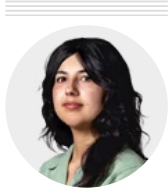


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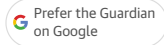
# How a Florida-based election skeptic came to run elections in California

## Clint Curtis, who once claimed to build vote-flipping software, will now lead elections in a conservative county



Dani Anguiano in Redding

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A Shasta county clerk of the board meeting. Photograph: Shasta County Clerk of the Board

Clint Curtis is a familiar face among election skeptics in the United States. The Florida-based lawyer and former computer programmer has said he once developed a software that could change votes. He opposes the use of voting machines and highlights his connection to proponents of election conspiracy theories, including Mike Lindell and Steve Bannon.

Soon he is slated to start overseeing elections in Shasta county, California, a conservative region of 180,000 people in the state's far north where Republicans vastly outnumber Democrats.

After holding public interviews, the governing body in Shasta voted late last month to appoint the out-of-state candidate - who has never before overseen an elections office - to serve as the county clerk and registrar of voters.

"I think now is the time to do things differently and lead in a different way," said Kevin Crye, the chair of Shasta's board of supervisors, and one of three supervisors who supported Curtis for the role. He said that Curtis could "right" what he believes is wrong with elections.

The move was not unexpected in a county that has emerged as a center of the US election denialism movement, which maintains that Donald Trump won the 2020 presidential election. But the decision to appoint Curtis over more experienced candidates, such as Joanna Francescut, the assistant elections clerk and registrar of voters who has worked in the office for more than 16 years, shows the deep foothold election fears and conspiracy theories have in the county.

Shasta county has faced years of political turmoil with the rise of a far-right faction in county government, and decisions around elections and voting have been particularly contentious.

The region's elections office reported increased harassment and aggressive behavior toward workers in past years. Cathy Darling Allen, the longtime elections clerk who retired last year, reported being frequently maligned by ultra-conservative elected officials and residents convinced of widespread voter fraud.



▶ [Lanson Zaniroli, four, watches his father Lance Zaniroli vote on 4 November 2014, in Shasta county, California. Photograph: Andreas Fuhrmann/AP](#)

In 2023, the county’s board of supervisors cut ties with Dominion Voting Systems, the voting machine company at the center of baseless conspiracy theories about election fraud, and [ordered the creation of a system](#) using a hand-count in an effort to “restore trust”.

Patrick Jones, a far-right supervisor who promoted the plan, [argued that year](#) that “Elections have been manipulated at the county level for decades” and that Shasta’s efforts could put a stop to the supposed interference. Amid national outcry, state lawmakers intervened, passing a bill preventing counties from using costly and error-prone manual tallies in most elections.

But the residents who believe conspiracy theories about voter fraud and stolen elections and the supervisors who have expressed skepticism in the process, have not given up on their efforts to transform voting in the region. While Shasta is a small county with political aims at odds with those of the Democratic state, what happens here has provided a framework for election deniers on how to advance their agenda across the US and reverberated nationally.

When the county was considering [ousting](#) Crye, one of its most conservative officials, national figures including Rand Paul and Trump ally Kari Lake urged residents to vote no on the recall.

**L**ast year when Allen announced her retirement after 20 years due to medical issues, the Shasta county board of supervisors held public interviews to replace her. Curtis and Francescut both applied then. Francescut, who oversaw the office of the county clerk and registrar of voters for months after Allen went on leave, had the endorsement of elections officials and prominent area Republicans.

The board opted then to appoint Tom Toller, a former prosecutor who had never worked in elections. He [vowed to change](#) the office culture, improve public confidence, and suggested he would be willing to push back against the California secretary of state’s office. In the end Toller was a vocal supporter of the office, and said he never saw evidence of fraud. He rejected suggestions from a local voting commission to take action that he said wouldn’t comply with state law.

Toller announced plans to resign in March due to medical reasons and endorsed Francescut for the job.

When the board of supervisors again held public interviews in April, both Francescut and Curtis applied for the job. Residents who have frequently spoken publicly about their concerns about vote tampering and stolen elections, expressed support for Curtis. But others urged the board to hire Francescut.



People arrive to cast their ballots at the Shasta county clerk and registrar of voters offices on 23 February 2024 in Redding in northern California's Shasta county. Photograph: Frederic J Brown/AFP/Getty Images

“Appointing her would not only be the logical choice but also a step toward ending the chaos and division that has plagued our elections for the past three years,” one speaker said.

“Without a doubt appointing a self-proclaimed election expert with no ties to our community, no elections experience and a history of promoting unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud would be a grave disservice to the voters of our county.”

Francescut highlighted her 16 years of experience in elections and history of working with the board of supervisors.

“I have a great technical knowledge,” she told the board. “The work of election administration requires a diverse skill set, including the ability to tabulate ballots as well as marketing and educating voters.”

Curtis has been known in election integrity circles since claiming that he developed a software to hack voting machines in 2000 at the request of the Florida state lawmaker Tom Feeney. He was reportedly interviewed by the FBI and spoke to Congress about his claims. Feeney, who Curtis ran against for a congressional seat, as well as his employer, denied those allegations.

Curtis, who previously ran for Congress as a Democrat, told the board of supervisors he felt compelled to “fix” elections because of the software he claimed to develop. “I broke it so I better fix it,” he said.

He said had a plan to secure elections in Shasta county by installing cameras and filming every step of the process so its integrity can be verified.

He also mentioned his appearances on the shows of Steve Bannon, Michael Flynn and Mike Lindell and said he had worked in elections law for years, citing consulting work with governments in Germany and the Netherlands about hand-counting (although he declined to provide contact information for people who could verify such work or other clients to the local outlet A News Cafe.) That same outlet reported that he appeared to have lied on his application for the role. Curtis also said he had worked on the Kamala Harris ballot audit when she ran for attorney general in California.

Curtis told the board he preferred hand-counting but would follow state law, and that running elections was a “pretty straightforward process”.

“We can secure our elections without having to have that hand count so everyone can still see everything,” he said.

Supervisor Matt Plummer opposed Curtis’s appointment, arguing his ideas had a “track record” of failure and pointing to widespread community support for Francescut. “The voters of Shasta county want Joanna in this role,” he said.

Supervisor Chris Kelstrom, however, said his appointment could “change voting not only in Shasta county but possibly the whole state and possibly the whole nation”

In response to a query from the Guardian, Curtis emphasized that he had worked with people of different political beliefs.

“I do not judge people by their political beliefs and feel that we must be willing to treat everyone with respect. Failing to do so just keeps us at each other throats and we accomplish nothing,” he said in an email.

The news of his appointment was met with dismay by Francescut’s supporters, including Morgan Akin, who has volunteered as a poll worker in the county alongside his wife for several years. He said he wasn’t sure if he would continue to volunteer. “She has 16 years of service there and they hired a guy who has no experience in elections.”

Soon after the decision, Francescut announced her intention to run for the office in 2026.

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