

JANUARY 6, 2021

PROGRESS MICHIGAN PRESENTS A SPECIAL REPORT:

Michigan Republicans replace local election officials in 'unprecedented' trend

MICHIGAN OFFICIALS FEAR CONSPIRACY THEORISTS WILL FILL ELECTION WORKER SHORTAGE

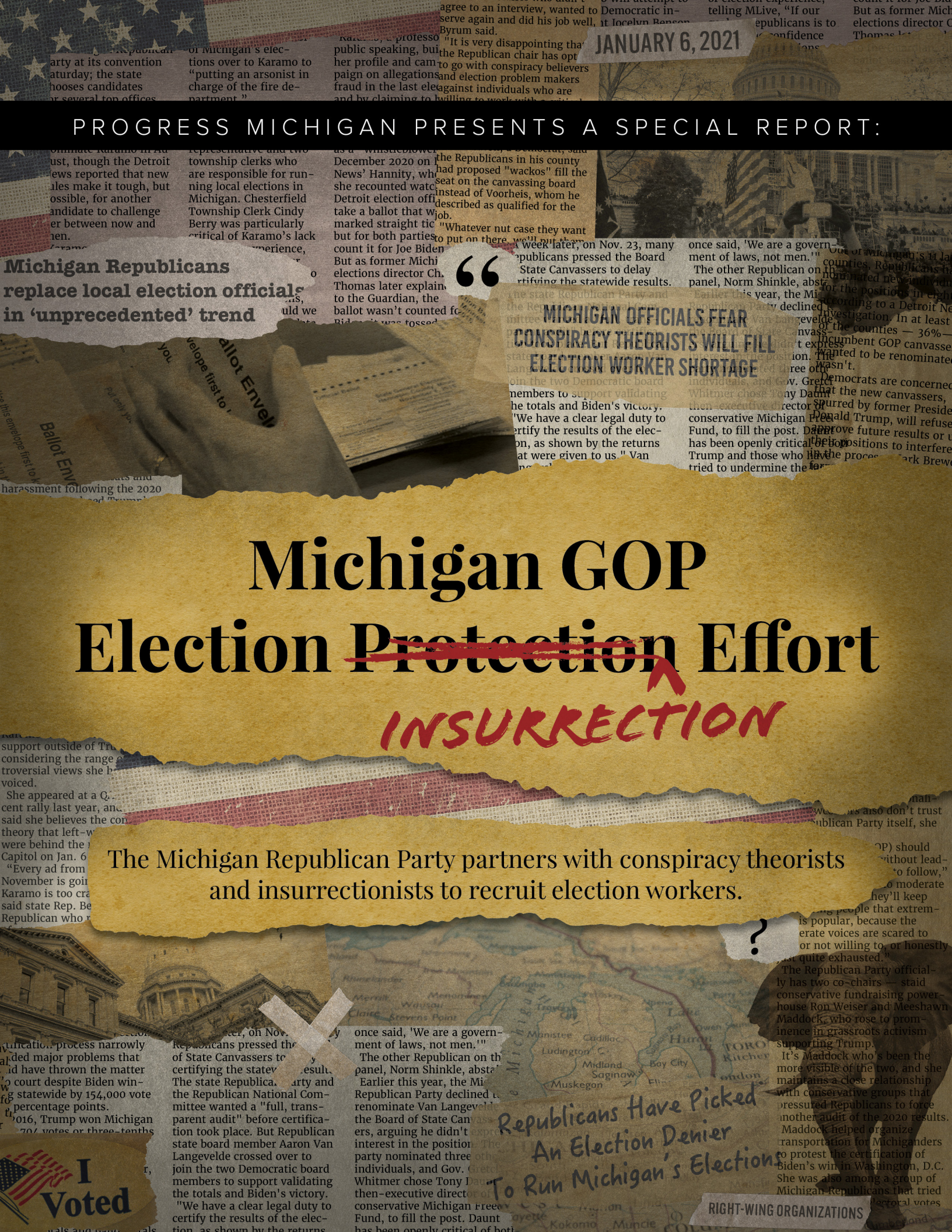
# Michigan GOP Election Protection Effort

## INSURRECTION

The Michigan Republican Party partners with conspiracy theorists and insurrectionists to recruit election workers.

Republicans Have Picked An Election Denier To Run Michigan's Election

RIGHT-WING ORGANIZATIONS



# Everything You Need to Know

## What's Happening

The Michigan Republican Party has teamed up with a coalition of national and local Republican and right-wing groups to recruit paid election workers and credentialed volunteer poll challengers. These groups include an alarming combination of Big Lie conspiracy theorists, people who worked to overturn the 2020 election results, groups involved with the January 6 insurrection, and people who have celebrated political violence.

## Why It Matters

To a hammer, everything looks like a nail. To a conspiracy theorist who falsely believes fraud is rampant, everything looks like suspicious activity. As both paid election workers and credentialed volunteer poll challengers, these conspiracy theorists could cause serious harm to our elections and stand in the way of Michiganders' freedom to vote.



**"DISENFRANCHISING  
EVEN ONE VOTER  
IS TOO MANY."**

*Ingham County Clerk Barb Byrum*

"These workers and volunteers can easily disrupt the process by challenging everything they see," said Ingham County Clerk Barb Byrum. "Or by intentionally slowing down their work, or leaving the polling place or the absentee counting board when they aren't supposed to."

If the very people in charge of running polling locations add to spreading voting misinformation and disinformation, or are rude or outright aggressive towards voters, there are going to be voters who stay home or go home rather than cast a ballot. "Disenfranchising even one voter is too many," Byrum continued.

# What's Going On?

The Michigan Republican Party, in coordination with the Republican National Committee (RNC), has launched what they are claiming is a massive election “protection” effort in Michigan, working with a large coalition of national and local right-wing, conservative, and Republican groups to recruit poll challengers and election inspectors.<sup>1</sup> Their continued efforts to pass anti-voter laws both through the legislature and through the ballot initiative process are already sounding alarm bells and this effort is nothing but another aspect of their slow-motion insurrection.

It is not unusual for political parties to recruit election workers, but the Republican Party has a fraught history with policing the polls. In 1982, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) filed a lawsuit charging the RNC with violating the Voting Rights Act and civil rights laws by trying to suppress Black voters. A judge’s ruling severely limited the RNC from challenging voters at the polls or being involved in recruiting poll challengers. That ruling has lasted for three decades but at the close of 2017, a judge ruled it had come to an end.<sup>2</sup> The result? The RNC has now hired “election integrity directors” in over a dozen battleground states<sup>1</sup>, including Michigan.

The website hosting this recruitment effort in Michigan, paid for by the Michigan Republican Party, lists 31 different local and national groups as part of their “team” at the time of this report’s publication.<sup>3</sup> A simple look at each of these groups reveals that the MI GOP is working with groups who wholeheartedly believe in the Big Lie and are still determined to ignore the will of voters and overturn the 2020 election.

There are groups filled with, founded by, and run by well-known 2020 election conspiracy theorists; groups run by right-wing Trump acolytes turned activists and filled with people who have become radicalized and activated by the Big Lie; groups who continue to work to restrict voting rights across the country; groups involved in the January 6, 2021 rally that preceded the violent insurrection; groups run by individuals who actively worked at the highest levels to overturn the 2020 election results; and groups headed by individuals associated with white supremacists who have previously celebrated political violence.

This report is not intended as a deep dive into the workings of this coalition or a thorough investigation into any of the individual groups. Rather, this report is intended as an overview highlighting the type of groups and people the Michigan Republican Party has chosen to partner with in their so-called election “protection” efforts and a sounding of the alarm at the consequences of allowing individuals and groups driven by the Big Lie conspiracy theory to have any amount of power or influence over voters and our elections.

# What They're Recruiting For

At least in part because of the rampant threats and intimidation surrounding the 2020 election, there has been a mass exodus of election workers in Michigan and other battleground states, leaving plenty of openings that can be filled with conspiracy theorists incited by the Big Lie.<sup>4</sup> The MI GOP is recruiting for both paid election workers and credentialed volunteer positions.

## **Election Inspectors**

In Michigan, poll workers are called “election inspectors.” Election inspectors are paid election workers appointed by local boards of election commissioners and each polling location must have at least three election inspectors, including at least one inspector from each major political party, although most locations will have more.<sup>5</sup> The MI GOP is recruiting people to apply for these positions.

Election inspectors are responsible for managing polling locations, managing voting equipment, recording voters, issuing ballots, managing poll watchers and challengers, registering voters, issuing provisional ballots as necessary, and processing absentee ballots.<sup>6</sup>

## **Election or Poll Challengers**

This is a credentialed volunteer position called an “election challenger” or “poll challenger.” Challengers are appointed by political parties or other qualified interest groups to observe the election process. They can challenge<sup>7</sup> a person’s eligibility to vote, challenge the actions of election inspectors, stand behind the table where ballots are being processed, and look at the Pollbook and other election materials.

# THE TEAM

The 30 groups that make up the Michigan Republican Party’s recruitment team include local Michigan conservative and right-wing organizations and local Republican groups, as well as national Republican and right-wing organizations. This report will not list every single organization, but will highlight the most alarming examples of who the MI GOP has chosen to partner with.

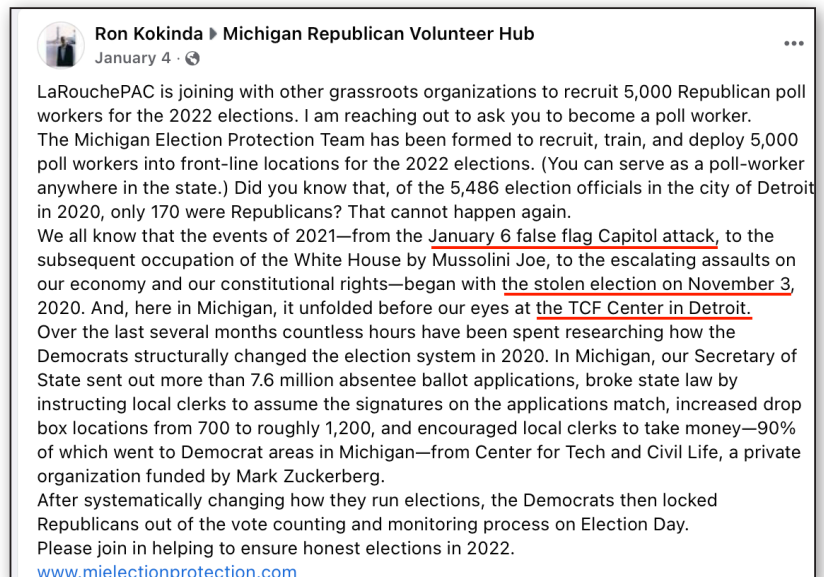
## National Conservative Groups

~~Conservative~~  
**CONSPIRACY**

**The LaRouche PAC** is a national, far-right conspiracy organization<sup>8</sup> named for Lyndon LaRouche, a known conspiracy theorist,<sup>9</sup> who ran for president eight times, including from a prison cell in 1992 after being convicted of tax and mail fraud. LaRouche has spread a variety<sup>10</sup> of both odd and harmful conspiracies including that the queen of England was involved in the international drug trade and the promotion of Holocaust denial. The group has pushed the Big Lie and hosted<sup>11</sup> Stop the Steal events.

When promoting the MI GOP election worker recruitment effort, one of their activists falsely claimed the 2020 election was stolen,<sup>1</sup> referencing the TCF Center in Detroit. That same activist claimed the January 6 insurrection was a “false flag” operation.

**Tea Party Patriots Action** is a national group mostly known for its opposition<sup>12</sup> to the Affordable Care Act and, more recently, spreading anti-mask coronavirus misinformation. But, like many conservative groups, they waded into Big Lie waters without pause. Tea Party Patriots Action is listed as a sponsor<sup>13</sup> for the “March to Save” event, better known as the rally preceding the January 6 insurrection. Their co-founder, Jenny Beth Martin, was scheduled to speak at a rally in DC on January 6,<sup>14</sup> although she did not end up doing so. She was, however, pictured alongside people later arrested<sup>14</sup> and indicted on criminal charges for being inside the Capitol. Martin has since continued to promote the Big Lie.<sup>14</sup>



# THE TEAM

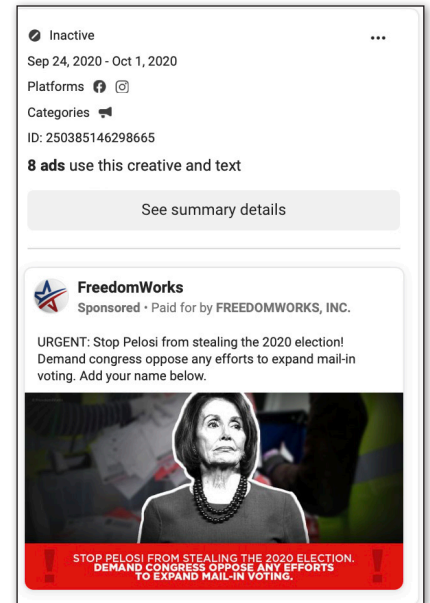
**Turning Point Action** is another national group behind the DC “March to Save” rally on January 6.<sup>15</sup> Turning Point Action is the election arm of Turning Point USA, a youth-focused right-wing nonprofit founded in 2012.<sup>16</sup> They have been vocal pushers of the Big Lie and brought buses of people to DC on January 6.<sup>16</sup> Their founder, Charlie Kirk, was the Arizona point person for the group “Stop the Steal,” founded by Ali Alexander, which is now being investigated by the January 6 House Committee.<sup>16</sup> Kirk also led a Stop the Steal rally in Phoenix shortly after the 2020 election took place.<sup>16</sup>

**Freedom Works** is a long-standing national conservative organization with nonprofit and PAC arms that has focused on grassroots organizing and is mentioned alongside big names such as the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), Heritage Action, and the State Policy Network.<sup>17</sup>

Freedom Works joined former President Trump and many other Republican and conservative groups in promoting the Big Lie before the 2020 election had even taken place by spreading false conspiracy theories around voting by mail.<sup>18</sup> After the election, they continued to not only push the Big Lie but also work with other conservative groups to push anti-voter measures across the country through efforts including providing state lawmakers with model bills and paying for Facebook ads.<sup>19</sup>

Freedom Works has bragged about their plans to launch a \$10 million state and federal effort to enact anti-voter laws.<sup>19</sup> In March of 2021 they launched an effort to rally U.S. Senate opposition to U.S. House efforts to protect voters such as the John Lewis Voting Rights Act, calling it the National Election Protection Initiative.

This Initiative is led by Cleta Mitchell, a Republican attorney who has voiced support for the wide range of anti-voter laws that have been introduced across the country including by Michigan Republican lawmakers.<sup>20</sup> Mitchell has defended Trump against allegations of violating federal election law since as early as 2011. She was forced to resign from her previous job at a law firm after it came out that she had “secretly aided” Trump’s efforts to overturn the 2020 election.<sup>21</sup> Mitchell was even a participant on the infamous call Trump made to the Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, where Trump pressured him to “find” enough additional votes to overturn Joe Biden’s win in Georgia.<sup>22</sup> Mitchell is also running the Conservative Partnership Institute’s “election integrity network,” hosting summits in battleground states to push for expanded poll watching programs and other measures that watchdog groups say could “curb voting rights to help Republican candidates.”<sup>23</sup>



# THE TEAM

## Local ~~Republican~~ Party Groups

**BIG LIE**

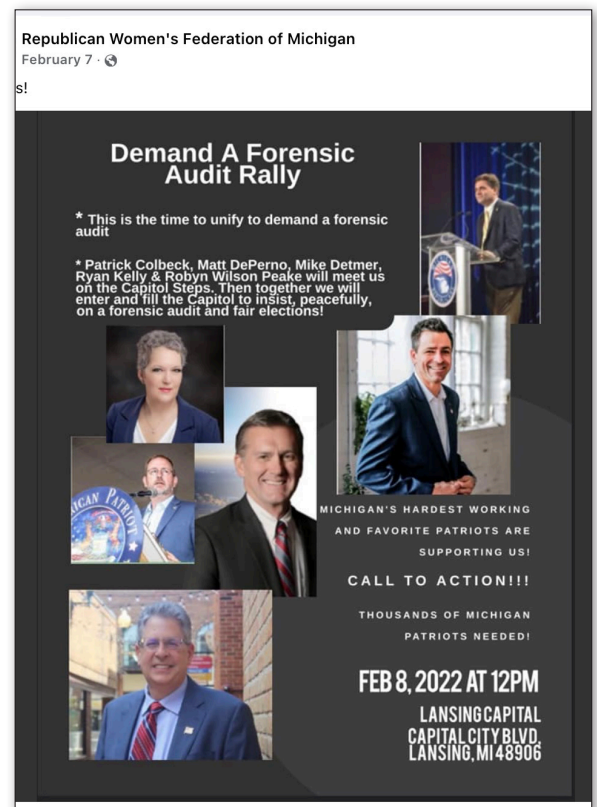
It's natural that the MI GOP would partner with local Republican groups in this effort, but many of the local groups listed as members of their team continue to push the Big Lie.

**The 14th Congressional District Republican Committee** participated in an effort to recruit 2020 poll watchers based on misinformation surrounding absentee voting,<sup>24</sup> called for a so-called forensic audit,<sup>25</sup> falsely claimed the 2020 election was rigged,<sup>26</sup> and falsely claimed Biden cheated.<sup>27</sup>

**The Republican Women's Federation of Michigan** has partnered with known Big Lie conspiracy theorists Patrick Colbeck and Matt DePerno to push for a so-called forensic audit of the 2020 election as recently as February 2022.<sup>28</sup> Londa Gatt, the group's 2nd vice chair, posted to social media using QAnon hashtags, told Facebook friends to send messages to Trump explaining he didn't incite them to help Trump's legal defense, told the Associated Press "we were cheated out of our legit president," and was questioned by the FBI about her participation in the January 6 insurrection.<sup>29</sup>

**The Oakland County Republican Party** has continued to push the false idea of election fraud and censured the state Senate Republicans behind the Senate Oversight Committee's 2020 election report.<sup>30</sup> They also recruited people to protest at the TCF Center in Detroit and are under investigation by the special congressional committee looking into January 6 and the efforts to overturn the 2020 election.<sup>31</sup>

**The Hillsdale County Republican Party** regularly shares posts on its Facebook page about the Big Lie, including regularly sharing content from Patrick Colbeck, known 2020 election conspiracy theorist. They organized buses<sup>32</sup> to the January 6 insurrection and later hosted a January 6 insurrection anniversary party.<sup>33</sup> Lance Lashaway, vice chairman of the county group, was investigated by the FBI for claiming he brought a gun to the U.S. Capitol on January 6.<sup>34</sup>



# THE TEAM

## Michigan Election Integrity Groups *CONSPIRACY*

The MI GOP's team includes several Michigan-based groups that claim to be about protecting the integrity of Michigan's elections, but are run by people who are focused on the Big Lie.

**MC4EI or Michigan Citizens for Election Integrity's** website is all about the false idea of 2020 election fraud.<sup>35</sup> Becky Behrends, their Vice President of Research has written about the Big Lie.<sup>36</sup> Phil O'Halloran, also Vice President of Research, has been on Sean Hannity's podcast to spread false information about elections.<sup>37</sup> He was a poll challenger at the TCF Center in Detroit and a plaintiff in one of Trump's failed election lawsuits in Michigan.<sup>38</sup>

**Pure Integrity for Michigan Elections** was formed after the 2020 election, which they refer to as a "fiasco" on their website.<sup>39</sup> One of their prominent spokespeople is Linda Lee Tarver, former vice chair of the Michigan Republican Party, who falsely said no election after the 2020 election would be fair if fraud wasn't addressed and falsely said fraud is more likely to happen in majority-Black districts.<sup>40</sup> She is also outspoken about how she refuses to move on from the 2020 election<sup>41</sup> and wants the election to be decertified.<sup>42</sup>





# THE TEAM

## Michigan Conservative Groups *CONSPIRACY*

Some organizations existed before the 2020 election but have been complicit in continuing to spread the Big Lie and joined forces with those that continue to work to overturn the will of Michigan voters. Others were formed in the wake of the pandemic as part of the conservative pushback against precautions to slow the spread of coronavirus but have readily taken up the Big Lie banner.

**Let's Fix Stuff** is a site is run by Patrick Colbeck, a former MI state senator who has made pushing the Big Lie his claim to fame and is considered a well-known conspiracy theorist.<sup>43</sup> His posts are often shared by local MI Republican and conservative groups on Facebook and he is a frequent presence at in-person events centered around pushing the conspiracy theory of election fraud. He also led a push to censor the MI Republican lawmakers who authored the Republican-led state Senate Oversight Committee's report on the 2020 election, which found no evidence of widespread fraud.<sup>43</sup>

Colbeck himself was named in the Committee's report as a person raising money by spreading false conspiracy theories and "knowingly sowing discord in our democracy."<sup>44</sup> The report noted that he pushed "demonstrably false" claims about the 2020 election "based on misleading information and illogical conclusions."<sup>45</sup> The Committee also recommended the MI attorney general investigate individuals raising money or gaining publicity through spreading misinformation, and Attorney General Dana Nessel, along with the Michigan State Police, agreed to open an investigation.

There is no doubt that Colbeck has gained notoriety for his continued spreading of election conspiracy theories. On his website, Colbeck collects donations, and he also operates a Give Send Go fundraiser for a so-called "legal defense fund" where he has raised nearly \$18,000.<sup>46</sup>

The image shows a screenshot of a GiveSendGo fundraiser page. The title is "Patrick Colbeck Legal Defense Fund" and it was created by Patrick Colbeck. The main heading is "MICHIGAN 'FIXING' THE VOTE". Below this is a line graph showing the progress of the fundraiser. A red line represents the goal, and a blue line represents the amount raised. A vertical line marks "NOV. 7th 6:31:42 am +54,199 vote injection". A red circle highlights the peak of the blue line. Below the graph, there is a yellow banner that says "BACKDATED BIDEN MAIL IN BALLOTS" and a blue banner that says "THE DIGITAL 'FIX'". On the right side, there is a progress indicator showing 70% completion, with a goal of USD \$25,000 and a raised amount of USD \$17,665. Below this are three buttons: "GIVE NOW" (217), "SHARE NOW" (49), and "PRAY NOW" (105). At the bottom, there is a "Recent Donations" section showing a donation of USD \$ 50. A small icon of a heart and a hand is visible in the bottom left corner.

# THE TEAM

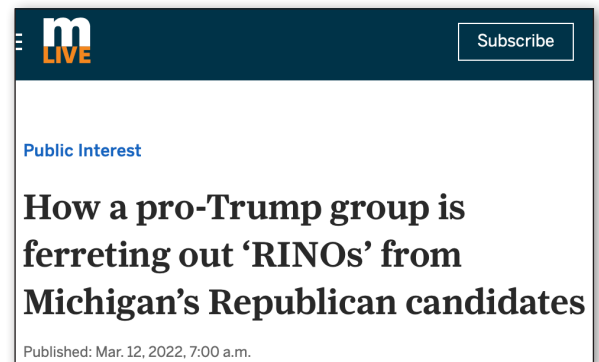
**The Michigan Conservative Coalition**, founded by Meshawn and Matt Maddock, operates two nonprofits, two state PACs, and also does work under the moniker Michigan Trump Republicans.<sup>47</sup> Both Meshawn Maddock and Marian Sheridan, the current MI GOP grassroots vice chair and co-founder of the Michigan Conservative Coalition, were among the 16 false Republican alternate electors who attempted to overturn the 2020 election.<sup>48</sup> The Michigan Conservative Coalition incensed protestors at the TCF Center, leading to the harassment of election workers in an attempt to disrupt the processing of ballots.<sup>31</sup> They also claimed January 6 was staged.<sup>49</sup>

**Patriot Approved** is a group who gives a “patriot” stamp of approval to right-wing candidates. The group was founded in April of 2021 by Curtis Clark, an Allegan County precinct delegate who signed onto censuring former MI GOP executive director Jason Roe for speaking out against the Big Lie.<sup>50</sup> They list Let’s Fix Stuff, Patrick Colbeck’s 2020 election conspiracy site, as an affiliate and the only candidates they have given a “patriot” stamp of approval to so far are Kristina Karamo, a known Big Lie conspiracy theorist running for Secretary of State, and Robert Regan.<sup>51</sup>

**Unite for Michigan** is a group not wholly focused on elections, but their leadership directory<sup>52</sup> contains multiple red flags: Patrick Colbeck, Cindi Holland from the Republican Women’s Federation of Michigan, and Janice Daniels from the Election Integrity Fund, which organized people to go door to door<sup>53</sup> in 2021 in an effort to find evidence of 2020 voter fraud.

**America First Michigan First**, formerly called the Mid-Michigan Conservative Coalition, is a right-wing grassroots organization that appears to be run by Debra A. Eil, a Republican grassroots activist. Eil has been a vocal supporter of Trump and was a Trump delegate at the 2016 Republican National Convention. She has also been a loud voice calling out any in the MI GOP who don’t subscribe to the Big Lie.

Eil led the grassroots push to oust<sup>50</sup> former MI GOP director Jason Roe, saying “some guy who believes that it’s Trump’s fault we lost the election and it wasn’t stolen” cannot be the future of the MI GOP. Her email blast to MI GOP precinct delegates requesting they sign on to her letter censuring Roe said, “those who publicly spoke out against election fraud by the Democrats and blaming our Republican president for the loss are TRAITORS to our Party and have no place within our leadership.”



# THE TEAM

The group seems to use the Big Lie as a litmus test for whether or not to support Republican candidates, supporting DePerno over Leonard for the Republican attorney general candidate because Leonard does not support the Big Lie and DePerno said he will prosecute “people who corrupted the 2020 election.”<sup>54</sup> They also promote events by known 2020 election conspiracy theorist Patrick Colbeck, centered around the idea of election “security.”<sup>55</sup>



Recently, the group, which has over 10,000 followers on Facebook, made headlines for sending around a questionnaire to GOP candidates asking their views on the Big Lie, prosecuting election officials for unspecified “violations,” replacing legislators who don’t cater to the Big Lie, January 6, and RINOs (an insult meaning Republican In Name Only), among other traditional Republican issues.<sup>56</sup>

When promoting the MI GOP’s election recruitment effort, the group called for building “an army of election inspectors.”<sup>57</sup>

**West Michigan Action Conservatives** is another local right-wing group involved in this effort that is entrenched in the Big Lie. The language on their website designed to recruit election workers asks people to “answer the call to serve and defend” and be the “frontline defense” against supposed election fraud.<sup>58</sup> They lean into misleading statistics and outright election conspiracy theories, wanting people to monitor drop-boxes to prevent “illegal ballot harvesting,” another favorite false mail-in-ballot boogeyman of the Right.

**Citizens Liberating Michigan** is an anti-mask, anti-lockdown group that endorses Kristina Karamo,<sup>59</sup> a known Big Lie conspiracy theorist, and has signed a petition backing a so-called forensic audit.<sup>60</sup> At one of their anti-mask events, a reporter was attacked for attempting to report on the event.<sup>61</sup>

**Stand Up Michigan** is a group primarily known for their anti-coronavirus precaution protests, but they have also spoken out about the 2020 election. They called for people to show up at the TCF Center in Detroit,<sup>62</sup> falsely claiming “shenanigans”<sup>63</sup> were happening. While Garrett Soldano, now running for governor, is the most well-known founder of the group, one of the group’s co-founders, Kevin Skinner, deserves a note. He spoke at a rally in November of 2020, claiming “tyranny is knocking on our door” and claiming Trump wanted veterans and retired police officers to volunteer to keep the election results from being certified.<sup>64</sup>

# THE TEAM

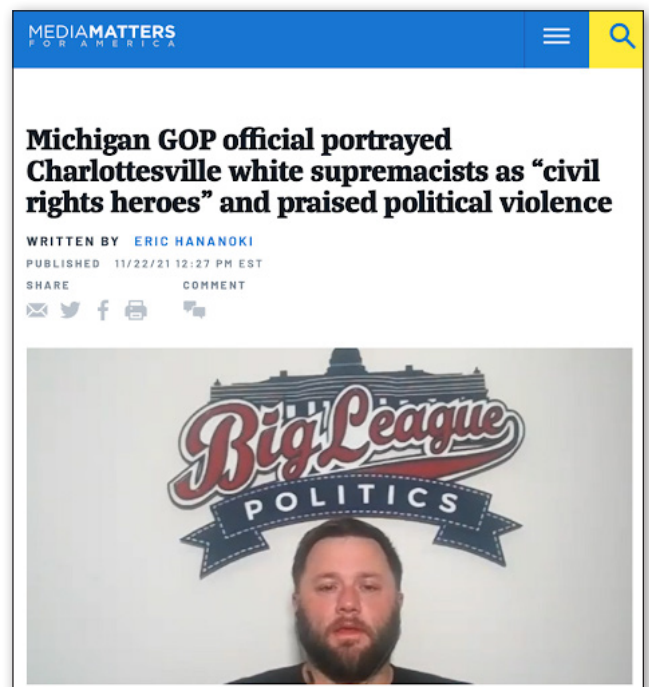
**The Coalition to Rescue Michigan**, founded less than a year ago in late 2021, and also called Rescue Michigan Coalition, has regularly pushed “false claims of election fraud” and advocates for anti-voter laws.<sup>65</sup> The organization’s leaders, President Adam de Angeli and Operations Officer Shane Trejo, appear to have a pre-existing relationship centered around pushing election-related conspiracy theories.

De Angeli, formerly the legislative director for Representative John Reilly, claims in his profile<sup>66</sup> on the group’s website that he was the source for the misleading viral #DetroitLeaks video and series of audio recordings of poll worker trainings in Detroit that falsely claimed workers were being taught how to steal the 2020 election.<sup>67</sup> Those audio recordings were centered in a series of stories written by Trejo for Big League Politics, a far-right website known for promoting propaganda and conspiracies.<sup>68</sup> Attorney General Dana Nessel sent Big League Politics a cease and desist for Trejo’s misleading and false stories in the weeks leading up to the election.

Trejo, also the Chairman of the 11th Congressional District Republican Committee, previously hosted a racist podcast called Blood Soil and Liberty with a member of the white supremacist group Identity Evropa.<sup>69</sup> “Blood and soil” is a well-known Nazi slogan. In his work, Trejo has regularly “celebrated white supremacists and their use of political violence.”<sup>70</sup>

Trejo wrote an August 2017 piece praising the organizers of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA and directed people to sign up for the event.<sup>70</sup> The next day, at the event, a white supremacist killed activist Heather Heyer with his car. In April of 2017, Trejo wrote a piece praising a violent antisemite and white supremacist known as “Based Stickman” who became a right-wing meme after beating a counter-protestor over the head with a rod during a Trump rally in California.<sup>70</sup>

“By inflicting righteous violence onto the skull of a lowly communist,” Trejo wrote, “Stickman emboldened many others to stand with him as well.”



## Conclusion

The Michigan Republican Party continues to pretend they have accepted the reality of President Joe Biden's 2020 win—when forced to do so by the press—while doing everything and anything to signal to their Big-Lie-believing base that they also believe the conspiracy theory. They continue to allow Big Lie conspiracy theorists to occupy positions of power and leadership within their party and use allusions to the Big Lie to incite their base and as justification for restricting voting rights.

The Michigan Republican Party's willingness to cater to Trump's Big Lie is affecting Michigan's elections at every level. We now have Big Lie believers as the Republican candidates for both attorney general and secretary of state, the chief election official in Michigan.<sup>71</sup> The MI GOP has worked to replace election officials on local canvassing boards, which are responsible for certifying election results, in some cases with people who worked to overturn the 2020 election.<sup>72</sup> They have run or are running for local clerkships, where they will be in charge of their local elections and can take actions such as hiding election equipment.<sup>73</sup> They have attempted to pass bills that would dangerously expand the rights of poll challengers and watchers that would "burden election administrators, cause delays for voters at polling locations, [and] open the door to voter intimidation" according to election officials and voting rights advocates.<sup>74</sup>

And now they have joined with extremist groups fueled by conspiracy theories to recruit poll workers.

While there are checks and balances in place to prevent potentially disruptive people with obvious bad intentions from becoming poll workers, it's inevitable that some will get those positions. And recruiting primarily from groups of conspiracy theorists with bad intentions certainly increases the likelihood that Michigan will end up with many problematic poll workers.

The language these groups use is also a cause for concern, especially when viewed in present context. It is not uncommon to use war-like language in political campaigns—slogans like "Join the Fight!" are common calls to action—but the rhetoric these groups have been using to recruit election inspectors and poll challengers is alarming when viewed alongside a violent attempt to stop the peaceful transfer of presidential power and an alleged plot to kidnap and potentially execute our governor.

America First Michigan First called for building an “army of election inspectors.”<sup>57</sup> West Michigan Action Conservatives asked their followers to “answer the call to serve and defend” and be the “frontline defense.”<sup>58</sup> The co-founder of Stand Up Michigan claimed Trump wanted former members of the military and police officers to keep the 2020 election results from being certified.<sup>64</sup> And Shane Trejo, a leader of the Coalition to Rescue Michigan, has previously praised a white supremacist for physically assaulting a protestor, saying he inflicted “righteous violence” and “emboldened many others to stand with him.”<sup>70</sup> All of this alongside a GOP candidate for office encouraging people to bring guns to the polls.<sup>75</sup>

The January 6 insurrection is proof that the Big Lie is a conspiracy theory that can and does drive people not only to action, but to violence. Considering all this, it does not seem alarmist or far-fetched to say that the Michigan Republican Party’s continued catering to the Big Lie and its believers, and their willingness to work with conspiracy theorists to further their pursuit of power, could lead to disruption at polling places, and harassment and intimidation of Michiganders simply trying to exercise their freedom to vote.

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