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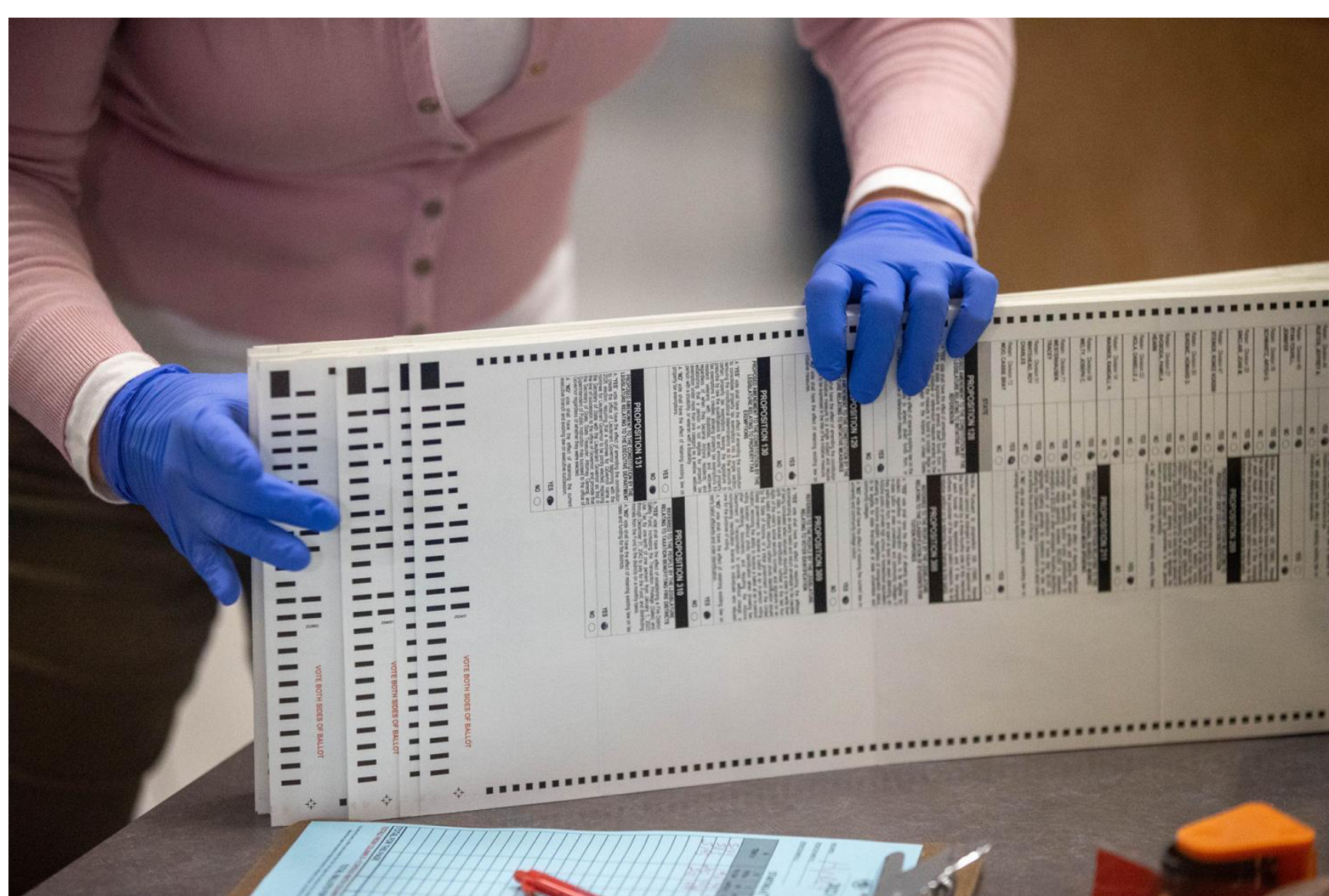
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Arizona bipartisan group calls on candidates to take 'democracy promise' to accept election results

By Wayne Schutsky

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After running through a vote-counting machine, an election worker gathers ballots at the Maricopa County Tabulation and Election Center on Nov. 10, 2022.

A collection of current and former Democratic and Republican elected officials in Arizona are calling on all candidates running for office to pledge they will accept the results of this year's elections.

Over a dozen current and former elected officials are supporting democracyFIRST in Arizona. The group is asking all candidates to make what they call a democracy promise with a goal of restoring what the group calls "the standards, expectations, and norms for elected officials and candidates seeking positions that directly impact our elections."

The promise includes four basic tenets, including supporting the right of every eligible voter to participate in elections; denouncing political violence; committing not to spread election misinformation; and accepting the election results and the peaceful transfer of power.

"With these four principles that democracyFIRST put out, I hope that we can broadly accept them, put this moment in American history past us, and then focus on the very real challenges, whether it's international or national, that are facing this country," Maricopa County Recorder Stephen Richer said. "And I think that is coincidentally and happily what the median Arizona voter wants from elected officials and candidates running for office."

Other elected officials who support democracyFIRST include Democratic Secretary of State Adrian Fontes, Republican Maricopa County Supervisor Bill Gates and Democratic Congressman Greg Stanton.

Republican Mesa Mayor John Giles, Democratic Tempe Mayor Corey Woods and independent Chandler Councilman Matt Orlando also support the group.

"This coalition represents a powerful collaboration across party lines to enhance and protect the democratic values we all cherish," Fontes said in a press release. "Our goal is to foster a political environment that encourages accountability and engagement, which are crucial for the health of our democracy."



Arizona state Rep. Justin Wilmeth (R-Phoenix) with his Pluto merch.

Rep. Justin Wilmeth (R-Phoenix), who is seeking re-election in competitive north Phoenix district, is the only current lawmaker who is currently backing democracyFIRST.

He said it is dangerous to undermine faith in the country's Democratic institutions.

"Overall, I really believe that most folks are up in arms about things just because it doesn't go their way and we can't get to that point," he said. "We have to have faith in the process and believe in it."

Wilmeth said he believes there are election processes that should be improved, but people from both sides of the aisle need to be able to have a civil discourse to address those problems rather than blaming conspiracy theories. He said he plans to ask his colleagues at the Arizona Capitol to join him in support of democracyFirst.

But signing the pledge could be a third rail for some Republican candidates, especially those running in competitive primaries in districts that have swung in the past for candidates aligned with former President Donald Trump, who continues to spread false information about the 2020 election he lost to President Joe Biden.

Wilmeth said he felt it was important to speak up anyway, though.

"And really for me, on an issue like this, I just think it's important for people in my position to stand up and say, 'look, not everything's a conspiracy. Not everything is a grift or a fraud,'" Wilmeth said.

Richer said it is incumbent for candidates of all types to get off the fence and commit to democracyFirst pledge, which he says "would have been very uncontroversial just a few years ago."

"I think there's a lot of hemming and hawing, especially on the Republican side, just because people try to play the best of both worlds," Richer said. "And certainly we've seen that strategy in the 2022 elections. I don't think that that was a terribly successful strategy. I don't think it's also a very morally responsible strategy."

Taking the pledge doesn't disqualify candidates from using legal avenues to question the election process if they believe there are flaws, he said.

"It just closes the door on intentionally distributing false information and continuing to contest election results even after the courts have ruled, and the results have been certified." Richer said.

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