**Headline:** Arizona’s Secretary of State Race Pits ‘the Guy Who Beat the Cyber Ninjas’ Against Trump Insurrectionist

**Teaser:** An interview with Adrian Fontes, who modernized Phoenix’s election system and helped hundreds of thousands of new voters during 2020’s pandemic and presidential election.

By Steven Rosenfeld

**Author Bio:** Steven Rosenfeld is the editor and chief correspondent of [Voting Booth](https://votingbooth.media/), a [project](https://independentmediainstitute.org/voting-booth/) of the Independent Media Institute. He has reported for National Public Radio, Marketplace, and Christian Science Monitor Radio, as well as a wide range of progressive publications including Salon, AlterNet, the American Prospect, and many others.

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**[Article Body:]**

American voters have heard plenty about Republicans seeking high office in 2022 who still deny that President Joe Biden was legitimately elected. They have heard less about the Democratic candidates running against the election deniers, especially in battleground states.

[Adrian Fontes](https://electfontes.com/) is the Democratic nominee for secretary of state in Arizona, where election deniers recently won the GOP primary for governor, attorney general and secretary of state. In 2020, Fontes was the top election administrator in Maricopa County, or greater Phoenix, which became a major target of Donald Trump’s false claims and bad-faith post-election reviews. He spoke to Voting Booth’s Steven Rosenfeld about his 2022 race and message to Arizona voters.

**Steven Rosenfeld:** Briefly tell us about yourself. You came from a public service family, joined the Marines, became a lawyer, an election official, and more.

**Adrian Fontes:** Thanks for this opportunity. I’m Adrian Fontes. I was born and raised down on the Mexican border in Nogales, Arizona. My family’s been in that region for pretty much forever. I went to Arizona State University for undergrad and before graduating I ended up leaving and enlisting in the United States Marine Corps. I joined to see the world and I got stationed in Yuma about two hours from my house. After that, I came back to Arizona State, finished summa cum laude from the Honors College, and ended up at law school at the University of Denver.

After prosecuting for a bit at the Adams County and then Denver County DA [district attorney’s office], I was with the Maricopa County Attorney’s Office here under Rick Romley, and then I was in charge of the international prosecution unit at the [Arizona] attorney general’s office. I left government services for private practice for several years as a contract public defender with the City of Phoenix, and then with Maricopa County, and eventually with the federal district court in Arizona, including arguing in front of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

And then, in 2016, I got really angry because people couldn’t vote in my hometown and so I ran for Maricopa County Recorder. And to everyone’s surprise, including myself, I won. And during those four years, we increased the number of voters from 2.1 to 2.6 million voters, which was a significant proportional increase. We also improved our [election] systems so much that even during a pandemic, between 2016 to 2020, we saw 600,000 more ballots cast in just this county alone. I’m real proud of the bipartisan team that I built and the work that we did there. So that’s sort of the nuts and bolts. And when I finished as county recorder after 2020, I went down to Pima County [Tucson] for the transition of the new county recorder there. I served under Recorder Gabriella Cázares-Kelly in Pima County for 100 days to help her create vote centers and do the ballot tracking and do a lot of the stuff we did in Maricopa County.

**SR:** As the Maricopa County Recorder, you ran the most highly scrutinized election of 2020, the one that brought in the Cyber Ninjas, and was validated, and whose legitimacy was defended, by non-Trump Republicans. I don’t think people may appreciate this. You also lost your reelection. You accepted the results. Tell us about that.

**AF:** It was the most highly scrutinized election in American history. Broward County [Florida in 2000] doesn’t have anything on Maricopa 2020. It was good to work with the Republican Board of Supervisors between the 2016 through 2020 cycle. There were some bumps in the road, but the system was about 30 years past due for an overhaul, and we created a bipartisan system that made that happen. We used expertise from around the country, asked a lot of questions, did a lot of training and once we executed—very, very well during a global pandemic—I did, as you indicated, come up about 4,600 votes short out of almost 2 million votes cast, and then I straightaway accepted the results.

We knew that was the right thing to do, because by that time, which was just a few days after Election Day, we had already heard all of the grumblings… that perhaps there would not be a peaceful transfer of power in Washington, D.C. I called my opponent in the campaign, Stephen Richer, who is now recorder, my successor, and I asked him if he wanted to do a tour. And we recorded that tour. We did a nice video presentation. The last slide of that was really, I think, the most poignant and important one. It showed the seal of the office. And then it had my name as the 29th Maricopa County Recorder and his name as the 30th Maricopa County Recorder, essentially handing over the reins to the office.

But even he [Richer], having campaigned so vigorously against me and my program, had to admit and come around to the argument that it was a very, very good election and a very, very good system that I created. He has been one of the staunchest supporters of it. In fact, he has received threats, including, I believe, death threats, because he has been such a strong supporter of the Maricopa 2020 election that I built. The [county’s] Republican Board of Supervisors has vigorously defended that election in court and in the public arena, and everybody knows we beat the Cyber Ninjas. We showed that through all of the scrutiny, whether it was from political parties, nongovernment organizations, academics, journalists and the media, the international press—everyone who had eyes on Maricopa 2020. I consider it a professional feather in my cap that it all went so well under my leadership. I’m very excited to be able to bring a lot of those best practices to the rest of the state of Arizona, and anybody else who wants to know how to run a great election.

**SR:** Let’s turn to 2022. What is the story of this election that you want voters to hear?

**AF:** There couldn’t be a starker contrast. In my opponent [Mark Finchem] you have a January 6 treasonous insurrectionist who was on the steps of the nation’s Capitol, probably egging on the violence, that could very easily have resulted in the death of [Vice-President] Mike Pence and potentially Speaker [of the House Nancy] Pelosi had they achieved their ends. He is a proponent and promoter of the big lie, and has personally gained, not just because of his currently elected position in the House of Representatives in Arizona, but through many of the other organizations he’s built and has pedaled T-shirts and bumper stickers on the big lie under the “stop the steal” banner. That’s on the one side.

On the other side, you’ve got me, a Marine Corps veteran, fully prepared and a well-versed election expert. I am CERA-certified [Certified Election Registration Administrator], which is certification that comes out of Auburn University and the Election Center. I called the balls and strikes [as the county’s senior administrator] that included my own political loss with integrity and honor, without hesitation, and I’m really excited about… [continuing to work] very closely with Republicans.

So, you’ve got a level-headed, bipartisan, former active-duty military man against an insurrectionist traitor. And while there’s a lot of other contests where you have a Trump supporter versus a non-Trump supporter, there is no other contest in the nation that pits the guy who beat the Cyber Ninjas themselves against a January 6 insurrectionist. This is the only one, at any level, for any office. And so, the A versus B that we’re experiencing in the secretary of state’s race in Arizona could not be a starker contrast between two candidates.

**SR:** How do you counter the lies that are being told by your opponent or punch through that noise? He doesn’t accept the 2020 results. He hurls personal insults and then he bemoans the lack of public trust in elections. And, apparently, a lot of Arizonans are okay with that.

**AF:** Well, I would argue that a lot of people are not okay with that. And all you have to do is look at the numbers. He had 58 percent of the voters in the Republican primary in his race vote against him. The truth of the matter is they only represent a very, very small portion of all of the voters in Arizona, and we have continued to chip away at the big lie with the plain truth. The truth of the matter is that it wasn’t just one or two elected officials, but a whole cadre of thousands of American citizens—Republicans, Democrats, independents, libertarians, Green Party members alike, across the entirety of Arizona and the nation—who ran the 2020 election. They did it well. There isn’t, as of yet, any real evidence of widespread fraud. There isn’t, as of yet, one single successful case, prosecution, or presentation of any material facts that might prove the big lie. That’s because it is simply a big lie. At the end of the day, the truth will prevail. We will use the very system that these fascists aim to destroy to beat them, and that will be the sweetest justice against their authoritarian intentions.

**SR:** Who is the audience for your campaign besides Democratic voters?

**AF:** The audience here is all Americans, right? We’re going to every corner of the state, both geographically and ideologically, to directly challenge folks who do not have evidence and continue to push the big lie. We’re going to be speaking directly with the Goldwater-McCain Republicans, those reasonable Chamber of Commerce types. We’re going to be speaking to the disaffected independents who don’t like either of the political parties. And, of course, our base, we hope will hear all of this as well. The message is exactly the same.

We want predictability and stability. We don’t want the wild-eyed uncertainty that Trumpism and the big lie present. Whether you’re in the business community, the medical community, the legal community, the education community; whether you’re in industry, in technology, you want the government to just do its job. And not the absolute uncertainty that the neofascists are presenting. The big lie is created, specifically and uniquely, to benefit one person [Donald Trump], not everyone. And that means that opportunities will disappear for everyone across the board because [if they prevail] we’re going to be under their model of having to hang on one person’s every word. That’s not how America is supposed to work.

And so, we will take the message of basic plain old truth. The reality that, you know, gravity exists. The sun comes up in the morning and sets at night. If you wear very tight shoes, you’ll be uncomfortable. It’s really very simple. We will be presenting the alternative to this wild-eyed uncertainty that they present. It’s not really that complicated, and we have already received an enormous outpouring of support from all sides of politics, not just the political left, but the center, and many folks on the political right have already reached out. We’re excited to just call balls and strikes the way folks need us to [as impartial election administrators].

**SR:** If you win, how hard will it be to rebuild trust after all of this rhetoric and propaganda?

**AF:** Winning back the confidence of the American people in our elections is not going to be easy, but nothing worthwhile is ever easy. It is critically important that we reach out to every corner of our political society during the course of this campaign and after. We’re going to have to be very cognizant of the ideas that have been put out there, whether they’re correct or incorrect. And we’re going to attack the lies with the truth and trust.

The biggest problem that we have right now is that the big liars have injected mistrust of one another into our systems. So, we have to be consistent. We have to open things up so folks can actually see what’s going on inside [of running elections], so that that trust can be rebuilt. This is a matter of not just trust, but faith. We have lost faith in one another as Americans, and that’s going to be a little bit difficult to build back. But I think with persistence and keeping our shoulder to the grindstone, we will be able to rebuild that trust. I have confidence in the American public.