



Stephen Richer unseats Maricopa County Recorder Adrian Fontes for key election post

November 12, 2020

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Maricopa County voters elected Republican Stephen Richer, a private attorney with a background in public policy, as the county's new recorder to help oversee county elections.

Richer defeated current Democratic Recorder Adrian Fontes in the Nov. 3 election.

"I will get to work and do you proud," Richer said to voters on Thursday, adding that he hopes to "improve confidence in the voting process and serve all of Maricopa County's 4.5 million residents."

With Richer stepping into his role on Jan. 1, a Republican will be back in charge of the county's elections after Fontes, in 2016, became the first Democrat to lead the office in decades.

Fontes' tenure was brief, but consequential. He propelled massive changes to the way the county votes, such as eliminating the use of assigned polling places in favor of vote centers where anyone can cast a ballot, and expanding early voting options.

Fontes' decisions spurred some errors, legal challenges and criticism that he disregarded the spirit of the law in favor of partisan priorities.

Richer told voters during his campaign that he would take the politics and controversy out of the office.

Fontes concedes as final votes come in

Fontes conceded on Thursday, although the county still had about 6,700 votes to count as of Wednesday night. Richer currently leads Fontes by 4,652 votes, out of more than 2 million.

Fontes initially held a wide lead over Richer, but that changed as more results came in. Richer took the lead on Saturday.

Fontes received praise from many on social media for graciously conceding the race. He'd posted on Twitter: "I've called @Richer4Recorder to congratulate him, and will be welcoming Maricopa's 30th Recorder with a personal tour of our facilities next week. #ProtectDemocracy."

Fontes said he knew the race would be tight, but it was unfortunate the way the results turned out. He said he was proud of his campaign team, and of his staff that ran the election.

"I don't want my personal political defeat to overshadow the amazing success we have achieved at the recorder's office and elections office," he said.

Steven Slugocki, Maricopa County Democratic Party chairman, said Thursday that Fontes' departure is a "tremendous loss," to the county.

"(Voters) didn't know the incredible improvements that Adrian has made to the system that have completely changed voting in the county," he said.

Fontes changed how Maricopa County votes

Along with helping the county's Board of Supervisors run elections, the Recorder's Office records, tracks and provides public access to documents such as deeds and property maps.

Fontes defeated longtime Republican recorder Helen Purcell in 2016 on a promise to restore voter trust after a botched 2016 presidential preference election in which voters had to wait hours to vote at their polling places.

He has mostly accomplished his goals of simplifying the voting process and eradicating long wait times.

Under his leadership, the county improved voter access by updating its technology so that voters' registration and information are reflected live when they got to a polling place, improved election security, made ballot tabulation more transparent, and made the switch to vote centers.

His experiments led to some technical glitches and long lines in 2018's primary election, and have caused strife between him and Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich and the county Board of Supervisors — so much so that the Republican-controlled board recently took back control over Election Day voting, leaving Fontes to manage voter registration and early voting.

This year, Fontes and the board had to make quick decisions about how to protect the health of voters and poll workers as COVID-19 spread in the county.

For the general election, officials quickly secured new polling places that could accommodate social distancing. Overall, there were no widespread issues with voting access or technology.

Voters for the first time ever in the county could go to vote centers to vote in person starting about a month before Election Day, and the county added more ballot drop-off options. All of this combined meant a record amount of early voting that helped ease lines on Election Day.

A few of the changes that Fontes made leading up to this election were challenged in court.

An Arizona Supreme Court judge ruled in September that Fontes' instructions on how voters should cross out mistakes on their ballot were illegal, and the judge ordered him to fix the instructions before the November election.

Fontes won another court battle that challenged his office's use of virtual voting during the COVID-19 pandemic for voters with mobility issues or severe illness.

Richer to follow Fontes' lead

Richer led a fierce campaign in which he consistently broadcast what he saw as Fontes' failures.

Richer has said Fontes' changes have been illegal and unsuccessful. He says Fontes is uncivil and too partisan to run an office that plays such a vital role in protecting democracy.

But, after Fontes called him to concede on Thursday morning, Richer changed his tone.

He thanked Fontes, and said that he appreciated how hard Fontes has worked during his time in office.

He said that he will partially lean on him, along with the county's election workers and former recorder Helen Purcell, to make the transition into his new role.

"I'm going in it with a large amount of humility," he said.

Who is Stephen Richer?

Richer plans to resign from his job as a lawyer for Lewis Roca Rothgerber Christie in downtown Phoenix so he can focus on learning the recorder role.

He previously worked in business management and public policy, including for think tanks such as American Enterprise Institute and the Cato Institute.

He's participated on the boards of the Arizona Humanities, the Arizona Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Federalist Society's Phoenix Lawyers Chapter.

Richer said he has helped out on some political campaigns in Arizona and elsewhere but this was his first run for office.

How will Richer change elections?

He has said he stands for "fair and competent elections," and wants voters to "have confidence in the voting process."

One way he would take the politics out of his position, he said before he was elected, would be to create an oversight board, staffed with people from all political parties. He also said he would develop strong relationships with the Board of Supervisors and Secretary of State Katie Hobbs.

Richer said that he would make public documents more accessible, including by posting every records request and its results online.

Slugocki said he is worried what Richer's win might mean for the county's elections. He said hopefully he does not try to limit voting access.

Richers said his main goal would be to "stay away from controversy."

"As much as I enjoy following the news I hope I'm not a regular subject of reporting," he said.