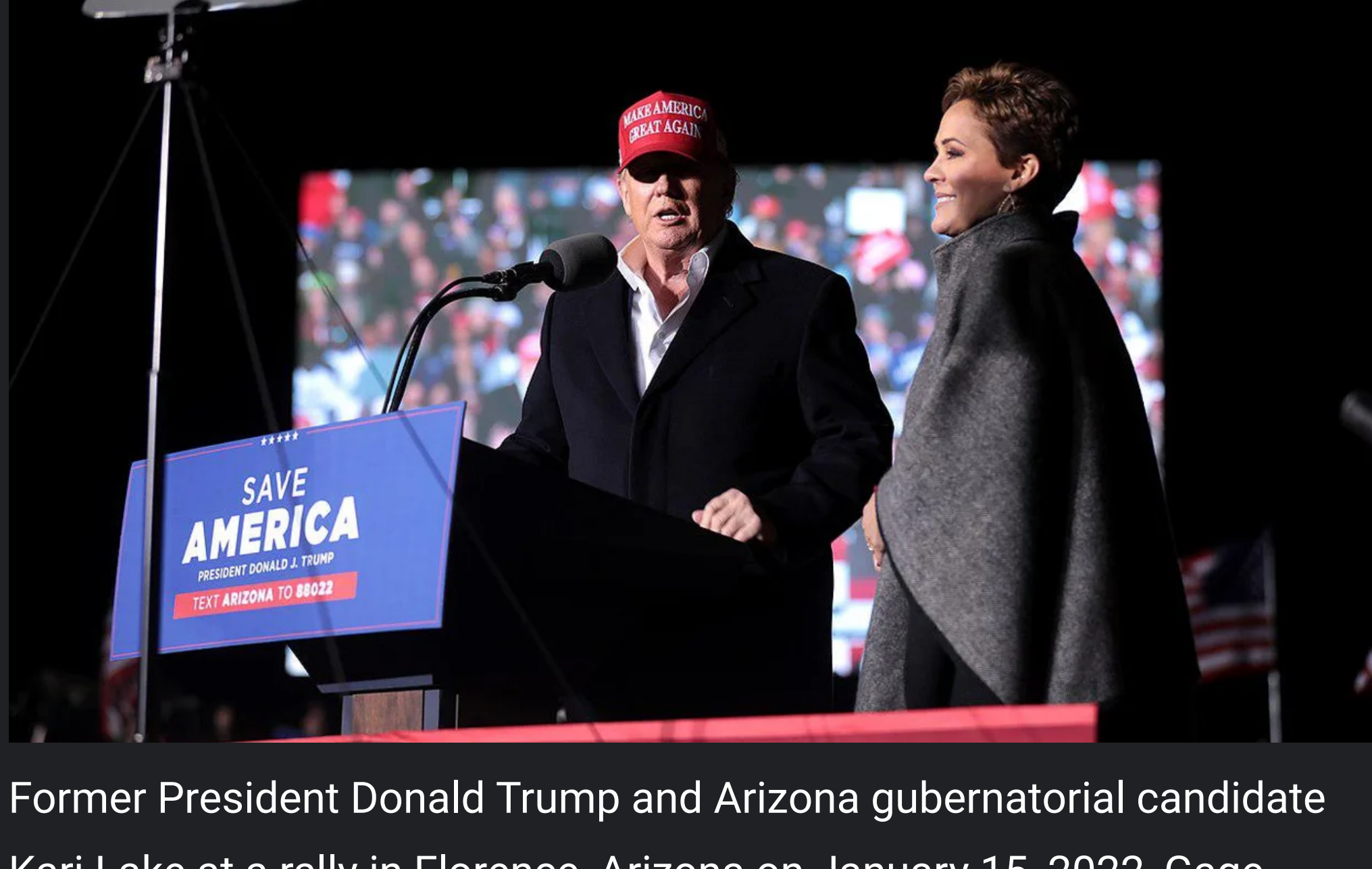


## 'Zuckerbucks': 2020 election conspiracy theories return to Missouri and Arizona



Former President Donald Trump and Arizona gubernatorial candidate

Kari Lake at a rally in Florence, Arizona on January 15, 2022, Gage Skidmore

[Jessica Huseman](#)

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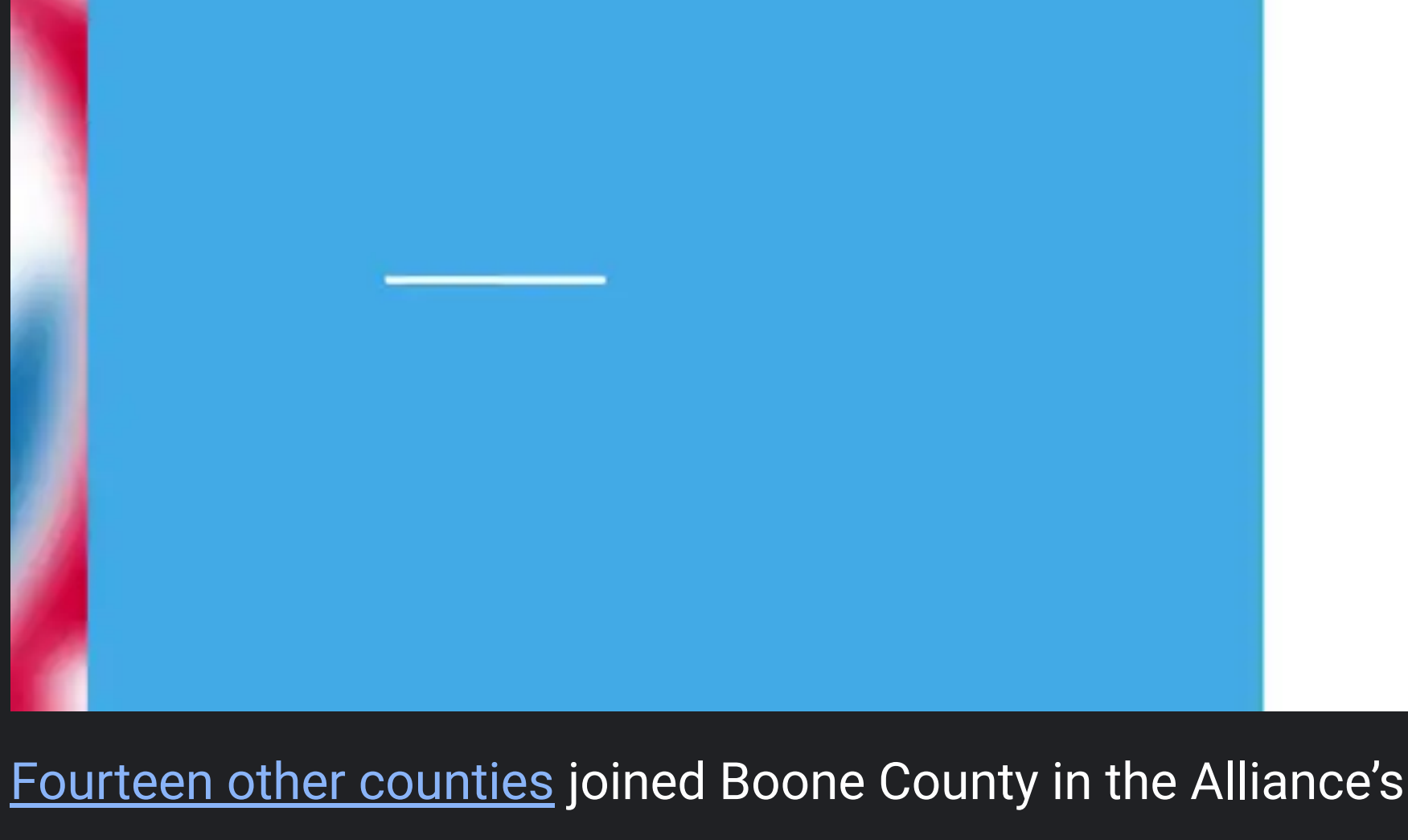
It turns out that right-wing activists have learned the same lesson as Hollywood: Everyone loves a sequel.

You may remember the nonprofit Center for Tech and Civic Life from the so-called “Zuckerbucks” controversy during the 2020 election. That was when a couple of nonprofits including the Center for Tech and Civic Life distributed hundreds of millions of dollars that had been donated by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan, as no-strings-attached grants to local election officials. Despite no evidence of partisanship (and [lots of people checked](#)), right-wing activists and critics [labeled](#) the funding a political act aimed at boosting turnout of Democratic voters.

CTCL now has a [new program](#), the U.S. Alliance for Election Excellence. It’s a group of 15 counties, all of whom submitted applications, who work together to share best practices and create things such as a [voluntary set of standards](#) for recruitment, training, management, and retention of poll workers, a major concern for election officials around the country.

Since the program’s launch in the spring of 2022, it and CTCL have been subject to waves of critical stories by rightwing news sites fueled by talking points from right-wing activists. So have the counties participating in the program.

In March of last year, those stories focused on Boone County, Missouri. Conservative media outlets such as The Federalist and The Heartlander accused the county of joining “a liberal dark money-linked election organization,” and doing so “using taxpayer money,” an apparent reference to the membership fee, which is less than \$2,000 a year.



[Fourteen other counties](#) joined Boone County in the Alliance’s inaugural cohort “to support each other, share best practices, and shape a new set of performance standards for the field.” The Federalist wrote about Boone County and then a very similar story about DeKalb County, Georgia, only a few weeks later. Most recently, yet another story highlighted Coconino County, Arizona. All the stories are written by the same reporter, who cites the same report from the Honest Elections Project falsely claiming CTCL seeks to “systematically influence every aspect of election administration” — though investigations by such places as the Federal Election Commission have [found that to be false](#) — in the first two paragraphs of each of the stories about all three counties. You’d be forgiven for initially thinking it was a copy-and-paste job. The articles paint a murky picture of what in reality seems to be a low-cost way for counties to share best practices in election administration.

The new article attempts to support its conclusion by quoting emails between a Coconino official and CTCL. Patty Hansen, that official in Coconino County, said she doesn’t know where the Federalist reporter got the emails. The reporter never contacted her for comment, she said, and neither he nor anyone else identifying themselves as an employee of The Federalist has submitted public records requests to her office. Other organizations certainly have, though, and any one of them could have handed them over. (Remember our [public records investigations?](#))

“It doesn’t matter to me where he got them,” she told me. “It’s just so strange to take bits and pieces out of different emails and try and come up with a conspiracy.”

Neither Boone County nor Coconino County has been dissuaded from continued participation in the program, those in charge there told me. Other counties participating in the alliance — a near-even mix of red and blue counties — should probably be on the lookout for similar coverage, though it appears to be having little overall impact.

Boone County Clerk Brianna Lennon, who [personally came under fire](#) over the county’s membership in the Alliance last year, said the public attention has mostly died down. But, she said, the public records requests from rightwing groups asking for all communications about and with the program continue. One group submitted such a request as recently as last Thursday.

“It’s always the same thing, emails between the clerk’s office and all the entities that are part of the alliance,” she told me. Lennon said the office will continue its membership, calling the alliance “the most efficient and economic way to provide professional development on election administration to my staff.”

Hansen had similar things to say. She’s been running elections for 36 years across three states, and saw her county’s participation in the program as a “way for me to learn from other experienced election officials to improve how we do things in Coconino County, but also to help others learn from my experience.”

She doesn’t seem bothered by the attention it’s brought to her office, nor was she particularly surprised by it. It’s a different version of negative attention her office and others like it have received in growing numbers since 2016.

“There are some people who are just really concerned, and believe there are conspiracies going on because their candidates aren’t winning,” she said. “It’s sad.”

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*Votebeat is a nonprofit news organization committed to reporting the nuanced truth about elections and voting at a time of crisis in America.*

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