



A Common Western Voice

Can the Rockies Be Heard in Washington, D.C.?

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“The widespread support for a Western primary comes from a basic instinct for democratic self-determination, coupled with a sense of identity.”

—Daniel Kemmis, *Headwaters News*, September 8, 2005



The Rocky Mountain region’s distinctive features—its vast open space, large proportion of federal lands, aridity, small population coupled with rapid population growth, abundance of natural amenities and natural resources, and popularity to vacationers—create a unique set of challenges for the region. Aspects of these general characteristics can be found elsewhere in the United States, but the way in which they all converge in the Rockies creates a number of issues that are either nonexistent in other regions or are not as urgent. Although these Rockies-specific issues can be addressed to some degree at the local and regional level, national attention is needed

to adequately address the Rockies’ concerns. But, the region’s political voice is hardly audible and is often ignored.

The eight-state Rockies region covers 24 percent of the U.S. landmass, but less than seven percent of the nation’s population lives in the region, rendering its influence in national politics weak. Even as the region’s population has grown at over three times the national rate (2000 to 2004) and continued population growth may increase the region’s strength in the Electoral College, projected population gains through 2030 still leave the total Rockies’ population low in comparison to the rest of the nation.

In presidential primaries and national elections, the particular issues and needs of Rockies states are rarely addressed except by a few stops during flights from coast to coast as candidates solicit

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votes in more populous parts of the nation. In response to continuing neglect of Western issues at the national level, various entities in the Rockies are working to draw more attention to our regional needs in national politics.

How can the Rockies region strive for a more influential voice in national politics?

The Rockies Project explores three related dimensions to this question. First, can the region articulate a common set of issues worthy of national attention? Second, is an early Mountain West primary and/or a Rockies-based presidential debate a viable option for drawing more attention to the West? And third, what role do regional partnerships play in focusing and vocalizing our common Western needs?

Finding our Voice

The December 6, 2004 issue of *High Country News* (HCN) published a cover story on “The 10 Biggest Challenges Facing the West.” As explained in the editor’s note by Paul Larmer, executive director of HCN, the paper stumbled upon this cover story after asking its staff, “What stories are the most important for us to follow? And how can HCN help set a positive agenda that is not mired in the morass of partisan politics?” After lengthy debate, HCN identified energy, global warming, water, nuclear energy, endangered species, private lands, healthy forests, agency openness, making it local, and solidarity as the ten most important topics to cover. Larmer admits that “we left out many critical issues, including those three large elephants in the room—population growth, immigration, and sprawl.”

The editors at *High Country News* may not have conclusively settled on the most important issues in the Rockies, but they have taken the first step. HCN recognizes that the Mountain West faces a common set of challenges and that those challenges need to be thoughtfully presented to be part of a common Western voice.

Keep in mind that the eight-state Rockies region is not entirely homogenous, and one must be careful when urging a common voice for this diverse region. However, a common voice does not require settling on one side of an issue. Rather, developing a common Western voice involves deciding on which issues are of greatest concern, with each issue having a complex variety of views and perspectives.

For example, look at the issue of energy development in the Rockies. Making energy development part of the common Western voice does not require a regional stance for or against this or that type of energy development. The recognition that developing certain Rocky Mountain energy resources versus not developing them, or that developing them in one way versus another way, has a major impact on the region’s economy, environment, and society is what we mean by deciding energy development is a critical Western issue. Asking the nation and its politicians to give the issue its deserved attention with the region’s perspective in mind is what we mean by making energy development part of our common Western voice, not asking them to take a particular stance on one side of energy development or the other.

Other regional groups, including the Western Charter Project, *Headwaters News*, and the Western Governors’ Association, are

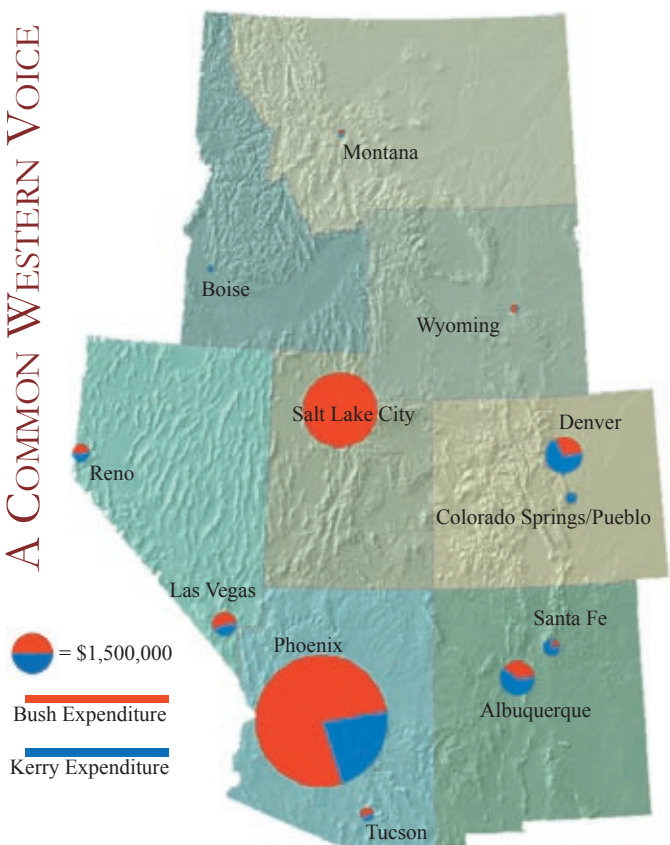


also working hard to define Western issues and, thus, speak with an articulate and strong voice on concerns unique to the Rockies.

The Western Charter Project, spearheaded by The Center for the Rocky Mountain West and The Center for Resource Management, aids local and state government leaders and constituents in creating a regional consensus and a powerful voice on the national stage. This is achieved by outlining key Western issues. In November 1999, at a Western Charter conference in Colorado Springs, Colorado, the project crafted a set of draft principles for the charter:¹

- *Western Character and Outlook*: the region embodies unique dimensions of hope, possibility, and optimism based upon its history, grandeur, and vast landscapes.
- *Landscape and Natural Resources*: the defining characteristic of the region, especially biodiversity, public lands, and open spaces.
- *Governance*: a desire to seek local solutions even as government jurisdictions and a preponderance of public lands complicate communities’ efforts.
- *The Economy*: once based upon natural resource extraction and use, global trends are fast converging on the region to bring about fundamental changes to rural communities and the rural way of life that has been integral to the West, including impacts on the quality of life, scale of commerce, and a diminished role for agriculture.
- *Growth*: rapid increases in both population and commerce challenge traditional ways communities and states have addressed growth, often leaving political entities overwhelmed by impacts beyond the capacity at which they can be absorbed.
- *Education*: competitiveness in a global arena requires a commitment to high quality, lifelong education and training, even as the financial and political commitments are strained.

The Center for the Rocky Mountain West continues to support Rocky Mountain regionalism through *Headwaters News*, an online news source which assembles daily news articles on the most



*One of Bush's media producers was based in Salt Lake City and the large amount of spending by Bush in the city does not correlate to his single stop there during his campaign.

Presidential Campaign Expenditures in the Rockies, 2004
Figure 1

Source: The Center for Responsive Politics

Trends from the 2004 Presidential Campaigns

Presidential candidates focus most of their campaigns on a very small proportion of American voters. Within the Rockies region, only four states saw most of the region's campaign spending and stops: Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada (Figures 1 and 2). And campaign travel records for the 2004 presidential race show that both George W. Bush (R) and John Kerry (D) rarely stopped in the Rockies states compared to other regions of the U.S. (Figure 2).

With ten electoral votes and a contentious race, Arizona received the most campaign spending of any state in the region. Colorado and New Mexico were also "battleground" states, providing nine and five electoral votes respectively, so they received some attention. Idaho, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming were essentially conceded to Bush, before the campaign even began, and as such, received no attention from either candidate.



pressing issues in the Rockies and supports an open forum on the issues. *Headwaters News* provides "a daily snapshot of news and opinion in the Rocky Mountain region of North America, giving the changing mountain West a tool to understand itself and a platform for the exchange of ideas."² Daniel Kemmis, senior fellow at the Center for the Rocky Mountain West and contributing writer to *Headwaters News*, leads innovative blogs on the Headwaters Web site on defining regional issues and building regional strength.

The Western Governors' Association (WGA), a bipartisan organization of governors which discusses Western issues and implements related policy, identified ten nationally relevant issues of particular importance to the West: energy, global warming, water, nuclear energy, endangered species, private lands, healthy forests, agency openness, making it local, and solidarity.³

Attracting National Attention

As the Rockies develops its regional voice, it must strive to make that voice heard. The Rockies can accomplish much at regional and local levels, but national decisions also have a huge impact, especially since the federal government owns and manages nearly half of the region. Innovative methods of drawing national attention to the Rockies must be developed if the region is to successfully protect and make use of its social, environmental, and economic assets.

Regional Presidential Primary

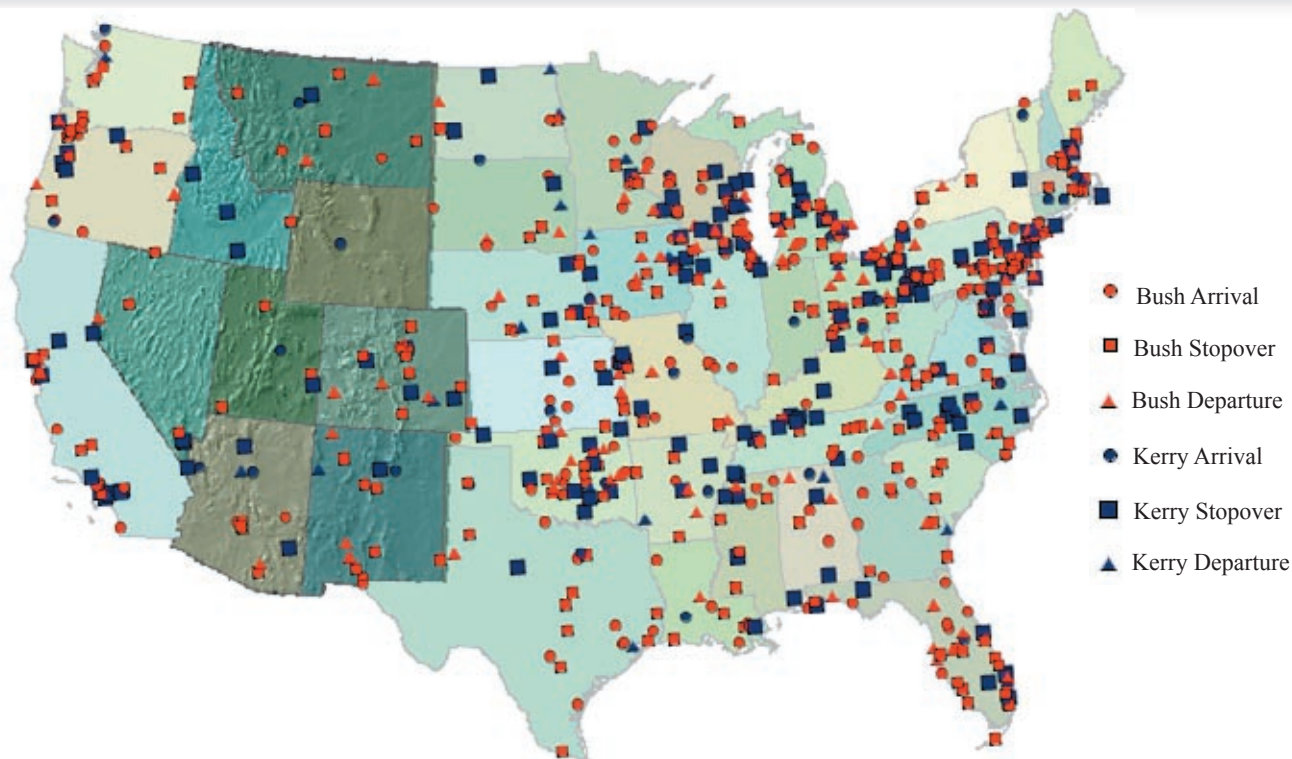
Holding an early-season, same-day presidential primary for the whole eight-state Rockies region is an often discussed and disputed method of bringing greater national awareness of and attention to Western issues. A Mountain West primary held early in the presidential primary season will force candidates to take a stance on Western-specific issues and will bring these issues to the national forefront. Much of the primary's outcome is determined early in the campaign, and although the Rockies states are weak individually, together they can build enough clout to be heard. From a regional viewpoint, such a primary has many advantages and much support, but on a national scale, opposition is mounting against the trend toward earlier and earlier primaries each election cycle.

Michael Stratton, a member of the Democratic National Committee's Commission on Presidential Nomination Timing and Scheduling and a strong supporter of a Mountain West primary, explains, "As the system works now, presidential candidates can easily ignore Western issues. They simply fly over the Rocky Mountains to get to the major media markets on the coasts, or visit the early primary states."⁴ Under the current system, candidates are not encouraged to adopt views on Western issues, like a federal water management strategy, clean energy technology, protection of natural resources, and land conservation. Advocates for a regional primary argue that a pivotal and strategic primary position for the Mountain West would encourage candidates to take positions on these issues and later be accountable for such positions when elected.

Presidential Campaign Stops, 2004

Figure 2

Source: The Center for Responsive Politics



*John Kerry's few stops in Idaho were attributed to vacation time he took from the campaign at his ranch in Ketchum.

Making Rockies-specific issues more prominent in presidential elections may lead to more attention to these issues throughout the whole government. Issues taken up by presidential candidates are often discussed by all national politicians and are debated by citizens nationwide. As a result, Rockies politicians will gain greater influence in setting political agendas and drafting legislation.

Early primary dates have been shown to attract significant candidate attention. For example, when New Mexico moved its primary date forward, it received far more media coverage and visits from presidential candidates.⁵ In 1996, Republican candidates spent a combined \$100 million in the early primary states of Iowa and New Hampshire.⁶ Supporters hope that an early-season primary in the Rockies would attract similar attention.

However, Curtis Gans, director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, argues that front-loading and grouping primaries undermines the whole presidential nominating system. Pushing a Mountain West primary early in the primary season would further shorten an already jammed schedule, leaving voters little time to get to know candidates and excluding voters with late-season primary dates.

Historically, the decision for each party's candidates was made at their national conventions during the summer months before the November election, giving voters more time to weigh the merits of each candidate in their party and, theoretically, make better choices. Today, however, the press determines the nomination in an *ad hoc* fashion in early spring.

For example, in the 2004 Democratic Primary, most of the news media had declared John Kerry the likely democratic nominee by mid-February, whereas in 1960, John Kennedy's nomination was not known until the convention in July. Polls showed that 20 to 30 percent of American voters in the 2004 elections did not know enough about John Kerry or his running mate, John Edwards, to be able to form an opinion of them. Gans suggests that candidates may be negatively affected by a trend towards early primaries as illustrated in 2000 and 2004 when Democrats chose their candidates the earliest in history and lost in November.

Additionally, according to Gans, grouping several state primaries together puts an emphasis on television advertising rather than grassroots campaigning and personal contact and therefore does not increase voter turnout.⁷ Indeed, since 1988, voter turnout was higher in individual primaries than grouped primaries in every year except 1992.⁸



Blocked primaries do reduce candidates' ability to pay attention to other states. A very small percentage of Americans receive attention from nominees during presidential elections. The majority of American people, including most people in the Rockies, is left out of the democratic process. As evidenced by the Commission on Federal Election Reform's recent, well-publicized suggestions, there is a need to empower more Americans in selecting presidential candidates. Thus the conundrum: blocked primaries would give a greater number of states more candidate attention, but if every state joins into appropriate blocks, the on-the-ground type of campaigning of the past would give way to new paces and styles.

National concerns over blocked primaries and front-loading are legitimate, but it is something that is already happening. Certain states and regions are taking advantage of it, providing incentive for others to do so as well. Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming held their 2000 primaries and caucuses on the same day. The initiative's sponsor, then-Utah Governor Mike Leavitt (R), commented that:

The Mountain West is on the brink of a monumental breakthrough, poised to become a player for the first time in American presidential politics. Given the strategic early timing of the Western presidential primary and the combined delegates at stake, candidates will be hard pressed to overlook the region. Western issues will be discussed and Western concerns will be elevated in importance.⁹

Despite initial support by the other states for a common primary, Arizona, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, and New Mexico opted out of the agreement, weakening the initiative. After the 2000 primaries the agreement between Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah was abandoned and in the 2004 primaries all of the Rockies states held separate primaries or caucuses.

Though states like Colorado and Arizona may have more Electoral College votes than other Rockies states, they are not large enough to compete for attention with California, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Florida. As an eight-state Rockies region we are large enough to attract national attention and small enough to support a common set of priorities.

On June 22, 2004, The Western Governors' Association (WGA) adopted a resolution supporting a Western States Presidential Caucus/Primary early in the primary season.¹⁰ Leading the initiative is

New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson (D), who has stated that Arizona, Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming have all expressed interest in joining this partnership. Utah Governor Jon Huntsman (R) supports the primary, explaining, "Utah can benefit from the economic development that goes with being part of major national campaigns, and the enthusiasm that is created for both parties around national candidates coming to our region."¹¹

Rockies-Based Presidential Debate

Another way to draw national political attention to Western issues is to host a presidential debate in the Rockies. Although Western issues were not addressed in Arizona's 2004 presidential debate, a debate with the backing of a coherent regional voice could force candidates to take a stance on Rockies' issues and address them when elected.

Logistically, a Rockies presidential debate may be easier to organize than a regional primary, since it does not require legislative or gubernatorial action. It would, however, hinge on successful negotiations with candidates, campaign staff, and the Commission on Presidential Debates. The Rockies region must convince campaign staffs and their candidates that much is at stake in the region and that speaking directly to Rockies citizens will have a large influence on voting. Although Bush won in every Rockies state in 2004, the presidential race was close in many states, and Democrats did well in other races. Each party has a lot at stake in the Rockies.

Future Regional Partnerships

In the Rockies' ongoing efforts to develop a coherent Western voice and to make its voice heard, regional partnerships will play a critical role. The region is learning to shed some of its lonesome cowboy image, an image that hinders regional cooperation and progress. As detailed earlier, it is regional organizations like the Western Governors' Association and the Center for the American West that are leading the way. Regional partnerships across state boundaries are important both because they focus on local and regional actions to effectively define and address regional issues and because they can attract national attention.

Our Western issues are largely affected by decisions made on a national level. Our region is sometimes treated as an inland colony





of the U.S. The rest of the country extracts water and energy resources and builds vacation homes, but leaves behind dry, toxic, and cold-bed communities. Many decisions are made without much Western participation and without even much consideration of Western perspectives.

By pooling resources, sharing successful strategies, and exchanging ideas through regional partnerships, the Rockies can do more to address its common regional problems. Our differences throughout the region—urban/rural, eastern slope/western slope, newcomer/native, and many more—must not be simply means of internal conflict. Rather, our varied needs and experiences must be the source of strength from which we decide what issues most impact our region, the source of our regional voice. These differences should not drive us apart, but should instead bring us together to give the issues their deserved attention through collaborative resolution.

A blocked primary and a presidential debate in the eight Rocky Mountain states are not perfect solutions to making our voice heard, but they will give the region more national political clout and attention. They are two tangible steps we can take towards self-determination, but they will not be easy. They both require strong regional leaders, commitment and cooperation from disparate

groups across the Rockies, and agreement on a clear set of issues. Whether we can rise to these challenges hints at whether we are indeed worthy of such national attention.

Endnotes

- ¹ Center for Resource Management, *The Western Charter Project: Initiating A Regional Conversation*, (November 1999), 16-17.
- ² *Headwaters News*, Headwaters News Homepage (2005), <http://www.headwatersnews.org/>.
- ³ Western Governors' Association, 2005.
- ⁴ Patrick O'Connor, "Democratic Strategist Urges Western Focus," *The Hill*, March 9, 2005, <http://www.thehill.com/thehill/export/TheHill/News/Frontpage/030905/brief.html>.
- ⁵ Western Governors' Association, "Western Presidential Primary," <http://www.westgov.org/wga/initiatives/primary.htm>.
- ⁶ The Federal Election Commission, <http://www.fec.gov/disclosure.shtml>.
- ⁷ Curtis Gans, "The Primary and Caucus System in U.S. Elections," speech to the Foreign Press Center, Washington, D.C., November 14, 2003.
- ⁸ FairVote, "Voter Turnout," FairVote Homepage, www.fairvote.org.
- ⁹ Dan Harrie, "Is Utah Just Detour on Road to Presidency?" *The Salt Lake Tribune*, March 12, 2000.
- ¹⁰ Western Governors' Association, "Western States Presidential Caucus/Primary," *Policy Resolution*, June 22, 2004, 4-13.
- ¹¹ Michael Coleman, "Governor Pushes for One Primary Day for the West," *Albuquerque Journal*, February 25, 2004.