



**Montana Legislative Services Division**

**Legal Services Office**

PO BOX 201706  
Helena, MT 59620-1706  
(406) 444-3064  
FAX (406) 444-3036

**TO:** State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee

**FROM:** Andria Hardin, Staff Attorney

**DATE:** August 23, 2024

**RE:** Litigation Update Concerning Recent Legislation

---

This memorandum was prepared as background information at the request of the State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee and does not represent any opinion or action on the part of the committee.

**I. Montana Public Interest Research Group v. Jacobsen**

**Plaintiffs:** Montana Public Interest Research Group; and Montana Federation of Public Employees.

**Defendants:** Montana Secretary of State Christi Jacobsen; Attorney General Austin Knudsen; and Montana Commissioner of Political Practices Chris Gallus.

**Defendant-Intervenors:** Republican National Committee and Montana Republican Party.

**Venue:** United States District Court for the District of Montana, Helena Division

**Docket No.:** 6:23-CV-70

**Legislation Challenged:**

**HB 892:** AN ACT REVISING VOTING LIMITS; PROHIBITING DOUBLE VOTING; PROVIDING A PENALTY; PROVIDING A DEFINITION; PROVIDING AN APPROPRIATION; AMENDING SECTION 13-35-210, MCA; AND PROVIDING AN IMMEDIATE EFFECTIVE DATE.

**Overview:** Plaintiffs allege that HB 892 violates the Fourteenth Amendment due process clause under the U.S. Constitution by using vague and unclear standards in a criminal statute seeking to prohibit double voting, violates the First and Fourteenth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution by criminalizing and chilling protected political expression beyond its intended purpose thereby making it overbroad, and also violates the First and Fourteenth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution by unjustifiably burdening fundamental voting rights.

Plaintiffs have asked the court to find the provision of HB 892 codified at section 13-35-210(5) unconstitutional and enjoin the Defendants from enforcing that subsection. The Plaintiffs have requested attorneys' fees and costs.

Plaintiffs filed for a preliminary injunction on November 6, 2023.

On January 18, 2024, the Republican National Committee and Montana Republican Party's Motion to Intervene was granted.

On April 24, 2024, the U.S. District Court issued an order granting Plaintiff's motion for preliminary injunction and enjoining Defendant's from enforcing the multiple registration prohibition and prior registration disclosure requirement provision codified in 13-35-210(5), MCA. All other provisions in HB 892, codified as 13-35-210, MCA, remain in effect.

On May 1, 2024, Defendants and Defendant-Intervenors filed notice of appeal of the preliminary injunction to the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

Update: On August 14, 2024, the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals heard oral arguments on the appeal of the preliminary injunction.

## **II. League of Women Voters of Montana v. Knudsen**

Plaintiffs: League of Women Voters of Montana.

Defendants: Attorney General Austin Knudsen; Montana Secretary of State Christi Jacobsen; and Montana Commissioner of Political Practices Chris Gallus.

Venue: Montana 18<sup>th</sup> Judicial District Court, Gallatin County

Docket No.: DV-16-2023-0001073D

Legislation Challenged:

HB 892: AN ACT REVISING VOTING LIMITS; PROHIBITING DOUBLE VOTING; PROVIDING A PENALTY; PROVIDING A DEFINITION; PROVIDING AN APPROPRIATION; AMENDING SECTION 13-35-210, MCA; AND PROVIDING AN IMMEDIATE EFFECTIVE DATE.

Overview: Plaintiffs allege HB 892 violates the Montana Constitution's guarantees of the rights to vote, free speech, free association, and due process. The allegations of this case mirror the above-mentioned case, *Montana Public Interest Research Group v. Jacobsen*, which was filed in U.S. District Court alleging violation of the U.S. Constitution, while this suit alleges violation of the Montana Constitution. Plaintiffs requested the court preliminarily and permanently enjoin Defendants from enforcing the challenged provisions of HB 892 – specifically the “Deregistration Requirement” and the “Omission Provision” under section 13-35-210(5), MCA – and award attorneys' fees.

On November 16, 2023, Plaintiffs filed a motion for a preliminary injunction against HB 892.

On April 29, 2024, the court denied Plaintiff's Motion for Preliminary Injunction concluding that it is moot, based on the U.S. District Court's injunction in *Montana Public Interest Research Group v. Jacobsen*. The action continues on the underlying merits of the case.

Update: None.

### **III. Ellingson v. State**

Plaintiffs: Mae Nan Ellingson; Jerome Loendorf; Arlyne Reichert; Hal Harper; Bob Brown; Evan Barrett; C.B. Pearson; Carole Mackin; Mark Mackin; and Jonathan Motl.

Defendants: State of Montana; Governor Greg Gianforte; Montana Secretary of State Christi Jacobsen; and Attorney General Austin Knudsen.

Venue: Montana First Judicial District Court, Lewis and Clark County, Judge Kathy Seeley

Docket No.: DV-25-2023-0000388-DK

Legislation Challenged:

SB 93: AN ACT GENERALLY REVISING BALLOT ISSUE LAWS; PROVIDING AND REVISING SUBMISSION AND PROCESSING TIMELINES FOR STATEWIDE BALLOT ISSUES; CLARIFYING SUBSTANTIVE AND PROCEDURAL PROVISIONS APPLICABLE TO BALLOT ISSUES; REORGANIZING STATUTORY PROVISIONS RELATED TO BALLOT ISSUES; PROVIDING DEFINITIONS; ESTABLISHING A FEE FOR FILING BALLOT ISSUES; PROVIDING A PENALTY; PROHIBITING FILING A BALLOT ISSUE SUBSTANTIALLY SIMILAR TO A DEFEATED BALLOT ISSUE OF THE PAST 4 YEARS; PROVIDING RULEMAKING AUTHORITY; AMENDING SECTIONS 5-5-215, 5-11-105, 7-5-132, 7-7-2224, 7-14-204, 13-27- 102, 13-27-103, 13-27-105, 13-27-112, 13-27-201, 13-27-204, 13-27-205, 13-27-206, 13-27-207, 13-27-209, 13-27-210, 13-27-211, 13-27-301, 13-27-303, 13-27-304, 13-27-308, 13-27-311, 13-27-316, 13-27-317, 13-27- 401, 13-27-402, 13-27-403, 13-27-406, 13-27-407, 13-27-409, 13-27-410, 13-27-501, 13-27-502, 13-27-503, 13-27-504, 13-37-126, 13-37-201, 13-37-228, AND 30-18-103, MCA; REPEALING SECTIONS 13-27-111, 13- 27-113, 13-27-202, 13-27-208, 13-27-312, AND 13-27-315, MCA; AND PROVIDING AN IMMEDIATE EFFECTIVE DATE AND AN APPLICABILITY DATE.

Overview: Plaintiffs allege that SB 93 is unconstitutional because it impairs, inhibits, makes more expensive, infringes, prevents, and effectively denies the people of Montana their reserved power to enact laws using the initiative and/or referendum process under sections 4, 5, and 6 of Article III, section 7 of Article IV, section 1 of Article V, and sections 2 and 9 of Article XIV of Montana's Constitution. Plaintiffs aver that SB 93 imposes requirements and obstacles to the initiative and referendum process not found within the Montana Constitution, including the filing fee, prohibition on filing, and time limitation on filing. Plaintiffs further aver that SB 93 grants agencies unconstitutional authority over the proposed initiative by subjecting it to review and rejection by the Secretary of State and Attorney General. Plaintiffs also state that the policy review process by multiple government entities, and those entities' ability to insert language on the face of the ballot petition (e.g., statements on harm to business interests, fiscal impact, and committee votes) is an unconstitutional interference with the sponsor's right to control the language that appears on the petition and adds additional time to the process. Plaintiffs further allege that SB 93 unconstitutionally impairs the People's power to gather signatures for the initiative petition.

Plaintiffs seek a declaratory judgment that SB 93 and/or specific statutory provisions are unconstitutional and an order enjoining Defendants from enforcing any aspects of SB 93. The Plaintiffs also seek attorney's fees.

On October 20, 2023, Plaintiffs filed a Motion for Partial Summary Judgment.

On February 5, 2024, Plaintiff's Motion for Partial Summary Judgment was granted. The order voids the provisions of SB 93 requiring a filing fee and allowing the Attorney General to engage in substantive legal review. The court found the filing fee was an impairment on the people's constitutional powers of initiative and referendum under Article III, sections 4 and 5. The court also found that the Attorney General may only review proposed ballot issues for legal sufficiency – whether the ballot statements comply with statutory requirements – not the constitutionality of proposed ballot issues.

On March 22, 2024, Plaintiffs filed a second Motion for Summary Judgment.

Update: On August 13, 2024, the Plaintiff's Second Motion for Partial Summary Judgment was granted in part and denied in part.

The court found section 13-27-221, MCA, which prohibits submission of proposed ballot initiatives that are substantially similar to a defeated measure within the past four years, unconstitutional in violation of Article III, section 4 of the Montana Constitution as it creates an arbitrary hurdle to participation in the ballot initiative process. The court further found sections 13-27-228 and 13-27-238(1)(d), MCA, providing for review of a ballot initiative by a legislative interim committee and placement of the results of the committee's vote on the petition, unconstitutional in violation of Article V, section 1 of the Montana Constitution as it improperly inserts the legislature in the people's independent lawmaking initiative and referendum process. The court denied summary judgment as to the remaining statutory challenges.

## **CASES STILL PENDING FROM LAST INTERIM (Last Update July 12, 2022)**

These updates are provided in an abbreviated version. The full litigation update on these cases can be accessed at: <https://leg.mt.gov/content/Committees/Interim/2021-2022/State-Administration-and-Veterans-Affairs/Studies-Topics/August22-Litigation-Update-Final.pdf>

### **I. Montana Democratic Party v. Jacobsen**

2021 Legislation Challenged: HB 176; HB 506; HB 530; SB 169

On July 27, 2022, the district court granted summary judgment holding that HB 506 is unconstitutional as it infringes on the fundamental right to vote and is not narrowly tailored based on the requirement that electors turning eighteen years old the month prior to an election are limited in their manner of voting based on when their birth date falls.

On September 30, 2022, after a trial, the district court issued an order finding HB 176, Section 2 of HB 530, and SB 169 unconstitutional.

HB 176 ended Election Day voter registration (EDR). The court found ending this practice severely burdens the right to vote and did not further a compelling state interest. It also violates equal protection when considering that ending EDR disproportionately burdens Native American voters and young voters.

Section 2 of HB 530 prohibited distributing, ordering, requesting, collection, or delivering ballots for a pecuniary benefit. The court found this prohibition severely and disproportionately burdens the right to vote for Native American voters and voters experiencing a disability. The court further found that the prohibition cannot overcome strict scrutiny as it has no legitimate, let alone compelling, state interest. The provision also violates the right to equal protection, freedom of speech, and due process for being vague.

SB 169 narrowed eligible voter identification, specifically limiting the use of student identification cards. The court held such limitation violates the constitutional right to equal protection by imposing heightened and unequal burdens on Montana's youngest voters and those burdens are not rationally related to a government interest.

The Defendant appealed and on March 27, 2024, the Montana Supreme Court affirmed the district court's decision holding the four laws unconstitutional.

Update: On June 24, 2024, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Kagan granted Defendant's application for an extension of time to petition the U.S. Supreme Court for a writ of certiorari until August 24, 2024.