

Republican who attacked reporter wins congressional by-election in Montana

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Greg Gianforte, a right-wing multimillionaire, defeated Democratic challenger Rob Quist in the by-election in Montana Thursday for the state's sole seat in the US House of Representatives. With 98 percent of precincts reporting, Gianforte had 50.1 percent of the vote compared to 44.1 percent for Quist. The seat was vacated after Congressman Ryan Zinke was appointed secretary of the interior in the Trump administration.

The victory was overshadowed by an incident the night before the election, when Gianforte, in full view of several media eyewitnesses, body-slammed a reporter from the British *Guardian* newspaper who had attempted to ask a critical question. Gianforte was later charged with misdemeanor assault.

The election attracted a great deal of national attention (Montana is one of the smallest states in the country by population and one of the least densely populated) due to the considerable effort made by the national Democratic Party, which billed it as a challenge to the Republicans in the "heart of Trump country." Trump carried the state over Hillary Clinton by 20 points in the November presidential election. Polls prior to the election indicated that the race had unexpectedly narrowed.

Gianforte, whose net worth is estimated at \$200 million, made his fortune from tech startup RightNow Technologies, which he founded in 1997 and sold to technology giant Oracle for \$1.5 billion in 2004.

He is well known for his religious fundamentalist views. He is the chairman of a local Christian school in Bozeman, the state's fourth-largest city, and his family's charitable foundation donated \$1.5 million to a creationist museum that rejects the theory of evolution and claims the dinosaurs were wiped out by the Biblical flood. In 2014, students at Montana Tech University in Butte planned a walkout when Gianforte

was announced as the commencement speaker for their graduation ceremony.

Since his entry into state politics last year, Gianforte has combined calls for attacks on the working class and defense of the wealth of the corporate-financial aristocracy with appeals to right-wing layers and thuggish attacks on the press. In this, together with his large personal fortune, Gianforte's rise mirrors that of Donald Trump.

During an unsuccessful run for governor last fall, Gianforte made scapegoating immigrants and refugees a major plank of his campaign. He called for the banning of immigration from "terrorist nations" in language that broadly coincided with the calls by then-candidate Donald Trump for a ban on Muslim immigration to the United States. One pamphlet distributed by his campaign caused an uproar for its use of a picture of a masked gunman next to a statement denouncing governor Stephen Bullock for admitting refugees into the state.

One local newspaper reported during the campaign that Gianforte was "one of several prominent Montana Republicans" to donate to the state legislature campaign of Taylor Rose, described by the Anti-Defamation League and Southern Poverty Law Center as a white nationalist.

Mass revulsion toward the right-wing millionaire undoubtedly contributed to the race becoming far closer than anticipated. Democrats sought to capitalize on this by nominating Quist, a folk singer and political novice backed by Bernie Sanders, who campaigned vigorously for him in a statewide speaking tour.

Quist, who reportedly raised \$6 million mostly in small donations, declined overt support from the Democratic National Committee or the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, a nod to the

widespread hatred of the Democratic Party leadership in the aftermath of the Hillary Clinton campaign. The unexpected support for Quist prompted a direct intervention by Donald Trump, who recorded a robocall supporting Gianforte, using a technicality to circumvent a state law prohibiting robocalls.

In the weeks preceding the election, Quist focused his campaign on the issue of health care, attacking Gianforte for supporting the House Republicans' American Health Care Act (AHCA), which would result in tens of millions of people losing their health insurance, while issuing vague calls for the expansion of public health care programs. At the same time, as with his political supporter and mentor Bernie Sanders, Quist whitewashed the role of the Democratic Party in shifting the cost for health care from employers to the working class under the Obama administration's Affordable Care Act.

In line with the right-wing campaign being waged by the Democrats against Donald Trump, Quist also attacked Gianforte for his investments in Russian companies such as the state-owned oil giant Gazprom. "Montana voters deserve to know why Greg Gianforte held onto his shady Russian investments after repeated Russian aggression against the United States and why he kept his Russian ties secret during his failed run for governor," Quist declared in a statement earlier this month.

Gianforte's attack on *Guardian* journalist Ben Jacobs occurred as the latter was attempting to ask a question about Gianforte's support for the AHCA in light of the Congressional Budget Office's report that 23 million people would lose health care coverage under the proposal. Audio of Gianforte's attack was released by the newspaper on its website and corroborated by several eyewitnesses, including reporters for the right-wing cable channel Fox News.

"[We] watched in disbelief as Gianforte then began punching the man, as he moved on top of the reporter and began yelling something to the effect of 'I'm sick and tired of this!'" the Fox News journalists declared in a statement. "To be clear, at no point did any of us who witnessed this assault see Jacobs show any form of physical aggression toward Gianforte, who left the area after giving statements to local sheriff's deputies."

Gianforte's campaign released a statement shortly afterward blaming the entire incident on Jacobs

himself. "[He] entered the office without permission, aggressively shoved a recorder in Greg's face, and began asking badgering questions," campaign spokesman Shane Scanlon claimed in a statement. "Jacobs grabbed Greg's wrist and spun away from Greg, pushing them both to the ground. It's unfortunate that this aggressive behavior from a liberal journalist created this scene at our campaign volunteer BBQ." Only during his election night victory speech did Gianforte reverse course and issue a tepid apology.

Three Montana newspapers pulled their endorsements of Gianforte shortly after the attack. The *Independent Record* published an editorial declaring that it was "sick and tired" of "Gianforte's incessant attacks on the free press."

"In the past," it continued, "he has encouraged his supporters to boycott certain newspapers, singled out a reporter in a room to point out that he was outnumbered, and even made a joke out of the notion of choking a news writer, and these are not things we can continue to brush off."

More than 70 percent of Montana voters had already cast their ballots in early voting when these election-eve developments occurred.

Republican leaders in the House of Representatives sought to downplay the incident as an unfortunate mistake. National Republican Congressional Committee Chairman Steve Stivers said, "From what I know of Greg Gianforte, this was totally out of character, but we all make mistakes." House Speaker Paul Ryan was evasive in a Thursday speech, declaring, "I'll let the people of Montana decide [who to represent them]." Various experts interviewed by the press stated that Gianforte would likely not face discipline in the House of Representatives.

Gianforte's assault on a reporter is no aberration. It flows directly from the thuggish and authoritarian behavior and strident attacks on the press by the highest-ranking member of the Republican Party, President Trump himself.



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