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SUPERIOR COURT OF ARIZONA
MARICOPA COUNTY

CV2020014553 12/21/2020

HONORABLE JOHN R. HANNAH JR

CLERK OF THE COURT
A. Walker
Deputy

ARIZONA REPUBLICAN PARTY

JOHN DOUGLAS WILENCHIK

v.

ADRIAN FONTES, ET AL.

JOSEPH EUGENE LA RUE
EMILY M CRAIGER
JOSEPH I VIGIL
THOMAS PURCELL LIDDY
SARAH R GONSKI
DANIEL A ARELLANO
ROOPALI HARDIN DESAI
KRISTIN ARREDONDO

COURT ADMIN-CIVIL-ARB DESK
DOCKET-CIVIL-CCC

RULING

Arizona law requires election authorities to validate electronic vote counts by manually recounting random batches of ballots. For this process, called the "hand count audit," election officials enlist representatives of Arizona's political parties to sample and count the ballots. Following the 2020 general election, Republican, Democratic and Libertarian Party appointees hand-counted 2917 ballots cast on voting machines at polling places in Maricopa County, and 5000 additional early (mail-in) ballots. *The hand counts verified that the machines had counted the votes flawlessly.* Maricopa County, Arizona General Election - November 3, 2020 Hand Count/Audit Report ("Audit Report"), *available at* https://azsos.gov/election/2020-general-election-hand-count-results (last visited December 9, 2020).

In this lawsuit, the plaintiff Arizona Republican Party asked for a court order directing the defendant Maricopa County officials to redo the hand count audit using different batches of ballots. The plaintiff baldly asserted that this relief was necessary to maintain "confidence in the integrity of our elections," without alleging any facts to show that the machines might have miscounted the votes. The plaintiff could not explain why the suit had not been filed before the election, or what purpose another audit would serve.

This order explains why the Arizona Republican Party's case was meritless, and the dismissal order filed November 19, 2020 was required, under applicable Arizona law. What remains is intervenor Arizona Secretary of State's application for an award of attorneys' fees. That application will require the Court to decide whether the Republican Party and its attorneys brought the case in bad faith to delay certification of the election or to cast false shadows on the election's legitimacy. *See* Arizona Revised Statutes § 12-349(A) (court "shall" assess fees and costs against a party or attorney when the party's claim is brought "without substantial justification" or "solely or primarily for delay").

ELECTION LAW BACKGROUND; AND THE ISSUE IN THIS CASE

Section 16-602 of the Arizona Revised Statutes requires a hand count audit of any election in which the votes are cast or counted on "an electronic voting machine or tabulator." A.R.S. § 16-602(A). The hand count audit verifies that the machines are working properly and accurately counting votes by hand counting some ballots and comparing the result to the machine count of those same ballots. The statute calls for the ballots cast on the voting machines at the polling places to be audited separately from the early (mail-in) ballots. *Compare* A.R.S. § 16-602(B)(1) *with* A.R.S. § 16-602(F). The election results do not become "official" until the hand count audits confirm the accuracy of the machine counts. A.R.S. § 16-602(C).

Subsection (B) of section 16-1602 sets out hand count audit procedures for ballots cast on voting machines at polling places. The process starts before the election, when the county officer in charge of elections tells the county political party chairs[1] how many of the parties' designees will be needed to perform the hand count. A.R.S. § 16-602(B)(7). At least a week before the election, the party chairs name the individuals who will physically count the ballots. *Id.* After the election, when the polls have closed and the unofficial vote totals have been made public, the party chairs take turns randomly choosing a limited number of specific polling places for audit. A.R.S. § 16-602(B)(1). The party chairs also choose the specific races that will be audited, A.R.S. § 16-602(B)(6), except that the presidential race is always audited. A.R.S. § 16-602(B)(5).

[1] The county political parties are effectively subgroups of the recognized state political parties under Arizona law. *See* A.R.S. section 16-825 (state committee of each party consists of county party chairs and one member of each county committee for every three elected at the county level).

The hand count must begin within twenty-four hours after the polls have closed. A.R.S. § 16-602(I). If the limited hand count produces evidence that the machine count might be inaccurate in some way, the hand recount expands in stages. A.R.S. § 16-602(C).[2] But when the limited hand count matches the machine count for a given race, "the results of the electronic tabulation constitute the official count for that race." *Id.* In all events, the hand count audit must be completed before the canvassing of the county election results. A.R.S. § 16-602(I). The responsible county officials must report the results of the audit to the secretary of state, who in turn must make the results publicly available on the secretary of state's website. *Id.*

The provision of section 16-602 at issue in this case, concerning the selection of polling places for audit, reflects the longstanding Arizona practice of organizing elections around political precincts. When the election is organized by precinct, the county board of supervisors establishes "a convenient number" of precincts before each election, and then designates one polling place in each precinct for the voters who resided in that precinct. *See* A.R.S. § 16-411(B). Consistent with that model, the statute refers to sampling of "precincts."[3]

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[2] The hand recount can extend to an entire county or jurisdiction, if necessary. A.R.S. § 16-602(D). Under some circumstances it can be treated as the official count. A.R.S. § 16-602(E). When the hand recount expands to cover an entire jurisdiction, the secretary of state must make available to the superior court "the escrowed source code for that county," and the judge then must appoint an independent expert with software engineering expertise to review the software and "issue a public report to the court and to the secretary of state regarding the special master's findings on the reasons for the discrepancies." A.R.S. § 16-602(J).

[3] The text of the statute says, in pertinent part:

> B. For each countywide primary, special, general and presidential preference election, the county officer in charge of the election shall conduct a hand count at one or more secure facilities. The hand count shall be conducted as prescribed by this section and in accordance with hand count procedures established by the secretary of state in the official instructions and procedures manual adopted pursuant to § 16-452. . . . The hand count shall be conducted in the following order:
>
> > 1. At least two per cent of the precincts in that county, or two precincts, whichever is greater, shall be selected at random from a pool consisting of every precinct in that county. The county political party chairman for each political party that is entitled to continued representation on the state ballot or the chairman's designee shall conduct the selection of the precincts to be hand counted. The precincts shall be selected by lot without the use of a computer, and the order of selection by the county political party chairmen shall also be by lot.

In 2011, the Legislature authorized Arizona counties to establish "voting centers" as polling places in place of the traditional precinct locations. 2011 Ariz. Legis. Serv. Ch. 331 (H.B. 2303) (West) section 3, *codified at* A.R.S. § 16-411(B)(4). At a voting center, any voter in the county can receive an appropriate ballot and lawfully cast the ballot on Election Day. *Id.* But the Legislature chose not to amend section 16-602 to specify hand count audit procedures for voting center elections. In fact, section 16-602 does not refer to voting centers at all.

Instead the Legislature delegated to the secretary of state the authority to make rules for hand count audits, including audits of elections conducted at voting centers. It did so by amending a sentence in section 16-602(B) that had read, "[t]he hand count shall be conducted as prescribed by this section." The sentence as amended in 2011 says, "[t]he hand count shall be conducted as prescribed by this section *and in accordance with hand count procedures established by the secretary of state in the official instructions and procedures manual adopted pursuant to § 16-452."* 2011 Ariz. Legis. Serv. Ch. 331 (H.B. 2303) (West) section 8, *codified at* A.R.S. § 16-602(B) (emphasis added).

The "official instructions and procedures manual adopted pursuant to § 16-452" is known as the Elections Procedures Manual. Arizona Secretary of State, State of Arizona Elections Procedures Manual (December 2019) ("Election Procedures Manual"), *available at* https://azsos.gov/about-office/media-center/documents (last visited November 25, 2020). The Elections Procedures Manual comprehensively lays out process and procedure details for Arizona elections. A new edition issues not later than December 31 of each odd-numbered year immediately preceding the general election. A.R.S. § 16-452(B). Each new edition must be formally approved by both the Governor and the Attorney General. *Id.* The current edition, issued at the end of 2019, received the endorsement of both Governor Ducey and Attorney General Brnovich.

Under the authority of section 16-602(B), the Election Procedures Manual gives detailed instructions to the county officials who conduct hand count audits. Election Procedures Manual at 213-234. The rule on sampling polling places for voting center election audits is straightforward and simple. "Each vote center shall be considered to be a precinct/polling location during the selection process and the officer in charge of elections must conduct a hand count of regular ballots from at least 2% of the vote centers, or two vote centers, whichever is greater." Election Procedures Manual at 216. Consistent with that directive, Maricopa County's 2020 general election hand count audit focused on a random sample of the voting centers that served as polling places.

The plaintiff here claimed that the Maricopa County hand count did not comply with section 16-602, because the statute refers to selection of "precincts" for audit and says nothing about voting centers. The plaintiff asked the Court to order Maricopa County election officials to identify all of the ballots cast at the voting centers by residents of randomly sampled precincts, and to hand count those ballots to see whether the count matched the electronic vote count.

RELEVANT FACTS AND PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The decision to conduct the 2020 election at voting centers instead of precinct polling places was made by the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors on September 16, 2020. *See* Maricopa County Elections Department, *Election Day & Emergency Voting Plan – November General Election* (September 16, 2020), ("Election Plan"), *available at* https://recorder.maricopa.gov/pdf/Final%20November%202020%20General%20Election%20Day%20and%20Emergency%20Voting%20Plan%209-16-20.pdf (last visited Nov. 25, 2020). The Board's decision effectively determined that the hand count audit likewise would focus on voting centers, since that is what the Elections Procedures Manual requires. There is no record, however, that the Republican Party expressed any objection, before the Board of Supervisors or to the officials who carried out the election plan. No one sought judicial intervention to clarify the alleged mismatch between the manual and the statute.

"The start of the hand count can be defined as the official training of the Hand Count Board members, selection of the precincts and races, coordinating the hand count with the party leaders, or any other activity that furthers the progress of the hand count for that election." Election Procedures Manual at 225. By that definition, the 2020 general election hand count arguably started in Maricopa County two weeks before the election, when the county officer in charge of elections told the county political party chairs how many of their respective members would be needed to serve on the "Hand Count Boards," and moved forward a week later, when the county chairs designate Hand Count Board members and alternates. *See* Elections Procedures Manual at 213. Again there is no record of any objection from the Republican Party when these steps were taken. No one asked for a judicial declaration that the county election officials were planning to recount the wrong ballots.

The official audit report says that the Maricopa County hand count began on the day after the general election, November 4. Maricopa County, Arizona General Election – November 3, 2020 Hand Count/Audit Report ("Audit Report"), *available at* https://azsos.gov/election/2020-general-election-hand-count-results (last visited December 9, 2020). That evening, the Maricopa County chairs of the Arizona Republican, Democrat and Libertarian parties took turns choosing "the polling places (vote centers) to be audited." *Id.* On November 7, the volunteers appointed by the parties began counting the ballots cast at the selected voting centers. *Id.* They completed the task mid-day on November 9. *Id.* In all they hand-counted 2917 ballots from four voting centers,

and another 5000 randomly sampled Maricopa County early (mail-in) ballots. *Id.* Nothing in the official report suggests that the Republican Party expressed disagreement, at any point in the process. *Id.*

As far as the court record shows, the complaint in this case stated the Arizona Republican Party's objection to the 2020 general election hand count audit for the first time. Filed on November 12, the complaint was framed as though the hand count had not yet begun when the complaint was filed. "Verified Complaint" at 1 ("Because the `sampling' is expected to begin soon, Plaintiff seeks expedited relief.") The complaint requested a declaratory judgment that the law requires sampling of precincts rather than voting centers for the hand count audit, and a writ of mandamus directing Maricopa County officials to conduct the hand count audit accordingly.

Responding to the complaint in a motion to dismiss, on November 16, the defendants advised the Court that by September 12 the hand count audit had already been completed, reported and posted on the secretary of state's website.[4] *The report showed that the hand count matched the machine count exactly. See* Audit Report ("No discrepancies were found by the Hand Count Audit Boards.") The plaintiff reacted by applying for an injunction to bar the Board of Supervisors from certifying the election results. The plaintiff continued to assert, even in the face of the audit showing a flawless vote tabulation, that a second hand count of a different sample of ballots was necessary to avoid "lingering questions" and a "cloud" over the "legitimacy" of the election." Application for Preliminary Injunction at 3.

THE REASONS THE PLAINTIFF'S CASE WAS DISMISSED

The plaintiff's claim for mandamus relief failed because the duty of County election officials was to comply with the Election Procedures Manual, and they did so. The declaratory judgment claim failed because its extreme tardiness prejudiced both the defendant county officials and the public interest. Both those claims, and the mid-case request for an injunction, were prohibited post-election challenges to election procedures. These issues are addressed in turn. The question whether the Elections Procedures Manual correctly applies section 16-602(B) is not addressed, because the plaintiff did not make the showing necessary to justify that inquiry.

[4] What exactly the Arizona Republican Party and its attorney knew or had reason to know about the status of hand count audit, at the time of filing the complaint, will be an issue on the application for attorneys' fees. The Republican Party appears to have had constructive knowledge, at least, of facts that contradicted the allegations in the complaint. The attorney (who also verified the complaint) said he "did not receive a copy" of the audit report until after the suit had been filed, Plaintiff's Response to Defendant/Intervenors' Motion to Dismiss at 3, n.1, but what he knew about the audit when he filed the complaint is unclear.

Mandamus Did Not Apply Because the Election Officials Followed the Law

The plaintiff presented its case primarily as a claim for mandamus relief. A writ of mandamus is an extraordinary remedy issued by a court against a public officer to compel the officer to perform an act required by law. *Sears v. Hull*, 192 Ariz. 65, 961 P.2d 1013, para. 11 (1998); *Adams v. Bolin*, 77 Ariz. 316, 322-323, 271 P.2d 472 (1954). If the officer is not specifically required to perform the duty or has any discretion as to what shall be done, the court may not issue the writ. *Adams v. Bolin*, 77 Ariz. 316 at 323.

Maricopa County officials had no discretion, under Arizona law, to hand count precincts instead of voting centers for the hand count audit. A county official's authority is limited to those powers expressly or impliedly delegated to him or her by state law. *Arizona Public Integrity Alliance v. Fontes*, 475 P.3d 303 ¶14 (2020). The Elections Procedures Manual directs county election officials to treat the voting centers as "precincts" for purposes of the hand count audit. Election Procedures Manual at 216. The manual has the force of law, meaning that county election officials must do as it says. *Arizona Public Integrity Alliance v. Fontes*, 475 P.3d 303 ¶16 (2020). Maricopa County officials therefore could not lawfully have performed the hand count audit the way the plaintiffs wanted it done. If they had done so, they would have exposed themselves to criminal punishment. *See* A.R.S. § 16-452(C) (a person who violates a rule in the Election Procedures Manual is guilty of a class 2 misdemeanor).

Since Maricopa County election officials had no power to vary from the Election Procedures Manual rules for the hand count audit, this Court likewise has no authority to issue a writ of mandamus to compel them to do so. "It is the duty of the court so far to adhere to the substantial requirements of the law in regard to elections as to preserve them from abuses subversive of the right of electors." *Hunt v. Campbell*, 19 Ariz. 254, 269, 169 P. 596, 602 (1917). A judge cannot change election rules whenever someone has "questions" or "concerns" about the results. A writ of mandamus lies only if election officials fail to follow the rules established by the law – here, the Election Procedures Manual. When Maricopa County officials conducted the hand count audit, they followed the Elections Procedures Manual to the letter. As a result, there was and is no basis for mandamus relief.

The Request for Declaratory Relief Was Way Too Late

There are legally appropriate ways to test the validity of the Elections Procedures Manual in court. The political party has the right to sue for a judicial determination of whether the Elections Procedures Manual follows the law. The Arizona Republican Party nominally did that here, by asking the court to "declare that the hand count sampling be of "precincts . . . and not of "vote centers." Verified Complaint at 5. But the law sets out basic rules, for that kind of lawsuit,

that were not followed here. The suit was brought against the wrong party, and far too late, for the requested relief.

Arizona's Uniform Declaratory Judgments Act, A.R.S. §§ 12–1831 through 12–1846, is an "instrument of preventive justice" that allows a court to determine a person's rights, status or other legal relations. *Canyon del Rio Investors, L.L.C. v. City of Flagstaff*, 227 Ariz. 336, 258 P.3d 154 ¶ 18 (App. 2011). When a justiciable controversy exists, the Act allows adjudication of rights before the occurrence of a breach or injury necessary to sustain a coercive action for damages or injunctive relief. *Id.* A justiciable controversy arises when the party seeking the declaration has a real, present interest in the issue and the party being sued has a real, present interest in opposing the declaration being sought. *Moore v. Bolin*, 70 Ariz. 354, 358, 220 P.2d 850, 852-853 (1950).

A party seeking a declaratory judgment must file suit against the appropriate party. On a claim like this one, where the plaintiff says that government officials have misinterpreted the law, the proper defendant is the government agency or official responsible for the interpretation. The official responsible for the Elections Procedures Manual, including the hand count audit rules, is the secretary of state. A.R.S. § 16-452. The secretary of state therefore should have been named as the defendant in this case for purposes of the declaratory judgment claim.

The plaintiff chose to sue Maricopa County election officials instead of the secretary of state. County officials have no power to rewrite the Elections Procedures Manual. As a result, the plaintiff's request for a declaratory judgment against them was futile. Fortunately for the plaintiff, the secretary of state chose to intervene. But for that decision, the declaratory judgment claim would have been dismissed out of hand.

A party seeking a declaratory judgment also must file suit at the appropriate time. Declaratory relief cannot be sought until a justiciable controversy has arisen. *Arizona State Board of Directors for Junior Colleges v. Phoenix Union High School District*, 102 Ariz. 69, 73, 424 P.2d 819, 823 (1967). On the other hand, the party seeking relief must not unduly delay. A legal doctrine called *laches* discourages dilatory conduct by litigants. *Lubin v. Thomas*, 213 Ariz. 496, 144 P.3d 510 ¶ 10 (2006). Laches requires dismissal of a case when unreasonable delay in bringing the claim prejudices the opposing party or the administration of justice. *Id.*

This case is a textbook example of unreasonable delay that calls for the application of laches. The plaintiff could have gone forward with the case months ago. Instead it waited until after the election, after the statutory deadline for commencing the hand count audit, and (as it turned out) *after the completion of the audit*. The delay prejudiced both the defendants and the public. That defect, unlike the failure to sue the proper party, could not have been fixed.

The plaintiff itself admitted that its claim could have been filed long ago. In one of its filings, the plaintiff said, "until this election cycle, there was simply no real case or controversy to decide in Maricopa County . . . because the county used the 'precinct' model" instead of the voting center model. Plaintiff's Response to Defendant/Intervenors' Motion to Dismiss at 3. The necessary implication is that a justiciable controversy arose when the Board of Supervisors first approved the use of voting centers for 2020 election cycle. Since the first elections in 2020 were the presidential preference primaries on March 17, the decision to use voting centers for those elections happened in January, or February at the latest. The plaintiff could have filed the case then, or at any time in the eight or nine months since.

Even if the focus is narrowed to the general election, the plaintiff delayed unreasonably. The Board of Supervisors passed the resolution authorizing the use of voting centers for the general election on September 16. The plaintiff unquestionably could have brought the action then. Instead the plaintiff waited another eight weeks to file the complaint, until the election was over and the statutory post-election deadline for commencing the hand count audit had passed.

The plaintiff asserted that its eleventh-hour filing decision primarily stemmed from worries about election integrity. "[P]erhaps most importantly (and obviously) of all concern about potential widespread voter fraud has taken on a special significance in this general election, warranting a thorough focus on these [election] laws and compelling Plaintiff to take action." Plaintiff's Response to Defendant/Intervenors' Motion to Dismiss at 2. Setting aside for the moment the illogic of an attempt to disprove a theory for which no evidence exists, the plaintiff's defense of the case's timing failed on its own terms. The filing delay created a situation in which an order requiring another audit with different rules would only have amplified public distrust.

The Arizona Supreme Court very recently highlighted the prejudice caused by belated lawsuits directed at election rules. The issue arose when the Maricopa County Recorder proposed sending out mail-in ballots with instructions different than those specified in the Elections Procedures Manual. *Arizona Public Integrity Alliance v. Fontes*, 475 P.3d 303 (2020). Disallowing the Recorder's proposal, our Supreme Court warned: "When public officials, in the middle of an election, change the law based on their own perceptions of what they *think* it should be, they undermine public confidence in our democratic system and destroy the integrity of the electoral process." 475 P.3d 303 ¶ 4 (emphasis in original).

The Supreme Court's admonition to public officials who would change the rules "in the middle of the election," applies squarely to this case. It applies to the Maricopa County officials administering the election. It applies to the Arizona Republican Party as an official participant in the election. Most importantly, it applies to this Court, when a participant in the election asks the court to change an election process that is already underway or, worse, to order election officials to do it over using different rules. Either way, the only possible answer is "no."

The plaintiff also failed to acknowledge the prejudice that its delay caused Maricopa County. The plaintiff argued that there was still time to conduct another audit before the deadline for the canvass. Assuming (generously) that the plaintiff was right about that, the argument ignored the cost to the county of repeating the hand count audit. A second audit would have cost tax dollars and disrupted the orderly administration of the election. The fact that the second audit would have been conducted under tight deadlines, with election resources at a premium, would have multiplied those costs. For that reason also, the plaintiff's declaratory relief claim was not well taken.

A Post-Election Judicial Inquiry into Election Procedures Was Not Justified

It is telling that the plaintiff lost interest in the declaratory judgment claim, and pivoted instead to the request for an injunction to stop the certification of the election and the canvass of the results, as soon as the defendants made clear that the hand count audit has been completed. The plaintiff could have pursued the declaratory judgment claim to determine how to audit future voting center elections. That it did not do so demonstrates that its real interest was not the audit procedure as such. The real issue, evidently, was the outcome of the 2020 election.

Arizona law categorically prohibits this kind of post-election lawsuit. Actions concerning alleged procedural violations of the electoral process must be brought prior to the actual election. *Sherman v. City of Tempe*, 202 Ariz. 339, 342, 45 P.3d 336 (2002). "[T]he procedures leading up to an election cannot be questioned after the people have voted, but instead the procedures *must* be challenged before the election is held." *Tilson v. Mofford*, 153 Ariz. 468, 470, 737 P.2d 1367 (1987) (emphasis in original). "If parties allow an election to proceed in violation of the law which prescribes the manner in which it shall be held, they may not, after the people have voted, then question the procedure." *Kerby v. Griffin*, 48 Ariz. 434, 444, 62 P.2d 1131 (1936). Our state Supreme Court long ago explained why this rule exists, in terms that remain relevant today.

> The temptation to actual fraud and corruption on the part of the candidates and their political supporters is never so great as when it is known precisely how many votes it will take to change the result; and men who are willing to sell their votes before election will quite as readily sell their testimony afterwards, especially as the means of detecting perjury and falsehood are not always at hand until after the wrong sought to be accomplished by it has become successful and the honest will of the people has been thwarted.

Hunt v. Campbell, 19 Ariz. 254, 277, 169 P. 596, 605 (1917), *quoting Oakes v. Finlay*, 5 Ariz. 390, 53 P. 173 (1898).

Because the public interest in protecting "the honest will of the people" is paramount, an allegation that election officials did not "follow the law" is not sufficient to sustain a post-election claim. Noncompliance with a procedural rule that could have been enforced by mandamus prior to the election justifies rejecting the vote afterward only if there has been "actual fraud" or a demonstrable effect on the election's outcome. *Id.* at 267-268, 169 P. at 601-602. The "cardinal rule," after the election, is this:

> [G]eneral statutes directing the mode of proceeding by election officers are deemed advisory, so that strict compliance with their provisions is not indispensable to the validity of the proceedings themselves, and that honest mistakes or mere omissions on the part of the election officers, or irregularities in directory matters, even though gross, if not fraudulent, will not void an election, unless they affect the result, or at least render it uncertain.

Findley v. Sorenson, 35 Ariz. 265, 269, 276 P. 843, 844 (1929).

From these substantive principles, procedural rules follow. One is that election results are presumed to be valid and free of fraud. *Hunt v. Campbell*, 19 Ariz. at 268, 169 P. at 602. The presumption against fraud is especially strong when the election contest "arises from the acts of public officers, acting under the sanction of their official oaths." *Id.* at 271, 169 P. at 603 (citation and internal punctuation omitted). "The presumption is in favor of the good faith and honesty of the members of the election board. Regarding their official conduct, like all public officials, courts never presume fraud against them to impeach their official acts." *Id.* at 268, 169 P. at 602. The election challenger bears the burden of proving the existence of fraud or impropriety. *See id.* at 264, 169 P. at 600.

Moreover, proof "of the most clear and conclusive character" is necessary to justify judicial intervention that might jeopardize "the certainty and accuracy of an election." *Id.* at 270-271, 169 P. at 603. (citation and internal punctuation omitted). Fraud or impropriety "ought never to be inferred from slight irregularities, unconnected with incriminating circumstances; nor should it be held as established by mere suspicions, often having no higher origin than partisan bias and political prejudices." *Id.* at 264, 169 P. at 600. "[N]othing but the most credible, positive, and unequivocal evidence should be permitted to destroy the credit of official returns. It is not sufficient to cast suspicion upon them; they must be proved fraudulent before they are rejected." *Id.* at 271, 169 P. at 603. "To destroy the credit of the official returns there must be positive and unequivocal evidence of the fraud, and if the circumstances of a case can be explained upon the hypothesis of good faith, that explanation will prevail. *Id*. at 276, 169 P. at 605.

These longstanding rules have stood the test of time. They remain vital today, guarding the electoral process against the gamesmanship of those who might otherwise hedge against a loss at

the polls by holding legal issues in reserve or use the law as a tool to thwart the will of the voters. An example of their recent application, in a case analogous to this one, is *Williams v. Fink*, 2019 WL 3297254 (Ariz. App. July 22, 2019). Williams, a candidate for Santa Cruz County Superior Court judge, challenged the result of the election because opposing candidate Fink's name had been listed first on most of the ballots.

The Court of Appeals affirmed the trial court's order dismissing Williams's claim without a hearing. The court held that "Williams's challenge to how the ballots were printed should have – and could have – been brought before the election. Because he failed to address the county's method of alternating the candidates' names on the ballots prior to the election, he cannot, after the election, question the county's procedure." *Id.*, ¶ 14. Alternatively the court held, citing *Findley v. Sorenson*, that Williams had failed to state a claim because he had not plausibly alleged that the purported misconduct of election officials might have affected the outcome of the election. *Id.*, ¶¶ 15-20.

The same rules applied here, in the same way as in *Williams*. The alleged procedural violation of the election laws (here, the sampling of ballots for the hand court audit by voting center rather than by precinct) resulted directly from pre-election decisions that were known, or should have been known, to the party claiming to be aggrieved. The implementation of the questioned procedure began before the election (in *Williams*, when the ballots were printed; here, when the political party officials chose the Hand Count Board members) though the alleged harm occurred later (in *Williams*, during the election itself; here, immediately after the election when the polling places were sampled for audit). The time for testing whether the procedure comported with the law, here as in *Williams*, was likewise before the election.

Similarly, here as in *Williams*, the plaintiff failed to state a viable post-election claim. The plaintiff here demanded a hand count audit "in strict accordance" with the statute, Verified Complaint at 1, at a time when an alleged failure strictly to comply did not give rise to a cause of action. The plaintiff offered only suspicion of wrongdoing, in a situation that required it to plead specific, facially credible facts backed by "the most credible, positive, and unequivocal evidence" of fraud or malfeasance. The plaintiff here did not even allege facts that cast doubt on the reliability of the hand count audit, let alone the outcome of the election or the honesty of the officials who administered it. The law therefore required immediate dismissal of the case.

The Proposed Amendment Adding a Claim for Injunctive Relief Was Futile

When this case was dismissed, Plaintiff's Motion for Leave to File an Amended Complaint was pending. The plaintiff asked in the motion for permission to add an application for preliminary injunction to the application for a writ of mandamus and the declaratory judgment claim. The plaintiff sought to enjoin the defendants from certifying the countywide voting results and issuing

the official canvass "until there has been a judgment or other dispositive ruling in this matter, and the terms of such ruling or judgment, if any, have been complied with." Application for Preliminary Injunction at 1.

A party seeking a preliminary injunction traditionally must establish four criteria: (1) a strong likelihood of success on the merits, (2) the possibility of irreparable injury if the requested relief is not granted, (3) a balance of hardships favoring that party, and (4) public policy favoring a grant of the injunction. *Arizona Association of Providers for Persons with Disabilities v. State of Arizona*, 223 Ariz. 6, 219 P.3d 216 ¶ 12 (App. 2009). As with any request to amend the complaint, however, a request to add a claim for an injunction may be denied if the amendment would be futile. *First Citizens Bank & Trust Company v. Morari*, 242 Ariz. 562, 399 P.3d 109 ¶ 12 (App. 2017).

The plaintiff's application for a preliminary injunction was futile here. The underlying election challenge had no chance of success, for all of the reasons stated above. The plaintiff could not show irreparable injury from the certification of the election results, or a favorable balance of hardships, because the plaintiff could not explain how, exactly, it would benefit from a do-over of the hand count audit. At the November 18 oral argument, counsel said, "It's about making sure there's no error, making sure there's no fraud." But that explanation ran headfirst into the public policy that prohibits judicial intervention into an election based on mere suspicion that something went wrong. As a matter of policy, the public's interest in "the certainty and accuracy of an election" far outweighed what the Arizona Republican Party described as "the importance . . . of doing everything with respect to this election 'by the book." Application for Preliminary Injunction at 3. In short, all four criteria weighed *against* the request for injunctive relief.

For all these reasons,

IT IS ORDERED affirming the order of dismissal filed November 19, 2020.