

Ultra-right takes control of Northern California county through recall election

Melody Isley, Patrick Martin

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Ultra-right forces have taken control of the board of supervisors in Shasta County, California, the largest county in the northern third of the state, with nearly 200,000 residents, after a recall campaign that ousted a member of the board based on fascistic demagogic over coronavirus restrictions.

Leonard Moty, a retired police chief and self-identified Reagan Republican, with nearly 40 years of experience in county government, lost his long-held seat on the board of supervisors in a recall election in February. He was formally replaced on March 1 by Tim Garman, who narrowly led a field of four candidates in the replacement vote, on the same ballot as the recall.

Garman's swearing-in ensured a far-right majority on the county board, which had been divided 3-2 in favor of a more moderate Republican faction. Les Baugh, of the ultra-right faction, was elected chairman of the board to replace Moty. Two weeks later, on March 17, moderate Mary Rickert was voted out of her position as vice chairman and replaced by another ultra-right supervisor, Patrick Jones.

The recall election drew fewer than 9,000 voters in Moty's district, a turnout of under 42 percent. They voted 56-44 percent to remove the incumbent supervisor. Garman won the seat with 2,391 votes, less than a quarter of those voting, and less than 10 percent overall. The number who voted in the recall but declined to vote for any replacement candidate—presumably supporters of Moty—was greater than the vote for Garman or any of the other replacement candidates.

With only this dubious mandate, the recall gives the ultra-right control of the county government which they have begun to assert aggressively. The first action was to announce an immediate performance review for the county health director, a regular target for fascistic rhetoric against enforcement of measures to protect the population from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The new majority also voted to repeal the health state of emergency due to the pandemic. This was merely a gesture, since the emergency is a statewide measure enacted by the Democratic-controlled state government in Sacramento.

The Democratic Party has a super-majority control of the state legislature and holds all statewide offices, but largely rural Shasta County has been controlled by the Republican Party for many decades. The county has only one city, Redding, with a population of 90,000, about half the county's total. Registered Republicans outnumber Democrats by two to one.

Far-right groups have flocked to Shasta County, and neighboring counties in Northern California and southern Oregon over the past decade and particularly since the emergence of Donald Trump. These include outright fascists like the Proud Boys, various gun rights groups and groups supporting secession of the interior areas of California to form a separate state that they claim would have a right-wing majority.

The pandemic policies of Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom, particularly his cynical double standard, claiming to support stringent public health measures while he and his wealthy cronies routinely ignore them, have given the far right ample opportunity for ratcheting up anger and distrust in a population already facing long-term unemployment and poverty even before the onset of COVID-19.

It was similar ultra-right appeals and demagogic against public health measures as infringements on "freedom" that were the basis of last year's recall petition against Newsom, which forced a recall election in which the Democrat retained his position by a wide margin.

Since the start of the pandemic, the Shasta County board has been subjected to constant protests and speeches from far-right and militia groups, decrying the conservative politicians for not openly defying Newsom's measures.

Propelled by the extreme right-wing media information cycle and local agitators, official meetings and public forums have featured open threats of violence against board members. During one meeting, a far-right activist told then Supervisor Moty that bullets are expensive, but “ropes are reusable”—echoing the right-wing conspiracy to kidnap the governor of Michigan in 2020 or, at minimum, a death threat.

In a widely circulated speech at a 2020 board meeting, Carlos Zapata, a local militia leader and Marine veteran, demanded an immediate end to any and all COVID-19 measures. “This is a warning for what’s coming. It’s not gonna be peaceful much longer.” Using the same rhetoric employed by Trump and his followers on January 6, 2021, Zapata declared, “I’m telling you what I will do to save this country. If it has to be against our own citizens, it will happen and there are a million people like me, and you won’t stop us.”

Zapata’s speech was widely distributed on social media, and he grew into a kind of fascistic celebrity, appearing on Info Wars with Alex Jones. And he has now produced a video campaign called “Red, White, and Blueprint,” where Zapata shares strategies to help other far-right organizations and activists oust local leaders that have not shifted far enough for the fascist right wing.

Zapata is a member of the Cottonwood Militia, the most influential far-right group in Shasta County. This group, like other far-right organizations, claimed a huge upswing in recruitment after the failed January 6 coup attempt last year.

Woody Clendenen, a spokesman for the group, claimed a close relationship with local sheriff’s departments: “They’re all in support. We’ve worked hard to get that, too”—referring to the militia’s “assistance” during the anti-police violence protests in the summer of 2020, where Clendenen says his group frequently attended left-wing rallies in order to monitor supposed “antifa” activity and to “protect our police and property.”

The militia’s activity extends from providing their recruits with firearms and ham radio training, to active participation in local elections. Clendenen explained that the leadership encourages members to join every branch of community leadership, from the chamber of commerce to school boards, water boards and city government. The strategies of the far-right organizations like the Cottonwood Militia are not limited to “monitoring” protests and functioning as propagandists or forces for intimidation, but they are increasingly aimed at gaining control of the political structure.

The Shasta County recall election became a nationalized race, backed by a broader far-right media apparatus and political donors. A critical role was played by a wealthy donor from Connecticut, Revere Anselmo, whose father co-founded the Univision television network and later launched a private telecommunications satellite company.

According to the Federal Elections Commission, Anselmo donated \$450,000 to the recall efforts in Shasta. Supervisor Moty’s usual campaigns, by comparison, had not reached above \$30,000 in spending. This huge sum gave the local recall campaign ample resources for attack ads and mailers, as well as to build support for the fascist organizations.

California has a long history of ultra-right and fascist groups, including the self-styled California State Militia, (to which the Cottonwood Militia is affiliated), the Oath Keepers, which is especially active in Southern California, and the We Are Change organization, which promotes both anti-vaccine and anti-science conspiracy theories.

Under conditions of the pandemic, and the complacent response by the Democratic Party, which has pursued essentially the same “let it rip” policy as the Republicans, it is not a surprise that ultra-right groups are able to profit from the resulting political confusion and uncertainty.

At the root of this political crisis is the growing social polarization. California has more billionaires than any other state, and more than most countries. At the same time, it has the highest official poverty rate in the US at 15.4 percent, according to the 2021 Census Bureau figures, and Shasta County is even higher, at 16.7 percent.



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