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Just as we began to question our own work and contemplate dropping the whole inquiry, we received a tip to ask the city a very specific question: "Have city committees been infiltrated by partisan actors?"

Once we posed that question, all further response from the city regarding that subject began requiring public records requests. At first, we believed it was because of the questions we were asking. But as we began filing official requests for this information, so did threats against the newspaper. Local political leaders and their groups began cancelling subscriptions, claiming that we were actively siding with "the minority voice" within the community and not representing the majority. Interview requests were refused and social media posts became increasingly negative about the paper on certain social media pages — some created specifically for that reason. As our investigation continued through the months ahead, the threats became more hostile and more specific to members of the news staff.

It took more than a year, but we finally came to understand why.

"... political control of everything from dog catcher to governor"

Since 2016, different partisan groups have been jockeying for total control over the Siuslaw regions' various governmental institutions.

"Getting grassroots organization into our local government is a must," one commentator wrote on Facebook in January 2017. "This was the big plan. Start putting people into any type of govt (sic) position and work it until you have political control of everything from dog catcher to governor. That's been something the tea party folks just took advantage of. While we were discussing policy they were quietly taking over local govt."

While a social media comment could in no way be construed as an official statement, it was later confirmed to us on the record that local liberal groups were looking to stack local committees to undo policies anticipated from the Trump administration. A few weeks later, local Republican leaders released the following email to a private political group:

"At our last meeting Wayne Lemler (County Repub. chairman), emphasized how important it is for conservatives to start replacing liberals on local boards, etc.

There are lots of open slots in the Florence area for you to do this. Although the positions do not declare a party, if you want to move the needle in local politics from liberal to more conservative, you need to get involved (or involved in supporting our candidates). Below is a list of

open positions and the candidates who have declared so far. I want you to know that if you apply, *we've got your back!*"

Given the nature of national partisanship, it's inevitable that national ideals will seep into local politics. It's important to remember that those involved on both sides are not evil. They are teachers, doctors, philanthropists, business owners, local artisans, community leaders. They're our neighbors.

There can be positive outcomes to having political parties participate. All forms of government struggle in getting community volunteers to serve on committee seats, from budget to planning. Truth be told, the majority of area residents don't get involved with city government, except in times of controversy. At the very least, political parties can be a factor in motivating individuals to become involved in their local government.

In addition, political parties have done good things for the local community. Thousands of dollars have been raised for area nonprofits by these organizations, some of which have actually found common ground on controversial issues such as climate change and gun control.

Most people don't believe that the issues they advocate for are partisan issues, i.e., climate change is a human issue; immigration enforcement is about the law; gun rights are about constitutional rights.

However, it is the unique political makeup of the Siuslaw region that makes the strongest argument against what has become a political polarization of the community.

"According to Lane County Elections, the three precincts making up our Florence and Dunes City areas cast their majority of votes for a Republican president, Republican Secretary of State, Republican State Treasurer and for Kate Brown's opponent, Republican Bud Pierce," one local political leader wrote about a public talk by the governor. "Since the meeting topics leaned to her agenda, it did not represent, nor 'tally' the views, of the Florence majority."

It's an argument that *both* sides have made to justify a mandate, but the actual 2016 numbers tell a different story.

While Trump may have won the majority in Dunes City with 51 percent of the vote, in every other precinct he was below 50 percent. And the claim about Brown is incorrect; she won in the Florence district by more than 100 votes. In fact, Florence is the most liberal

precinct in the region, with Democrats winning by wide margins in some races by upwards of 400 votes.

"It doesn't matter how we decide. The final decision does matter, but we're never going to get everybody on board. It's not going to happen. We're going to have people disappointed who don't like the direction we're going. And they'll be vocal about it. That's fine, that's their right. There will be people that agree and think we're doing a great job. We hear it all."

However, in other regions — particularly the unincorporated precinct — the margins are much tighter, with some races favoring Republicans, such as in the governor's race.

In terms of the Siuslaw region, there is no dominant political majority. In speaking with citizens — both conservative and liberal — most say they value cooperation over ideological purity. Most feel uncomfortable with what they consider extremes influencing decisions, particularly during a time of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet from a partisan political perspective, the precinct map is a godsend.

Flip just a couple hundred votes, and you have control of everything.

"This anger drove millions ..."

While arguments for political parties in local government have certainly been made, it is often with the caveat that "politics does not influence a vote" in nonpartisan elections such as city council and local board positions.

However, there are local political groups which have openly stated their intentions to insert politics into local government — and their views are far from moderate. On the liberal side, the "resist" movement heavily influences their outlook. A driving factor in their tactics is to both replace and locally counteract Trump's policies through local ordinances. While *Siuslaw News* has found no evidence to support accusations that they are affiliated with "terrorist" organizations, they are often aligned with groups that advocate confronting local officials over national policies, as well as through protests and filling local seats with Democrats.

While many individual members make attempts at bipartisan solutions in public comments, prominent leaders within the group often do not.

"This anger drove millions of people to march here in Florence and throughout the country and the world," one resident wrote in a letter to the editor. "It is anger that brought these people together. Now we are at the stage of channeling this anger into a meaningful resistance. ... It may take a few years, but through our sustained anger we will take back America."

It is this kind of rhetoric that has painted the group as "dangerous" by some elected

officials. The person who said this has launched a crusade to bring the city's attention to climate change. However, it was difficult for some elected officials to reach common ground on a statement motivated by anger. There were protests, there were insults against the officials. The actions of this individual, along with other like-minded groups in the community, helped shape the views of elected officials on climate change as a whole.

And when that occurred, the entire climate change argument became a partisan issue. On the conservative side, the primary local group is headed by a couple who cut their political teeth in Washington state by creating a political action organization against a school bond within the city, and it appears the efforts were successful.

What they found unsuccessful, however, was an attempt to block Catholic Charities from building low-income housing for local migrant workers who were living in unsanitary conditions due to a lack of housing opportunities. At a council meeting of Prosser City, one of the pair "... presented 160 signed protest cards for the council to review, then turned to Catholic Charities' representatives and blurted out: 'You folks are not welcome here,'" according to reporting in the *Tri-City Herald*.

That individual now sits on the City of Florence Community and Economic Development Committee (CEDC) and has worked on updating city housing codes in an effort to foster affordable housing in the region.

As for statements from some conservative supporters, they range from "Trump was elected fair and square by citizens of the United States. Insurrection will be dealt with because the will of the people through the ballot box will stand," to an individual who stated that if there was ever a civil war, there were people "just chomping at the bits to unleash maximum destruction on all anti-American, Anti-fa-loving anarchists."

When an elected Florence official posted the comments, people suggested he contact the police, as some construed it as a direct threat to the official — so he did.

"My job is to represent the voice of the city, the voice of my constituents," another councilor stated in a private interview with *Siuslaw News*. "I represent anybody, both sides, every side, of whatever

the conversation might be. I get advice from council and staff. And I will move forward with that information in what I feel is the best representation for the city and the public."

They were talking about attempts to bridge the gaps between disparate groups.

As an elected official, it's vital to let the facts lead decisions. But when there is so much division surrounding the facts, and each faction using their own version of facts, it can be difficult to make a sound decision.

In a zero-sum partisan game, there will always be a winner and a loser.

"I think it goes back to,

"Don't confuse me with the facts, I've already made up my mind," they said. "It doesn't matter how we decide. The final decision does matter, but we're never going to get everybody on board. It's not going to happen. We're going to have people disappointed who don't like the direction we're going. And they'll be vocal about it. That's fine, that's their right. There will be people that agree and think we're doing a great job. We hear it all."

In the next Siuslaw News edition on Aug. 15, we will provide a summary of these effects, beginning in 2016, as part of the overview heading into our investigative series.

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