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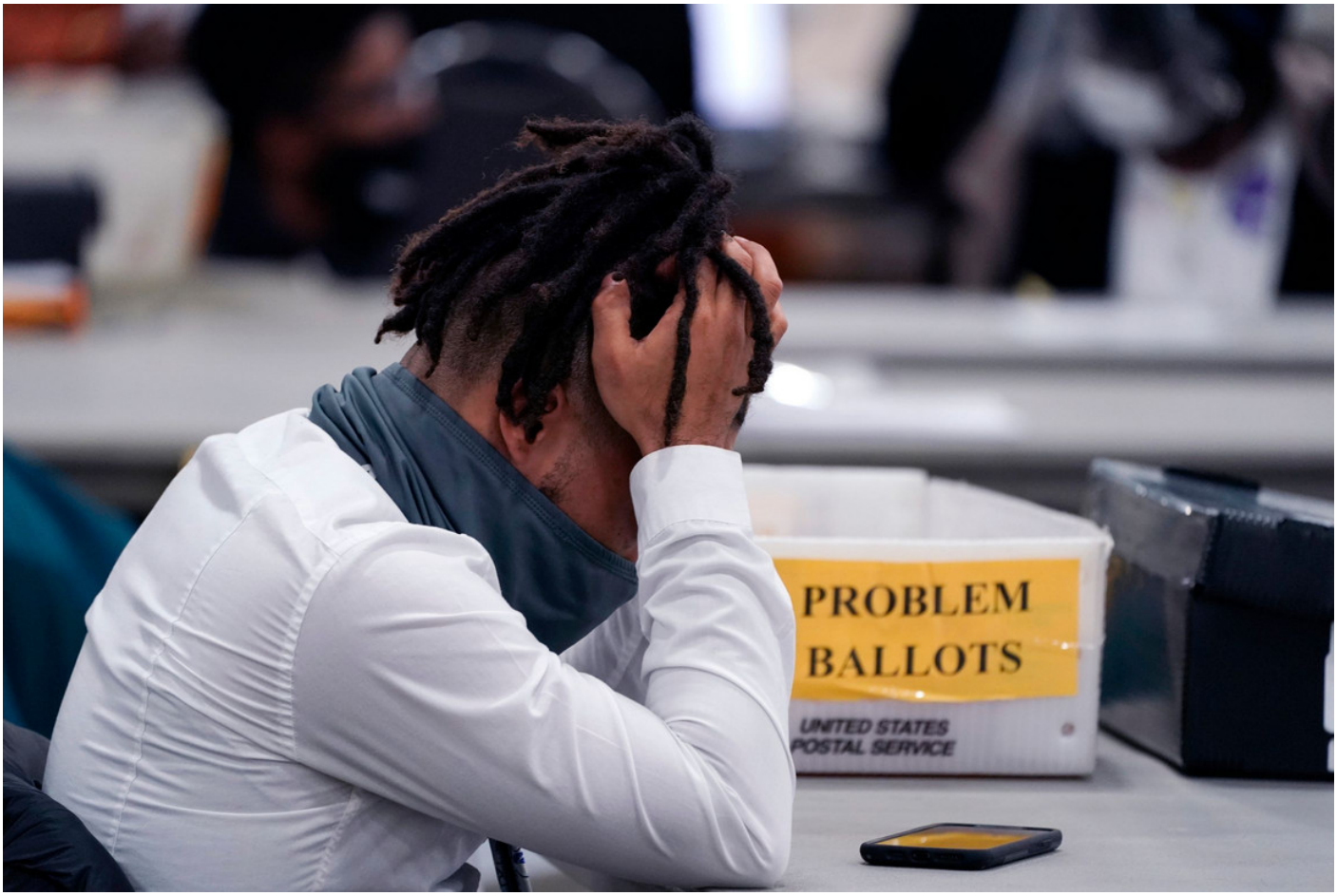
The Inside Story of Michigan's Fake Voter Fraud Scandal

How a state that was never in doubt became a "national embarrassment" and a symbol of the Republican Party's fealty to Donald Trump.



An elections worker rubs his head in the closing hours where absentee ballots were processed at the central counting board, Nov. 4, 2020, in Detroit. | AP Photo/Carlos Osorio

By **TIM ALBERTA**
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Tim Alberta is chief political correspondent for Politico Magazine.

After five years spent bullying the Republican Party into submission, President Donald Trump finally met his match in Aaron Van Langevelde.

Who?

That's right. In the end, it wasn't a senator or a judge or a general who stood up to the leader of the free world. There was no dramatic, made-for-Hollywood collision of cosmic egos. Rather, the death knell of Trump's presidency was sounded by a baby-faced lawyer, looking over his glasses on a grainy Zoom feed on a gloomy Monday afternoon, reading from a statement that reflected a courage and moral clarity that has gone AWOL from his party, pleading with

"We must not attempt to exercise power we simply don't have," declared Van Langevelde, a member of Michigan's board of state canvassers, the ministerial body with sole authority to make official Joe Biden's victory over Trump. "As John Adams once said, 'We are a government of laws, not men.' This board needs to adhere to that principle here today. This board must do its part to uphold the rule of law and comply with our legal duty to certify this election."

Van Langevelde is a Republican. He works for Republicans in the Statehouse. He gives legal guidance to advance Republican causes and win Republican campaigns. As a Republican, his mandate for Monday's hearing—handed down from the state party chair, the national party chair and the president himself—was straightforward. They wanted Michigan's board of canvassers to delay certification of Biden's victory. Never mind that Trump lost by more than 154,000 votes, or that results were already certified in all 83 counties. The plan was to drag things out, to further muddy the election waters and delegitimize the process, to force the courts to take unprecedented actions that would forever taint Michigan's process of certifying elections. Not because it was going to help Trump win but because it was going to help Trump cope with a

loss. The president was not accepting defeat. That meant no Republican with career ambitions could accept it, either.

Which made Van Langevelde's vote for certification all the more remarkable. With the other Republican on the four-person board, Norman Shinkle, abstaining on the final vote—a cowardly abdication of duty—the 40-year-old Van Langevelde delivered the verdict on his own. At a low point in his party's existence, with much of the GOP's leadership class pre-writing their own political epitaphs by empowering Trump to lay waste to the country's foundational democratic norms, an obscure lawyer from west Michigan stood on principle. It proved to be the nail in Trump's coffin: Shortly after Michigan's vote to certify, the General Services Administration finally commenced the official transition of power and Trump tweeted out a statement affirming the move "in the best interest of our Country."

Still, the drama in Lansing raised deeper questions about the health of our political system and the sturdiness of American democracy. Why were Republicans who privately admitted Trump's legitimate defeat publicly alleging massive fraud? Why did it fall to a little-known figure like Van Langevelde to buffer the country from an unprecedented layer of turmoil? Why did the battleground state that dealt Trump his most decisive defeat—by a wide margin—become the epicenter of America's electoral crisis?


STOP THE STEAL


TRUMP
NO MORE BULLSHIT
2020
We fled Socialism
We fled
NO FAKE

Large numbers of people gathered to join in the Stop the Steal protest, on Nov. 7 in Lansing, which was organized to show opposition to Biden winning the presidency. Many at the demonstration suspected voting counts to be inaccurate or fraudulent. | Stephen Zenner/Sipa via AP Images

In conversations with more than two dozen Michigan insiders—elected officials, party elders, consultants, activists—it became apparent how the state's conditions were ripe for this sort of slow-motion disaster. Michigan is home to Detroit, an overwhelmingly majority Black city, that has always been a favorite punching bag of white Republicans. The state had viral episodes of conflict and human error that were easily manipulated and deliberately misconstrued. It drew special attention from the highest levels of the party, and for the president, it had the potential to settle an important score with his adversary, Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer. Perhaps most important, Trump's allies in Michigan proved to be more career-obsessed, and therefore more servile to his whims, than GOP officials in any other state he has cultivated during his presidency, willing to indulge his conspiratorial fantasies in ways other Republicans weren't.

This, Republicans and Democrats here agreed, was the essential difference between Michigan and other states. However sloppy Trump's team was in contesting the results in places like Georgia and Wisconsin, where the margins were fractional, there was at least some plausible justification of a legal challenge. The same could never be said for Michigan. Strangely liberated by his deficit of 154,000 votes, the president's efforts here were aimed not at overturning the results, but rather at testing voters' faith in the ballot box and Republicans' loyalty to him.

"We have to see this for what it is. It's a PR strategy to erode public confidence in a very well-run election to achieve political ends," Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, a Democrat, said in an interview last week. "This was not any type of valid legal strategy that had any chance at ultimately succeeding."

"Anybody can sue anybody for any reason. But winning is a whole different matter. And Trump didn't have a realistic pathway here," Brian Calley, the former GOP lieutenant governor, told me prior to the certification vote. "I'm not too worried about the end result in Michigan. I understand the drama. … I know the system looks clunky. But I actually think we'll look back on this and

know the system looks clunky. But I actually think we'll look back on this and say, you know, we've actually got a very strong system that can stand up to a lot of scrutiny."

Benson and Calley were right that Trump was never going to succeed at altering the outcome in Michigan—or in any of the other contested states, or in the Electoral College itself. The 45th president's time in office is drawing to a close. No amount of @realdonaldtrump tweets or wild-eyed allegations from his lawyers or unhinged segments on One America News can change that.

But what they *can* change—where he *can* ultimately succeed—is in convincing unprecedented numbers of Americans that their votes didn't count. Last month, Gallup reported that the public's confidence in our elections being accurate dropped 11 points since the 2018 midterms, which included a 34-point decrease among Republicans. That was before a daily deluge of dishonest allegations and out-of-context insinuations; before the conservative media's wall-to-wall coverage of exotic conspiracy theories; before the GOP's most influential figures winked and nodded at the president of the United States alleging the greatest fraud in U.S. history.

Trump failed to win Michigan. But he succeeded in convincing America that a loss, no matter how conclusive, may never again be conclusive enough.

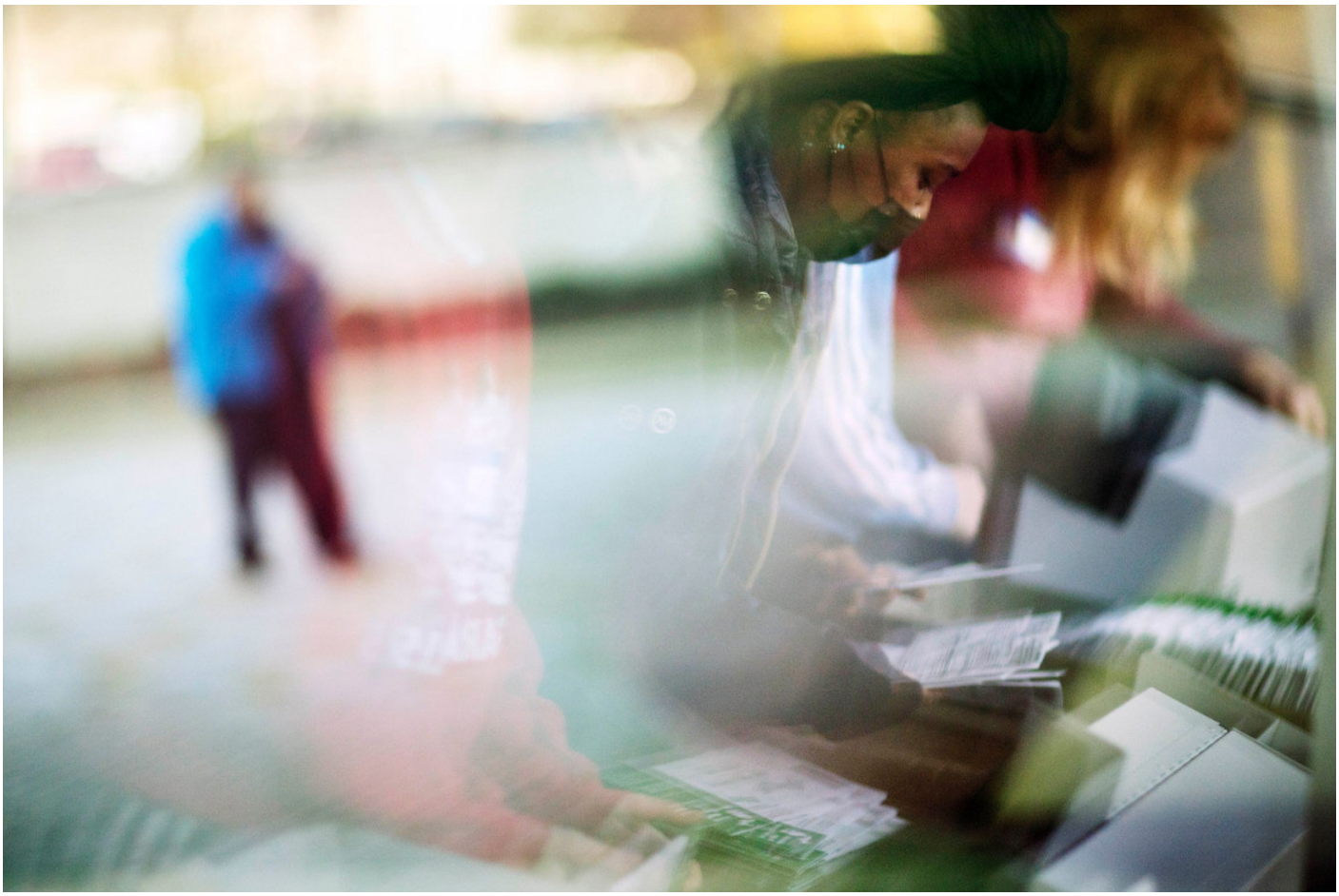
The irony of Michigan's electoral meltdown is that Election Day, in the eyes of veteran clerks and poll workers across the state, was the smoothest it had ever been. Like clockwork, one can always depend on controversies—sometimes mini-scandals—to spring up by noontime on any given Election Day. But not in 2020. There were no documented instances of voter intimidation. No outcry over precincts opening late or closing early. Heck, in the state's biggest and busiest voting jurisdictions, there were no *lines* to complain about. The day was eerily uneventful.

Much of this owed to months of tireless preparation by election officials at the state and local level. Of course, it also had something to do with the historic nature of 2020: More than half of Michigan's voters chose to vote absentee, the result of a new law that predated the deadly Covid-19 pandemic that scared many people away from voting in-person. For this reason, Michiganders were not congratulating themselves when the polls closed on election night. They knew the real gantlet lay ahead.

"You're talking about election officials implementing new laws, running an election with a 60 percent mail vote, in the middle of a pandemic," said Chris Thomas, Michigan's longtime chief elections administrator, a nonpartisan who spent decades working under secretaries of state from both parties. "In terms of voters getting the ballots processed and counted in a reasonable time period, I thought they did a marvelous job. But it was a huge challenge."

Because state law prohibited the processing of absentee votes until 7 a.m. on Election Day—preventing workers from getting a head start with the time-consuming work of opening envelopes, removing ballots and preparing them for tabulation—everyone understood the state would face a historic backlog of votes to count once the polls closed at 8 p.m. This was the source of a monthslong dispute between the Democratic governor, the Democratic

secretary of state and the Republicans who control both the House and Senate in Lansing. Whitmer and Benson warned the GOP leaders that a protracted counting process, especially in the scenario of a competitive election, would invite chaos. Other states Trump carried in 2016, such as Ohio and Florida, allowed for pre-canvassing of absentee and other mail-in ballots so that voters would know which candidate carried the state on election night. Why couldn't Michigan do the same?



In this Nov. 3 photo, election inspectors are reflected in a window as they begin processing ballots while a voter outside arrives to drop a ballot into an official box on Election Day at City Hall in Warren, Mich. | AP Photo/David Goldman

The Republicans—House Speaker Lee Chatfield and Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey—were not interested. Spooked by Trump's continued assault on mail voting, and aware that their own members in the Legislature were distrustful of the new "no-excuse-absentee" rules, Chatfield and Shirkey weren't inclined to do the process any favors. Only in the late stages of the race, when Republican state senator (and former secretary of state) Ruth Johnson

suggested a meager concession—allowing 10 hours of absentee ballot processing before Election Day—did the GOP throw a bone to election workers.

It's helpful to understand the party's logic. Not only did they want to avoid the perception of aiding a system the president was attacking as illegitimate and not only were they skeptical of the Democrats' concerns of a drawn-out count. But many Republicans didn't believe the election would be terribly close to begin with. A summer's worth of polling, conducted for them privately at the local and statewide level, indicated that Trump stood little chance of carrying Michigan a second time. The common expectation was that the president would lose comfortably, by at least 4 or 5 points, a margin that would render any controversy about absentee voting meaningless.

That thinking changed abruptly around 10 p.m. on election night. As the president surged to a durable lead in Florida—defying expectations by winning large numbers of Hispanics *and* holding his own among absentee voters—Michigan Republicans were gripped by equal parts euphoria and panic. It was clear Trump was running far more competitively than they'd anticipated; he was on track to win Florida, Ohio and North Carolina, three states that tally their ballots quickly, meaning the spotlight would abruptly shift to the critical, slow-counting battlegrounds of Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.

Everyone here knew this had been a possibility, but it wasn't until midnight that the urgency of the situation crashed over Republicans. Trump had built a

lead of nearly 300,000 votes on the strength of same-day ballots that were disproportionately favorable to him. Now, with the eyes of the nation—and of the president—fixed on their state, Michigan Republicans scrambled to protect that lead. Laura Cox, chair of the state party, began dialing prominent lawmakers, attorneys and activists, urging them to get down to the TCF Center, the main hub of absentee vote counting in Detroit. She was met with some confusion; there were already plenty of Republicans there, as scheduled, working their shifts as poll challengers. It didn't matter, Cox told them. It was time to flood the zone.

"This was all so predictable," said Josh Venable, who ran Election Day operations for the Michigan GOP during five different cycles. "Detroit has been the boogeyman for Republicans since before I was born. It's always been the white suburbs vs. Detroit, the white west side of the state vs. Detroit. There's always this rallying cry from Republicans—'We win everywhere else, but lose Wayne County'—that creates paranoia. I still remember hearing, back on my first campaign in 2002, that Wayne County always releases its votes last so that Detroit can see how many votes Democrats need to win the state. That's what a lot of Republicans here believe."

As things picked up at the TCF Center, with more and more white Republicans filing into the complex to supervise the activity of mostly Black poll workers, Chris Thomas noticed a shift in the environment. Having been brought out of retirement to help supervise the counting in Detroit—a decision met with cheers from Republicans and Democrats alike—Thomas had been "thrilled" with the professionalism he'd witnessed during Monday's pre-processing session and Tuesday's vote tabulating. Now, in the early morning hours of Wednesday, things were going sideways. Groups of Republican poll challengers were clustering around individual counting tables in violation of the rules. People were raising objections—such as to the transferring of military absentees onto ballots that could be read by machines, a standard practice—that betrayed a lack of preparation.

"Reading these affidavits afterward from these Republican poll challengers, I was just amazed at how misunderstood the election process was to them," Thomas chuckled. "The things they said were going on—it's like 'Yeah, that's *exactly* what was going on. That's what's *supposed* to happen.'" (The Trump team's much celebrated lawsuit against Detroit was recently withdrawn after being pummeled in local courtrooms; his campaign has to date won one case and lost 35.)

At one point, around 3:30 in the morning, Thomas supervised the receiving of Detroit's final large batch of absentee ballots. They arrived in a passenger van. Thomas confirmed the numbers he'd verified over the phone: 45 trays, each tray holding roughly 300 ballots, for a total of between 13,000 and 14,000 ballots. Not long after, Charlie Spies, an attorney for the U.S. Senate campaign of Republican John James, approached Thomas inside the TCF Center. He wanted to know about the 38,000 absentee ballots that had just materialized. Thomas told him there were not 38,000 ballots; that at most it might have been close to 15,000.

"I was told the number was 38,000," Spies replied.

By five o'clock on Wednesday morning, it was apparent Trump's lead would not hold.

His cushion over Biden had been whittled down to 70,000 votes. There remained hundreds of thousands of absentee ballots to be counted in the large, Democratic strongholds of Detroit, Lansing and Flint. The math was simply not workable for the president. Just before 9:30 a.m., Biden overtook Trump in the tally of Michigan's votes—and suddenly, a switch flipped on the right.

After 24 hours of letting the democratic process work, Republicans around the country—watching Trump's second term slipping through their fingers—began crying foul and screaming conspiracy. No state cornered the hysteria market quite like Michigan.

First it was breathless accusations about Antrim County, a rural Republican redoubt in northwestern Michigan with a total turnout of 16,044 voters, where the unofficial returns showed Biden leading Trump by 3,000 votes. (A human error caused the candidates' totals to be transposed, the county clerk said, and it was quickly corrected, though this did nothing to stop context-less social media posts about the mistake from going viral, or to slow the spread of rumors about Governor Whitmer buying off local officials because she owned a vacation home in Antrim County.)

Then it was Stu Sandler, a longtime Michigan GOP operative and top adviser to James' U.S. Senate campaign, moving preemptively to declare victory and accuse Democrats of trying to steal the seat. "John James has won this race. The ballots are counted. Stop making up numbers, stalling the process and cheating the system," Sandler tweeted. (James, who was clinging to a small lead that would soon disappear, promptly retweeted this sinister claim. Sandler later deleted it and told me he apologized for tweeting "in the middle of an intense moment"—but stuck to his claims of widespread "irregularities" that damaged his candidate.)

The true insanity was saved for Detroit. By early afternoon on Wednesday, hundreds and hundreds of Republicans had descended on the TCF Center, responding to an all-hands-on-deck missive that went out from the state party and was disseminated by local officials. Cox, the party chair, tweeted out a video of her comrades standing outside the locked-up downtown building. "Republican poll challengers blocked from entering the TCF Center in Detroit! This is egregious!" she wrote.

Truly egregious was Cox's dishonesty. At the time of her tweet, several hundred of her party's poll challengers, attorneys and representatives were already *inside* the TCF Center monitoring the count. By law, Republicans were allowed to have 134 challengers in the room, one for each tabulation table. In reality, the GOP had far more than that, according to sworn testimony from nonpartisan poll watchers inside the TCF Center. Because of the overflow, election officials ultimately decided to lock down the complex, starting with the glass-encased canvassing room where the tabulation work was being done. This left dozens and dozens of Republicans trapped behind the glass—in addition to the hundreds of others locked outside with Cox. Some began to bang hard on the inside windows; others began to film workers handling the ballots, a violation of state law. To protect the workers, TCF officials covered some of the windows with cardboard—a decision Thomas said he was not consulted on, but absolutely agreed with.

"The people outside that room were doing exactly what the law says you would eject people for doing—they were disrupting the election," Thomas said.

"Everyone else in the room—the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, the ACLU, the nonpartisans—they all still had a full complement of challengers in the room. And the Republicans, by the way, had far more challengers in the room than they were entitled to."

What made this behavior all the more confounding, Thomas said, is that the election was conducted more transparently than any he'd ever participated in. Each of the 134 tables had monitors placed at the end, "showing every keystroke that was made," so that challengers could see exactly what was happening. But he came to realize that none of this mattered. Having dealt with Republican poll challengers for decades, Thomas said, it was clear the people who infiltrated TCF on Wednesday were not adequately trained or there for the right reasons.

"They clearly came in believing there was mass cheating going on in Detroit and they were on a mission to catch it."

— Chris Thomas

"Unlike the people who were there Monday and Tuesday, these people Wednesday were totally unprepared. They had no idea how the system worked. They had no idea what they were there for," Thomas said. "Many of them—not all of them, but many of them—they were on a mission. They clearly came in believing there was mass cheating going on in Detroit and they were on a mission to catch it."

As conspiracy theories proliferated across the right-wing information universe—Sharpie markers disenfranchising Trump voters in Arizona, a marked Biden/Harris van unloading boxes full of ballots in Nevada, suspicious turnout patterns in Wisconsin—Detroit held a special place in the president's heart.

When Trump addressed the nation from the White House on Thursday night, insisting the election had been "stolen" from him, he returned time and again to alleged misconduct in Michigan's biggest city. Detroit, he smirked, "I wouldn't say has the best reputation for election integrity." He said the city "had hours of unexplained delay" in counting ballots, and when the late batches arrived, "nobody knew where they came from." He alleged that Republicans had been "denied access to observe any counting in Detroit" and that the windows had been covered because "they didn't want anybody seeing the counting."

All of this was a lie. Republicans here—from Ronna Romney McDaniel to Laura Cox to federal and local lawmakers—knew it was a lie. But they didn't lift a finger in protest as the president disparaged Michigan and subverted America's democratic norms. Why?

In the days following Trump's shameful address to the nation, two realities became inescapable to Michigan's GOP elite. First, there was zero evidence to substantiate widespread voter fraud. Second, they could not afford

to admit it publicly.

McDaniel was a case in point. Born into Michigan royalty—granddaughter of the beloved former governor, George Romney, and niece of former presidential nominee Mitt Romney—she knows the state's politics as well as anyone. Working for her uncle's campaign here, and then as a national committeewoman and state party chair, McDaniel earned respect for her canny, studied approach. She spun and exaggerated and played the game, but she was generally viewed as being above board.

That changed after Trump's 2016 victory. Tapped by the president-elect to take over the Republican National Committee—on the not-so-subtle condition that she remove "Romney" from her professional name—McDaniel morphed into an archetype of the Trump-era GOP sycophant. There was no lie too outlandish to parrot, no behavior too unbecoming to justify, no abuse of power too flagrant to enable. Longtime friends worried that McDaniel wasn't merely humiliating herself publicly; she seemed to be changing in private. She was no longer coolly detached from the passions of politics. If anything, she was turning into a true MAGA believer.

There was some relief, then, when in recent weeks McDaniel told multiple confidants that she doubted there was any scalable voter fraud in Michigan. Nevertheless, McDaniel told friends and fellow Republicans that she needed to stay the course with Trump and his legal team. This wasn't about indulging him, she said, but rather about demonstrating a willingness to fight—even when the fight couldn't be won.

If this sounds illogical, McDaniel's thinking is actually quite linear. The RNC will vote in January on the position of chair. She is anxious to keep her job. It's bad enough that despite an enormous investment of time and resources in Michigan, McDaniel was unable to deliver her home state for the president. If that might prove survivable, what would end McDaniel's bid instantaneously is abandoning the flailing president in the final, desperate moments of his reelection campaign. No matter how obvious the outcome—to McDaniel, to the 168 members of the RNC, maybe even to Trump himself—any indication of surrender would be unforgivable.

This is why McDaniel has sanctioned her employees, beginning with top spokesperson Liz Harrington, to spread countless demonstrable falsehoods in the weeks since Election Day. It's why the RNC, on McDaniel's watch, tweeted out a video clip of disgraced lawyer Sidney Powell claiming Trump "won in a landslide" (when he lost by more than 6 million votes nationally) and alleging a global conspiracy to rig the election against him. It's why McDaniel felt comfortable throwing under the bus a highly respected local Republican clerk in her own backyard, the Detroit suburb of Oakland County, for a human error that was rectified with transparency from start to finish. (The clerk, Tina Barton, called McDaniel's insinuations of fraud "categorically false.")

Honesty and decency have not been hallmarks of Republicanism during Trump's presidency. They certainly are not priorities now. With Trump entering the anguished twilight of his presidency, all that appears to matter for someone like McDaniel—or Cox, the state party chair, who faces an upcoming election of her own—is unconditional fidelity to the president.

"The unfortunate reality within the party today is that Trump retains a hold that is forcing party leaders to continue down the path of executing his fantasy of overturning the outcome—at their own expense," said Jason Cabel Roe, a Michigan-based GOP strategist who once worked as a vendor for McDaniel, and whose family goes back generations with hers. "Frankly, continuing to humor him merely excuses his role in this. The election wasn't stolen, he blew it. Up until the final two weeks, he seemingly did everything possible to lose. Given how close it was, there is no one to blame but Trump."

"Principled conservatives who respect the rule of law and speak out suddenly find themselves outcasts in a party that is no longer about conservativism but Trumpism."

— Jason Cabel Roe

Roe added, "But if they want a future within the party, it is required of them to demonstrate continued fealty. Principled conservatives who respect the rule of law and speak out suddenly find themselves outcasts in a party that is no longer about conservativism but Trumpism. Just ask once-conservative heroes like Jeff Flake, Justin Amash and Mark Sanford."

This same principle applies to Chatfield and Shirkey, the state legislative leaders who were summoned to Washington last week for a meeting with Trump. Under normal circumstances, nobody would begrudge anyone a meeting with the president. But the circumstances surrounding the Michigan GOP leadership's secret huddle with Trump were anything but normal.

Just days earlier, a meeting of the Wayne County canvassing board had devolved into pandemonium after the two GOP members initially refused to certify the county's results. There were valid concerns about some inconsistencies in the balancing of Detroit's poll books; and yet, those inconsistencies were minimal relative to the 2016 election, when Trump won by a margin 15 times smaller—and when the board voted unanimously to certify the result. Monica Palmer, one of the GOP canvassers, caused an uproar when she offered to certify the rest of Wayne County—precincts like Livonia—

without certifying Detroit. (Livonia, which is 95 percent white, had more poll-book irregularities than Detroit, which is 80 percent Black.)

Tweeting out siren emojis, Jenna Ellis, the attorney for Trump's campaign, announced: "BREAKING: This evening, the county board of canvassers in Wayne County, MI refused to certify the election results. If the state board follows suit, the Republican state legislator will select the electors. Huge win for @realDonaldTrump."

This proved wrong on two counts. First, the Wayne board—after a heated period of comments from the public—reversed course the same night and voted unanimously to certify the results after Democrats agreed to an audit of the county's numerical inconsistencies. Second, the notion that legislators would under any circumstance be free to send their own partisans to the Electoral College had no basis in fact. Under Michigan statute, the only electors eligible to represent Michigan are those who will vote for the winner of the popular vote. There is no discretion for anyone—the governor, leaders of the legislature, canvassers at the county or state level—to do anything but follow the law.

Wayne County Board of Canvassers discuss a motion to certify election results during a board meeting in Detroit on Tuesday, Nov. 17, 2020. | Robin Buckson/Detroit News via AP

That didn't stop Trump from buying in. Having long been advised by his legal team that state legislators would be his ace in the hole—particularly in Republican-controlled states with close elections—the president called Chatfield and Shirkey the morning after the Wayne board meeting. He invited them to the White House for a briefing on the state of play in Michigan. Both Chatfield and Shirkey are talented and ambitious, self-grooming for future runs at higher office. Both could see the obvious problems of meeting with the president at such a precarious moment—and both could also see how spurning Trump could torpedo their careers in the GOP.

When they huddled with some of their rank-and-file members, an uneasiness gripped some of the people present. Some wanted to know whether Trump had been inviting legislators from other swing states; others wondered whether he might make a direct ask to intervene on his behalf, putting them in a tenuous and potentially incriminating position. More than a few mentioned how their inboxes had exploded ever since Mark Levin, the far-right radio personality, had begun tweeting screeds about legislatures having the power to send any electors they wish to the Electoral College.

Ultimately, the GOP lawmakers felt they were obligated to go. This was the president calling on them—and besides, they joked, it might be a long time before a Republican occupied the Oval Office again. But precautions were taken. In a savvy move, Chatfield and Shirkey prepared a letter addressing concerns over funding to deal with Covid-19 in Michigan. They also brought along their general counsels. These two maneuvers—one to soothe the outcry over Michigan lawmakers meeting with a president whose legal team was calling for them to overturn the state's election results; the other to insulate them from improper discussions about doing exactly that—were sufficient to sidestep any major crisis.

The president asked them about allegations of fraud, and the legislators told him about various probes they had authorized to look into reports of irregularities. But Trump, perhaps sensing the nervous reticence of his guests, did not make the ask they feared. As the meeting went on, it became apparent to some people in the room that more than anything, Trump had called his Michigan allies to Washington to get an honest assessment of what had happened there. He wanted to know if there was any pathway to victory. They told him there was not.

"I don't get it," the president said, venting confusion and frustration. "All these other Republicans, all over the country, they all win their races. And I'm the only guy that loses?"

Right around the time Chatfield and Shirkey were bearing the bad news to Trump in Washington, the Republican rumor mill was churning back home.

With all 83 counties boasting certified results, the only thing that stood between Joe Biden and his rightful claim to Michigan's 16 electoral votes was certification from the state board of canvassers. In a rational political climate, this would not have been the subject of suspense. But the swirling innuendo and disinformation had long ago swept away any semblance of normalcy. Already, one of the board's two Republicans, Norm Shinkle, a career party fixture, had hinted he would not vote to certify the state's result. Because the two Democrats would obviously vote in favor of certification, a manic gush of attention turned to the other Republican member, Aaron Van Langevelde.

The problem? Hardly anyone knew the guy. Van Langevelde, a deputy legal counsel to the Michigan House GOP, had been appointed to the board less than two years earlier by Governor Rick Snyder. He had kept a deliberately low profile in Lansing, attending the occasional happy hour but spending most of his time in nearby Eaton County, where he lives with his wife, an assistant prosecutor, and their three children.

All day Friday, and throughout the weekend, a chorus of Michigan Republican heavyweights tried and failed to contact Van Langevelde. When it became apparent that his extended family was shooing away callers—giving the

impression he did not welcome this intrusive sort of spotlight—word got around that Van Langevelde had cold feet. By Sunday morning, speculation was rampant that Van Langevelde would resign from the board on Monday. This made perfect sense to Republicans and Democrats alike: Based on their fact-finding mission into the mysterious fourth board member, Van Langevelde was a bookish type, a rule follower, an obsessive student of world history (particularly the Roman Empire) who believes to his core in a conservative application of the law. His pious Dutch sensibilities, one co-worker said, make him "the the kind of guy that would turn himself in for tasting a grape at the grocery store." He would be inclined, Lansing insiders figured, to vote in favor of certifying the results. But he would be *disinclined* to throw away his future in the Republican Party. A resignation from the board was his only way out.

Working off this expectation, a late lobbying blitz turned on Shinkle. In the 36 hours preceding Monday's vote, he was inundated with calls and emails and text messages from high-ranking Republican luminaries around the state. Some, such as former congressman and House Intelligence Chair Mike Rogers, urged him to certify the results in accordance with Michigan law. Others, including McDaniel and Cox and other state party figures, pleaded with Shinkle to stand his ground and insist on a two-week delay. The response they got was universal: He would promise to "do my best," then he would offer a litany of unsubstantiated allegations of fraud. (Not everyone bothered contacting Shinkle: That his wife served as a plaintiff's witness in Trump's ill-fated lawsuit against Detroit struck many people not just as a conflict of interest, but as a clear indication he would never vote to certify.)

When Monday morning arrived, the Michigan MAGA coalition hoped to wake up to news of a postponed meeting on account of Van Langevelde's resignation. No such luck. Nervously, the calls and text messages and email chains began anew—this time directed not toward Shinkle or Van Langevelde, but to each other. What was going on? Was the 1 p.m. meeting really going ahead as scheduled? Would Van Langevelde, who had stayed silent and off the grid for the previous 96 hours, dare to vote against the party's edict?

Some Republicans didn't want to believe it. But for others, reality began to set in. They had grown so accustomed to Republicans falling in line, bending a knee to Trumpism, that the notion of someone acting on his own personal ethic had become foreign. But the more they learned about Van Langevelde, the more he sounded like just that type of independent thinker. Some viewed his relative youth as an asset, believing he wouldn't risk throwing away his future in the party. What they had failed to appreciate was that young conservatives were oftentimes the most disillusioned with the party's drift from any intellectual or philosophical mooring.

By the time the meeting commenced, just after 1 p.m., the smart money had shifted dramatically—away from any resignation or delay and toward prompt certification. Van Langevelde did little to disappoint. "The board's duty today is very clear," he declared just minutes into the meeting. "We have a duty to certify this election."

Like a good attorney, Van Langevelde meticulously questioned a number of expert guest speakers to ascertain if they had dissenting views of the board's authority under state law. Time and again, they affirmed his position. The body did not have power to audit or investigate or recount; that could be done only by distinct bodies *after* certification was complete. The job of the board of state canvassers was narrowly to examine the certified results from all 83 counties and then, based on the relevant vote totals, certify a winner of Michigan's 16 electoral votes. The one time he was challenged—by Spies, the political superlawyer representing John James' U.S. Senate campaign—Van Langevelde calmly brushed his recommendations aside, telling Spies, "I'm going to have to respectfully disagree with you on that."

If this young canvasser's rebellion against the entire Republican Party apparatus was surprising, what came next was all too predictable. Within minutes of Van Langevelde's vote for certification—and of Shinkle's abstention, which guaranteed his colleague would bear the brunt of the party's fury alone—the fires of retaliation raged. In GOP circles, there were immediate calls for Van Langevelde to lose his seat on the board; to lose his job in the House of Representatives; to be censured on the floor of the Legislature and exiled from the party forever. Actionable threats against him and his family began to be reported. The Michigan State Police worked with local law enforcement to arrange a security detail.

All for doing his job. All for upholding the rule of law. All for following his conscience and defying the wishes of Donald Trump.

"It took a lot of courage for him to do what he thought was right and appropriate, given the amount of pressure he was under," said Brian Calley, the GOP former lieutenant governor, who told me days earlier that he had never heard the name Aaron Van Langevelde. "He carried himself as well as anybody

heard the name Aaron Van Langevelde. "He carried himself as well as anybody I've seen in that type of setting, including people with decades and decades of experience. He showed an awful lot of poise."

In Michigan, the upcoming race to chair the Republican Party has already been turned on its head. Ron Weiser, the former party head who's made it known that he wants to reclaim his old post, was thought to have a strong case against Cox, who has been viewed as unsteady by some GOP elders. But it was Weiser who, while chairing the party in 2018, recommended Van Langevelde to then-Governor Snyder—a fact Cox and her allies are already sharpening for attack.

That's right: The name Van Langevelde is already so infamous in Michigan Republican lore that those associated with him are at risk of being branded turncoats, too.

It might sound silly, given Trump's imminent departure from the White House. But Trump shows no sign of ceding the spotlight: He is already making noise about running for president in 2024. Because of this, and because of the sweeping transformation of the party—not just ideologically or stylistically, but mechanically, with MAGA loyalists now installed in state and local leadership posts across the country—the question of loyalty will continue to define the Republican identity for years to come.

Republican identity for years to come.

That contours of that identity—what it means to be a Trump Republican—have gained clarity over time. The default embrace of nationalism. The indifference to ideas as a vision for governing. The disregard for institutional norms. The aversion to etiquette and the bottomless appetite for cultural conflict. Now there is another cornerstone of that identity: The subversion of our basic democratic process.

2020

The Election That Broke the Republican Party

BY TIM ALBERTA

More than any policy enacted or court vacancy filled, Trump's legacy will be his unprecedented assault on the legitimacy of the ballot box. And it will not be considered in isolation. Future iterations of the GOP will make casual insinuations of voter fraud central to the party's brand. The next generation of Republicans will have learned how to sow doubts about election integrity in one breath and in the next breath bemoan the nation's lack of faith in our elections, creating a self-perpetuating justification to cast suspicion on a process that by raw numbers does not appear conducive to keeping them in power.

Look no further than John James. It took three full weeks after Election Day—despite his race being called for Gary Peters on November 4, despite the certified county totals proving he had lost by 92,000 votes—for the Republican Senate nominee to concede defeat. In the interim, he released a series of videos calling for independent investigations into Detroit's voting irregularities, insisting that such efforts are needed to "restore trust" in the system.

"This is not some whacked-out fringe," James said in one taping. "When half the votes in our state believe we just had the most secure election in U.S. history, and the other half believe they were cheated, we have a problem."

James is right. We do have a problem. Our elections continue to be underfunded. Our election bureaus are chronically understaffed. Our election workers are badly undertrained. Our elections are prone to a significant

amount of human error—and any municipal or county clerk will tell you that concerns over not catching those errors keep them up at night.

But errors are not fraud. And when James says he's troubled that half of Michigan's voters feel they were cheated, he would do well to remember that *he was the one telling them they got cheated in the first place*.

That November 4 missive James retweeted from his campaign adviser—"Stop making up numbers, stalling the process and cheating the system"—has since been deleted. But there is no denying the advent of a pattern. Republicans in Michigan and across America have spent the past three weeks promoting baseless allegations of corruption at the ballot box, the rabid responses to which they use as justification to continue to question the fundamental integrity of our elections. It's a vicious new playbook—one designed to stroke egos and rationalize defeats, but with unintended consequences that could spell the unraveling of America's democratic experiment.

"By capriciously throwing around these false claims, you can't get to the heart of a really important issue. In fact, you lose any credibility to get to the heart of that issue," said Venable, the longtime Michigan GOP official who rocked his former comrades by endorsing Biden this fall. "And by the way, if you're going to do an audit, you'd better do it statewide. This is not just a Detroit thing. There are sloppy Republican precincts all over the state. When I served on the Ingham County board of canvassers, we never had a problem in Lansing. You know where our big problems were? The small townships in the rural precincts

of the county, run by Republican clerks. And those folks weren't perpetrating fraud, either. That's the point: There's a difference between sloppiness and fraud. But you can't solve one by inventing stories about the other."

There is no immediate way to make Americans appreciate this distinction, no instant cure for the flagging confidence in our elections. But there are obvious incremental steps to take in the name of transparency and efficiency. First among them, acknowledged Chatfield, the Michigan House speaker, is getting rid of the rules that led to the TCF Center circus in the first place.

"There's a lot we can learn in the state of Michigan, because the way we've handled this, it's become a national embarrassment," Chatfield told me in a brief interview after the final certification vote. "And one of the items where we should look at other states and see how they've done it well, is regarding the early processing of absentee ballots. We mishandled that this year. We should have allowed for early processing. We didn't, and it became a spectacle. I think we can learn from that. It should be something the Legislature fixes moving forward."

This is relatively easy for Chatfield to admit—he's term limited and leaving office soon. For those Republicans left to pick up the pieces in the coming legislative session, there may be little incentive for bipartisan cooperation on a subject that now divides the two party bases as starkly as gun rights or tax rates. The backlash against absentee voting from Republican constituents was already fierce; in the wake of Trump's defeat and the TCF Center conspiracies, Republicans might find it beneficial to avoid raising the issue at all.

There is little cause for optimism. If the majority of GOP politicians couldn't be bothered to do the easy work of debunking crackpot conspiracy theories, how likely are they to do the hard work of hardening our democracy?

"A lot of our leaders in this country ought to be ashamed of themselves," said Thomas, the nonpartisan elections guru who kept Michigan's governing class guessing his political affiliation for the past several decades. "They have propagated this narrative of massive fraud, and it's simply not true. They've leapt from some human error to massive fraud. It's like a leap to Never Neverland. And people are believing them."

He exhaled with a disgusted groan.

"The people of this country really need to wake up and start thinking for themselves and looking for facts—not conspiracy theories being peddled by people who are supposed to be responsible leaders, but facts," Thomas said. "If they're not going to be responsible leaders, people need to seek out the truth for themselves. If people don't do that—if they no longer trust how we elect the president of the United States—we're going to be in real trouble."

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