

## Divided Fresno County GOP battles over local party's role

By John  
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Sanger Republican JD Bennett working the phone banks.

MARK CROSSE/THE FRESNO BEE

The Republican Party is not a monolithic organization in which all members think alike. And so it goes with the leadership of Fresno County's Republican Party.

On Monday night, there was a transfer of power that could possibly be called democracy in action, or maybe a hostile takeover. Whatever the case, the turnover was wholesale, and there's plenty of bitter feelings.

"It was very contentious," said Sanger Republican JD Bennett, who supported the insurgents who took over the Fresno County GOP's executive committee. "I would actually use the adjective extremely contentious."

Out as chair of Fresno County's Republican Party is Clovis resident Kurtis Willey, who has held the post for the past 18 months. In is Fred Vanderhoof, who is now on his third stint as county chair. Also out among the county GOP's executive committee are other Willey allies, replaced by a slate backing Vanderhoof, a Fresno resident.

Vanderhoof is diplomatic about the turnover, saying he decided to jump back into local Republican politics after the party's strong national showing in the November election.

"The people of the nation want change," he said. "I think that's what this election was about. Large government is choking the spirit of the American people."

But others are eager to talk about the divisiveness among rank-and-file party leadership. In a nutshell, it boils down to the role of the county party.

Does it exist as an organization focused on raising money, manning phone banks and walking precincts, following the marching orders of the candidates seeking office? Or should it be more outspoken and activist, eschewing money and support from more moderate members of the party, and possibly even shunning candidates seeking to win election who are not true to the party's platform?

Willey and his fellow members, who decided not even stand for reelection Monday, think it should be the former. Bennett and others the latter.

To outsiders, this battle may appear surreal. After all, the Fresno County GOP last year endorsed renegade conservative Republican Tim Donnelly for governor over moderate establishment candidate Neel Kashkari — and that was with Willey leading the way. Obviously, people define conservative differently.

Bennett — who isn't currently a central committee member but is seeking to be put on it — said the Fresno GOP had become beholden to Tulare Republican Rep. Devin Nunes, calling it "Devin's cartel." Nunes is widely considered a solid conservative, but to Bennett and others, he is a "progressive" — a bad word in Republican circles — who has strayed from his conservative roots.

"If it's a crime to want to raise money, register voters and win elections, than I am guilty," said Johnny Amaral, Nunes' chief of staff. "A functioning, effective, efficient (county central committee) checks their issues at the door and works to build the party, and lets the candidates and incumbents carry the banner."

Under the new leadership — many of whom aren't first-timers on the committee and are what Willey called "recycled leadership" — there are some signs the Fresno County GOP could instead head in the opposite direction.

Some of the local party's very conservative members didn't like that the Fresno County GOP under Willey accepted money from party mega-donor Charles Munger Jr. of Santa Clara County. To the new leadership, Munger represents a wing of the party that is seeking moderate candidates who might have wider appeal to the general public, but who are not true to the state Republican Party's platform.

Bennett said Willey and other central committee leadership "forced you to accept things you don't want to accept. Like the Munger money. Once you do, you are indebted to them."

The local party should shun money from people like Munger, Bennett said, and instead raise money on its own.

Willey — who thinks the new leadership will likely scare off lots of monied donors with that thinking — said the Munger money was funneled through the state Republican Party and has major strings attached, really only allowing it to be spent on administrative costs. The money can't be used for voter registration or to support candidates.

One thing Willey doesn't quibble with is the crux of the GOP central committee battle.

"They plan to take over the party because people aren't conservative enough," he said.

Willey points to a recent message from Randall Jordan, chair of the Tea Party California Caucus, which says the organization needs to "create a slate of consistent conservatives for county central committee office. In several counties, establishment Republicans control the committees only because conservatives will not run for an office in their county."

In the same message, Jordan wonders if the new Republican majorities in Congress will "provide total gridlock or show that the GOP would rather make deals than govern by constitutional principles."

Willey thinks this is a misguided strategy that will damage the Republican Party in the long run.

He's not alone. In fact, contrary to what Bennett and some others say about Nunes, others say they'd like to see his political team, with its focus solely on raising money and getting candidates elected, more involved in Fresno County's Republican Party.

The party registered 3,000 new Republicans while Willey was chair, with the effort driven exclusively by local money contributions. That is the kind of work a county party should do, he said. The rank-and-file are "assistants" to elected GOP officials and candidates, and should be working to help them hold office as well as grow party membership.

Instead, he said those now in power wanted to head off on tangents like trying to censure Fresno County Supervisor Debbie Poochigian and Assembly Member Jim Patterson for not endorsing Kerman Republican Gary Yep in the Fresno County District 1 supervisor race to replace retiring Phil Larson.

The seat is non-partisan, but Patterson and Poochigian endorsed Brian Pacheco, the ultimate winning candidate. Pacheco is a Democrat who once worked for Fresno Democrat Jim Costa — now a congressman — when he was in the state Legislature.

"That hurts the party," Willey said. "And for no other reason than they didn't meet a litmus test set by a handful of people. It is counterproductive to what we are trying to do as a party."

For his part, Vanderhoof is more tactful in his view of the local party.

He said the new leadership gives the local party the "opportunity to get out and make some changes," and he sees those changes as ones that "helped us win across the nation" last year. Yes, he said, the local rank-and-file Republican Party should support elected Republican officials, but he said the local party also should "support and be a voice for the GOP voters in Fresno. We are a go-between."

That means, Vanderhoof said, that the local party will communicate the voice of grassroots voters to the elected officials — as well as the other way around.

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