

‘Outraged’: Pueblo city councilor censured for using Dem resources to help Heather Graham



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Some incumbent Democratic officials in Pueblo have gone above and beyond to be bipartisan, but the local party has come after elected Democrats for directly supporting Republican candidates.

Garrison Ortiz and Epimenio “Eppie” Griego were censured in summer 2022 for publicly endorsing Zach Swearingen, the GOP candidate who eventually won the open commissioner seat.

Tuesday evening, while city council was meeting in a work session, Pueblo City Councilor Sarah Martinez faced similar consequences from Pueblo County Democrats who alleged she took Democratic voter data and software and used it to help Heather Graham, the Republican mayoral candidate running against Democratic incumbent Nick Gradisar.



All but one of the members of the Pueblo Democrats’ executive committee present voted to censure Martinez. This doesn’t expel her from the party but removes her from her position as precinct chair and position on the central committee.

“We are outraged at our private data being stolen and that our party resources were used by Ms. Heather Graham to target Democratic voters and manipulate them in this election cycle,” said Bri Buentello, the chairwoman of the Pueblo Democrats, in a statement shared with the Chieftain.

Martinez said that she did not understand the rules about data usage and apologized to the party for violating policy in a statement she texted to the Chieftain Wednesday afternoon.

“If I had known it was a violation, I would not have shared the proprietary data. I want to assure my supporters that I have a commitment to uphold Democratic values,” Martinez wrote.

Why Martinez was censured

Martinez was the fiscal agent for a committee advocating for the defeated municipal ballot question 2A, which would have increased lodging taxes in Pueblo to pay for childcare.

The pro-2A campaign purchased access to the Democratic voter database and canvassing tool on Aug. 22, 2023.

Shad Murib, the chair of the Colorado Democratic Party, told the Chieftain that the database and voter outreach tool called VAN (short for “Voter Activation Network”) has been developed for decades by Democratic strategists.

Local campaigns pay the state party for access to the system, and it’s not cheap: local campaign finance records show that access cost \$451 during this latest election cycle.

The system can help campaigns accurately target likely voters based on certain factors, including some of their political proclivities.

A copy of the licensing agreement for VAN shared with the Chieftain explicitly prohibits sharing the data with other committees, even if they’re also Democrats.

“You’re paying for the ability to use this voter file and the system — to betray that contract and give it to any other candidate is already a problem. The fact that it was allegedly used to support a Republican is just on top of that,” Murib said.

Graham and Martinez’s relationship

Graham and Martinez both joined city council as newly elected millennial women in January 2022 and Martinez attended her mayoral campaign launch event in mid-November 2022.

Although they're from different parties, the two women have worked closely at times throughout their time on city council. Graham appointed Martinez to be the work session chair during both of her years as city council president.

Martinez does not appear to have made a public endorsement of any mayoral candidate.

Graham has posted multiple selfies with Martinez to her campaign page as they were on city business, including attending President Joe Biden's speech at CS Wind, a gala benefiting the Mariposa Center for Safety and a city community clean-up event.

How Martinez allegedly used the data

Screenshots from VAN shared with the Chieftain show that Martinez created multiple files within the system, including two titled "HG" and "HG Runoff."

There are 9,000 to 13,000 voters on different lists that Martinez created within the system, Buentello said.

Buentello helped Martinez create the voter lists for her 2021 city council campaign, she said. Access to VAN is a "major incentive" for candidates to affiliate with the Democratic Party because of how powerful it can be.

Graham told the Chieftain in an interview that she knew Martinez was using VAN software to facilitate canvassing, but thought that Martinez had been using voter data she bought from the county for \$85.

Graham said that she doesn't know how to use the voter outreach software that Martinez was using and didn't know that she would "get in trouble" for what she did. She also said she would have used a GOP system for her campaign if she had known.

Graham said that canvassers for her campaign were also distributing materials for the pro-2A campaign.

She added that former city councilor Vicente Martinez Ortega tried to help her create voter lists and helped her recruit canvassers for her campaign.

Martinez Ortega was pictured standing next to Gradisar in a group photo featuring volunteers for his campaign, which the local Democratic Party posted to Facebook in early December.

Martinez Ortega told the Chieftain Wednesday afternoon that he referred just one canvasser to Graham earlier this summer. He said he supports Gradisar in the mayoral runoff race.

Buentello said that she was unaware of Martinez Ortega allegedly working with Graham's campaign until she was asked by the Chieftain.

At this time, the state party is not considering any further action against Martinez, Murib said: the local party will be handling the aftermath.

Murib had a conversation with Martinez in early December, shortly after local Democrats got a hunch that she had been using the database purchased for the pro-2A campaign to help Graham. Murib said that she told him she was unaware of the rules and did not dispute that she had misused VAN data.

Murib said that it is a “serious problem” to share allegedly stolen data with a Republican candidate, “with or without the campaign’s consent.”

“We take protecting people’s private data seriously and we take adherence to the law seriously,” he said.

Martinez says she’s true to her Democratic values

In the statement shared with the Chieftain, Martinez said that internal party politics “are of secondary importance to the platform we are elected to represent,” which focuses on helping working families.

Martinez said that her work, such as protecting access to reproductive healthcare, advocating for childcare and vouching for workers in the city unions, “speaks to what my values are and what I will continue to fight for.”

“I feel it is an existential question that both parties are going to have to face if they cannot hold their elected officials to the platform they’ve been elected to represent. There are Dems who don’t concern themselves with the betterment of working families, women, and people of color and there are Republicans who don’t believe in oppressing women through restricting access to reproductive healthcare and ensuring families can avail themselves of quality childcare,” Martinez said.

She confirmed that in early December she had a meeting with the state party chair, Murib, but did not have a chance to speak with the local executive committee before she was censured. She said she would “welcome a conversation with anyone who has questions.”

“I truly hope the Central Dem Party will forgive my actions and continue to support the work I do to improve the lives of every citizen and our community as a whole,” Martinez said. “We have to work together to move Pueblo forward.”

Buentello said that there is a “fundamental misalignment in values” between Graham and the Pueblo Democratic Party.

“In an era where the Republican Party is the party of Trump, where so much of their constituency not only believes but celebrates conspiracy theories like Qanon, where they won't listen to scientists and public health experts and get a vaccine — there's just a certain plan here that isn't necessarily aligning with the Democratic Party,” Buentello said.

Graham said that she did vote for Donald Trump in 2020 “when my business was shut down” but said associating her with the GOP agenda shortly before the election is “wrong.”

“My voting record on council has shown that I work for all people of Pueblo, not just the Republican Party. That's a far stretch and a far cry that they're trying to make a week before the election,” Graham said.

The political context of Martinez's censure

Martinez is one of two remaining city councilors affiliated with the Democratic Party. Conservative and Republican-aligned candidates now hold a 5-2 majority on city council.

Democrats also lost their majority on the Pueblo Board of County Commissioners last year.

Former state House Majority Leader Daneya Esgar was appointed to fill Ortiz's seat after he resigned for another job in May 2023 and is now running for her first four-year term.

Esgar is the only Democrat on the three-member BOCC: Griego left the party late last year amid backlash over allegations he said an anti-gay slur. In November 2022, Swearingen was the first Republican to be elected to Pueblo County's top elected body in decades.

Graham's campaign recently announced that Griego endorsed her. She also announced Swearingen's endorsement in late November.

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