Teton mountains reflect on Oxbow Bend in Grand Teton National Park in Moran, Wyo. **AP Photo/Amber Baesler**

Few issues matter more to Wyoming hunter Jeff Muratore than the fate of the public lands — where he tracks elk and deer to feed his family, where he seeks solace and taught his grandchildren to hunt. A lifelong Republican, Muratore is no liberal: He voted for President Donald Trump and stands by traditionally conservative values like smaller government and fewer regulations.

But in Wyoming's August primary, he could not bring himself to vote for the Trump-endorsed gubernatorial candidate, Megan Degenfelder. He felt that one of her opponents, Eric Barlow, had a better record of championing the lands owned by all Americans and managed by the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and other federal agencies. In 2026, a year after Utah Sen. Mike Lee, R, spearheaded an attempt to sell off roughly 3 million federal acres, saying the sales would encourage the development of affordable housing, Barlow, a state senator, crafted a [successful resolution](#) recognizing the importance of public lands to Wyomingites.

Muratore thought about the land and its future as he worked his way down the ballot. And he voted against his own state senator, Bob Ide, who drafted [unsuccessful legislation](#) in 2025 demanding that the federal government surrender its public lands to the state.

Muratore, who formerly led the Wyoming chapter of the nonprofit Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, wasn't the only one to buck candidates viewed as hostile to public lands or wildlife.

Across the state, incumbents lost as voters favored more moderate Republicans like Barlow. In fact, the right-wing Wyoming Freedom Caucus [lost its majority](#) in the Wyoming House of Representatives; it now holds only 10 of 62 House seats heading into the next legislative session. Its allies in the state Senate, including Ide, faced similar defeats. The moderate sweep was a remarkable turnaround for a voting bloc that had sought to secure a supermajority.

Other issues — like the Freedom Caucus’ plan to defund parts of the University of Wyoming and its role in a statewide campaign finance scandal — influenced voters. But many observers say politicians’ public lands positions played a part in their fate.

“The threat level to our access to the lands that we own as citizens of the United States and the state of Wyoming finally hit a tipping point,” said Wes Allen, co-owner of Sunlight Sports, a multigenerational outdoor store in Cody. “When we had candidates locally and for statewide offices who stood up and said they believed in public lands and wouldn’t want to sell public lands, it was a powerful statement.”

WYOMING’S POLITICS HAVE LONG been conservative. The Equality State once elected moderate Democrats like Teno Roncalio, the last Democrat to represent Wyoming in Congress, and former Gov. Dave Freudenthal. But since Freudenthal left office in 2011, Republicans have occupied all of Wyoming’s statewide and federal offices as well as most seats in the state Legislature. Republicans currently hold 56 of 62 seats in the House and 29 of the Senate’s 31 seats, meaning that the most important battles aren’t often fought in November but in August, during the Republican primary. Recently, conservative, ideologically libertarian Republicans found themselves pitted against the socially and fiscally conservative Freedom Caucus, the coalition of firebrands who captured a House majority in 2024 amid a wave of anti-woke national sentiment.

But in 2025 and 2026, emboldened by its victories, the Freedom Caucus stumbled, said Gail Symons, a longtime Wyoming policy wonk who operates [Civics307](#), a voter education website. The lawmakers targeted beloved institutions like the University of Wyoming and the Wyoming Business Council, an economic development outfit. The Freedom Caucus proposed cutting 11%, or about \$40 million, from the university’s budget, and attempted to [defund and dismantle](#) the Business Council altogether.

Many of the legislators who lost in August voted for and even co-sponsored Ide’s public-lands transfer bill in 2025, though some, like Reps. John Bear, R-Gillette, and Rep. Chip Neiman, R-Hulett, also supported Barlow’s public-lands resolution in 2026.

Bear, the former chairman of the Freedom Caucus, lost his seat in the August primary and said that public-lands policy likely played a role in the outcome. But he believes the public misunderstood his position. While Bear believes federal lands should be transferred to the states, he doesn’t think the states, Wyoming included, would sell them off.

“Once we have 100% of the resources and revenue from those public lands, we would double our revenue and be quite easily able to manage those lands,” he said, adding that public-land supporters “duped people into believing that public lands were at risk.”

A 2016 study commissioned by the Wyoming Legislature found that state management of public lands would not only be costly, it would come with a “bureaucratic maze” of congressional laws and directives.

Some in the Freedom Caucus did not directly target public lands. Many, however, championed other controversial wildlife management bills, including legislation [allowing landowners to sell](#) valuable hunting licenses and mandating [unlimited statewide](#)

[mountain lion hunting](#). Another measure would have forced the Wyoming Game and Fish Department to give out free “[bear coupons](#)” allowing resident elk hunters to kill grizzly bears — which are still federally protected — as well as black bears outside of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

None of those measures made it to the governor’s desk, though Barlow’s public-lands resolution did. Voters paid attention to what their local lawmakers supported, Symons and others said.

“The Freedom Caucus misread quite a few things, not the least of which the degree to which Wyoming citizens of every political persuasion really, really feel strongly about public lands,” Symons said.

At the same time, [opposition to the Freedom Caucus](#) mounted.

A backcountry mountain guide named Zach Lentsch, the son of a Wyoming game warden, formed Protect Wyoming, the state’s first public-lands PAC. He believed that traditional nonprofits were too restricted — 501(c)(3) organizations are not allowed to advocate for or against candidates — so he and the group’s treasurer, Chris Allen, raised money, then held public events and knocked on doors, targeting the candidates with the most extreme views.

“All 33 candidates that we preferred — that were on our pro-public lands and wildlife slate — won,” Lentsch said.

LIKE LENTSCH AND SYMONS, Allen, the Cody business owner, has watched the pendulum of Wyoming politics swing back and forth, each time tilting more to the right, including on public-land policy. While Wyoming voters have historically voiced support for public lands in bipartisan polls, they have still backed lawmakers who favor transferring them to states or selling off national forests, parks and other federally managed land.

At the national level, that trend may have continued. Republican voters picked current U.S. Rep. Harriet Hageman — who once proudly wore the tagline “[Wicked Witch of the West](#)” for her public-lands stance — over Sam Mead for U.S. Senate. In 2024, the congresswoman backed Utah’s attempt to return BLM land to the states, which failed in the Supreme Court. She has also advocated for overturning [popular national policies](#) like the Roadless Rule, which prevents road construction in some areas of national forests. Mead, in contrast, made protecting public lands one of his core platform positions.

[Is Harriet Hageman an ally of Indian Country?](#)

Symons understands the dichotomy. In her view, voters decided to send a Trump-aligned fighter to D.C., while choosing more moderate candidates locally. Hageman also had significantly greater name recognition than Mead.

Allen credits the swing in local elections partly to concern over public lands, spurred to some extent by Sen. Lee’s push to sell them off.

“I don’t think it was widely accepted that our politicians would willingly give up protections for public lands,” he said. “But in the last couple of years, it became clear

there were certain people who don't believe we should have public lands, who believe we should give away most of our lands to other entities. And they're not doing that because they think it's good policy, but because they simply don't believe in public lands."

In Allen's view, the August primary was the first time a majority of voters concluded that protecting public lands was one of their major issues. Neither he nor Symons and Muratore expect this to be the last swing of the public-lands pendulum. But, as Muratore said, "it is a pretty big bump in the road."

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