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The far right's growing influence and 4 other takeaways from NPR's ERIC investigation

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Miles Parks

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Cleta Mitchell speaks at a conference in Camp Hill, Pa., on April 1, 2022. The influential conservative attorney helped former President Donald Trump as he sought to overturn the 2020 election. She's now working to dismantle ERIC.

Matt Rourke/AP

Why are Republicans abandoning one of the best tools the government has to catch voter fraud? That simple question is the focus of a new NPR investigation, published Sunday.

The tool is the Electronic Registration Information Center, better known as ERIC. It was created almost a decade ago as a way for states to share government data, in an effort to keep their voter rolls up to date. It allows election officials better insight into when their voters move and die and the rare times when they vote twice in different states, which is illegal.

THE NPR POLITICS PODCAST

Listen to NPR's ERIC investigation

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"The little secret is that maybe more than 10 years ago, if somebody voted in Ohio, in Florida, in Arizona and Texas, you would have never known," Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose, a Republican, said in an interview with NPR in February.

"With ERIC, we can compare our voter rolls to those states."

Eight Republican states have now pulled out of ERIC, including many with voting officials who are on the record as praising the partnership as recently as a few months ago. Ohio pulled out a month after LaRose spoke to NPR.

J. Christian Adams, a conservative elections attorney, has long been a critic of how ERIC operates. But he told NPR: "It's this crazy zeal to get out of ERIC ... that is going to cause voter fraud to flourish."

So what happened? Here are five takeaways from NPR's investigation:

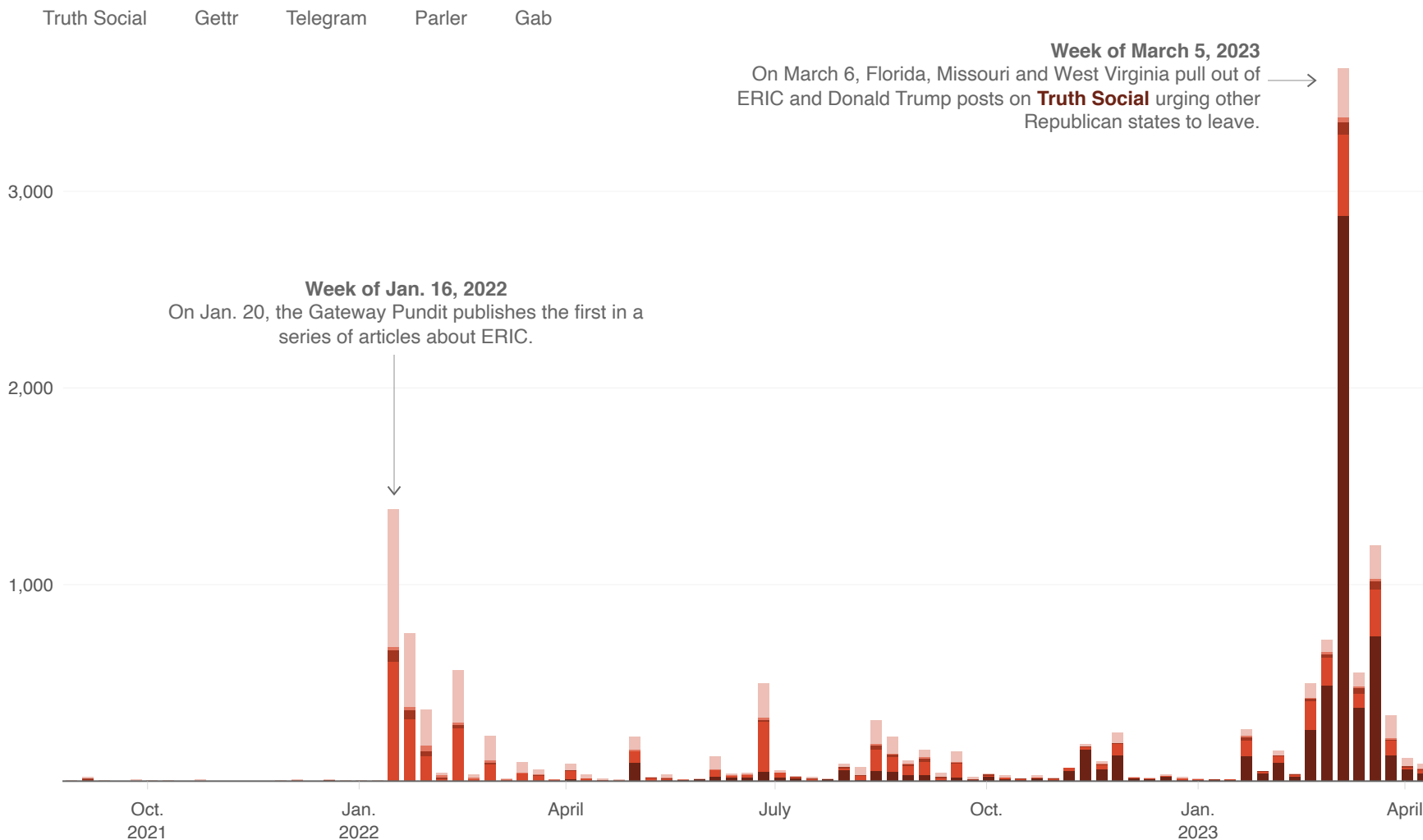
1. A far-right website kicked things off

The story starts in January 2022, when a far-right website called the Gateway Pundit, which has pushed conspiracy theories in the past, began writing about ERIC. Up until then, the partnership was considered a quiet bipartisan success story, with member states that spanned the political spectrum.

NPR's investigations team analyzed hundreds of thousands of social media posts on a handful of social media sites frequented by election deniers. We found the Gateway Pundit's coverage started the far right's fixation on the program:

Weekly mentions of the Electronic Registration Information Center

In the months leading up to the Gateway Pundit's first article about ERIC, the compact was mentioned a few times a week across four social media sites frequented by the far right. The week of that first article, the number of mentions surged to more than 1,000.



Notes

Truth Social launched Feb. 21, 2022.

Source: NPR analysis of SMAT data. For Gab, Parler, Gettr and Truth Social, SMAT aims to scrape all public posts. A sample of over 65,000 public and private channels are scraped from Telegram. This chart reflects posts that included the phrase "Electronic Registration Information Center" or the acronym "ERIC." False positives were removed. [Full methodology.](#)

Credit: Nick McMillan/NPR

Roughly a week after the first Gateway Pundit article, Louisiana Secretary of State Kyle Ardoin, a Republican, announced his state would become the first to pull out of ERIC, citing "concerns raised by citizens, government watchdog organizations and media reports."

2. Local "election integrity" groups are a political force

NPR found that while Ardoin did not make a big public show out of pulling out of ERIC, he did bring the announcement to maybe the only constituents at that time who would even care: a local group of conservative activists gathered in Houma, La.

The crowd, assembled for an "election integrity town hall," applauded for 15 seconds when Ardoin announced he was pulling the state out of ERIC. The event was publicized less than 24 hours before Ardoin's office released its statement on ERIC.

NPR's investigation also found these sorts of community election integrity groups to be critical in the effort to discredit ERIC across the country.

A group called Protect Your Vote Florida published a page on its website called "How to Influence Florida Legislators to Suspend Contract with ERIC!"

Sponsor Message

"The STRATEGY is to run a campaign directed at key Florida legislators," the group wrote in the post, which included a list of the state's lawmakers and contact information. "Hand delivered letters, emails, phone calls, and social media activity will all be utilized to maximize impact."

Emails acquired by NPR through public records requests showed election officials began to field questions from voters and state lawmakers shortly after these calls went out.

3. A Trump ally has coordinated an election denial machine

Cleta Mitchell is known by many for working with former President Donald Trump to try to overturn the 2020 election. The attorney was on the infamous call where Trump asked Georgia election officials to "find votes."

In the time since, she's been building an election denial infrastructure.

Her podcast, "Who's Counting," has become a central hub for stolen election narratives, and she's also started a coalition of grassroots groups across the country called the Election Integrity Network.

NPR's investigation found Mitchell to be a ringleader of sorts for the effort to dismantle ERIC.

She even hosted a secret ERIC summit with red state lawmakers last summer, according to documents shared with NPR by a nonprofit watchdog group called Documented.

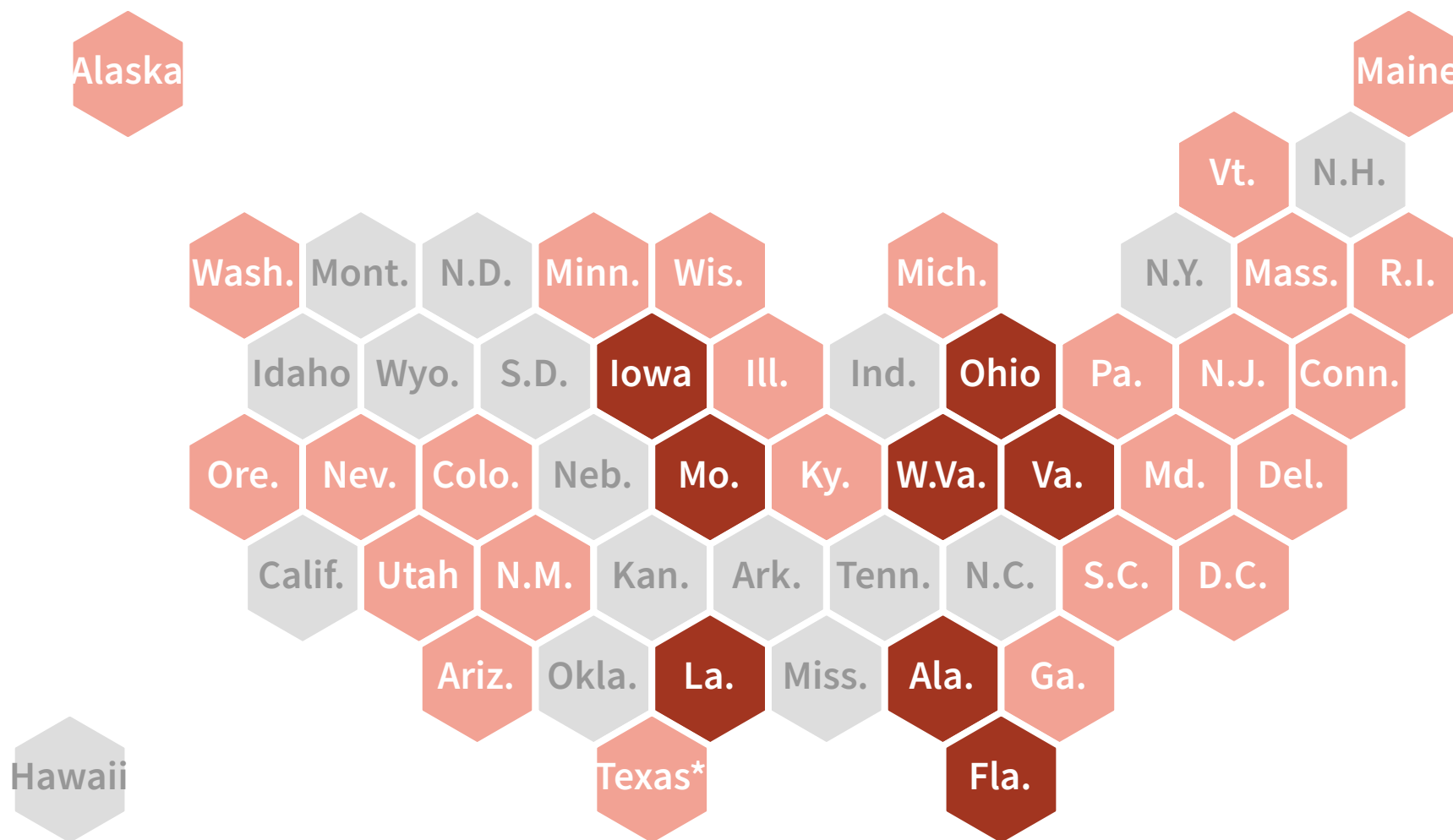
Secretaries of state from the first five states to withdraw from ERIC attended the event, according to one attendee.

Which states are ERIC members — and which have pulled out

As of June 4, 2023, eight Republican-led states have withdrawn from the ERIC partnership — Louisiana in 2022, followed by seven more this year.

Member states

Withdrawn states



Notes

*Texas has also [passed legislation](#) that would seek to end the state's participation in ERIC

Credit: Nick McMillan/NPR

4. Republican primaries are a driving force behind the ERIC exodus

In Louisiana, when Ardoin made the decision to leave ERIC, he was gearing up to run for reelection in a state Trump won by almost 20 percentage points. He was facing numerous challenges on his right. And ERIC was becoming a priority for Republican voters.

"We started hearing it on the campaign trail," added Alabama Secretary of State Wes Allen in an interview with NPR.

Allen ran for his office last year, and shortly after the Gateway Pundit published its first article, he made a campaign promise to pull out of ERIC if he won. This January, he followed through, and Alabama became the second state to withdraw.

Secretaries of state in Missouri, West Virginia and Ohio — all states that have pulled out — have announced campaigns for higher office next year, or are expected to run.

In Florida, Gov. Ron DeSantis is a candidate for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination. DeSantis appointed Cord Byrd as his secretary of state last year, and the state's stance on ERIC shifted almost immediately.

NPR's investigation found that before he was secretary, Byrd regularly joined election integrity calls hosted by Mitchell.

5. ERIC withdrawals will make for "dirtier voter rolls" and an emboldened far right

Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a Republican, put it simply in an interview with NPR: The states that have left ERIC "indirectly said, 'We're going to have dirtier voter rolls.' "

Brianna Lennon, a Democrat who oversees voting in Boone County, Mo., told NPR that will surely be the case in her county.

Before Missouri joined ERIC, the elections office relied on returned mail to find out if a voter moved to another state.

"That's what we'll have to go back to using," she said.

Election experts say less accurate voter rolls have a direct impact on voters, from longer lines at precincts to mail ballots and information getting sent to the wrong places.

Lennon told NPR she's worried about what the ERIC saga means for the 2024 election cycle. She had gotten a sense recently that community election integrity groups were gaining more traction in her state, but she says the secretary of state's decision was the first major policy decision she's seen that lined up so directly with their goals.

"I'm sure there are going to be ripples that come from this particular move and I'm not exactly sure what the end will be," she said. "I don't think this is an isolated thing."

Read or listen to the full investigation here.

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