

—Slug:.....COMM-0842.west.Francis_VDC_chair
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—For section.....News
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—Dateline.....Westminster
—Article Number:.....42658

Notes from editor (not for publication):

—The graf about the dumbass with the Nazi texts kind of reads as a non sequitur. As much as I'd like to leave it in, I think the point is stronger without it, especially since the seat will remain Republican anyway. Let's hold onto it for another context.

—Line 62: I'm adding some precision to avoid phone calls from the non-credible candidates.

—Line 65: I added some numbers.

—Line 105: Looks like Olivia's last name is Wolfe.

—Line 134: Well, I found something interesting here. I looked up the info from the Federal Election Commission and did some number crunching and added this paragraph. It does seem to contradict Lachlan's characterization of "hundreds" of people making small donations. Can you check these numbers with him and make sure I didn't misinterpret any of this data?

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

#####BEGIN HED#####

1 State Democrats name chair from Windham County

#####END HED#####

#####BEGIN SUBHED#####

2 Lachlan Francis, of Westminster, beats Justin Willeau of
3 Vershire for the job in a 33-12 vote at the party's biennial
4 reorganization

#####END SUBHED#####

5 TEXT BODY:

#####BEGIN TEXT#####

6 The Vermont Democratic Party (VDP) has seemingly
7 been in disarray for the past few years, but Lachlan Francis of
8 Westminster, its newly elected chairman, has big plans for
9 change.

10 On Nov. 15, Francis, 29, defeated Justin Willeau of
11 Vershire, the former secretary of Orange County's Democratic
12 Committee, by a vote of 33 to 12 at the party's biennial
13 reorganization in Randolph.

14 Previously, Francis was the chair of the Windham County
15 Democratic Committee. That two-year post now goes to Stuart
16 Brown, formerly the Rockingham town chair.

17 "I've worked on campaigns right going back to 2012 in
18 Vermont, all across Vermont," Francis said. "I've knocked on
19 doors to elect Democrats in 13 of our 14 counties, which, I think,
20 is a big part of the reason why I got the support that I did."

21 Francis succeeds outgoing interim party chair Jim
22 Ramsey, of Manchester, who held the job after the former chair
23 resigned.

24 In related news, the Vermont Republican Party and the
25 Vermont Progressive Party have also elected chairs in recent
26 weeks.

27 Rep. Paul Dame, of Essex Junction, who was recently
28 reelected to another two-year term, has been chair of the
29 Vermont Republican Party since 2021. Bill Hunsinger, of Ripton,
30 who serves on his town's Selectboard, was just elected chair of
31 the Vermont Progressive Party.

32 For a state that votes overwhelmingly Democratic and
33 turned out for the national party's nominee, Kamala Harris, in a
34 big way in the 2024 presidential election, the VDP suffered major
35 losses in the 2024 election.

36 For one thing, Democrats lost their supermajority in the
37 Legislature. With it went their ability to override the vetoes of

38 Republican Gov. Phil Scott on party-line votes by a two-thirds
39 majority.

40 Democrats lost 14 serving representatives in the House,
41 including several longtime members who chaired committees. In
42 the Senate, the party lost six seats, including four incumbents, as
43 Republicans netted 19 seats across 23 districts.

44 **Changing the focus**

45 During the last election, Scott went on the campaign trail
46 with a campaign strategy of blaming Democrats for making
47 Vermont “unaffordable.” But Francis does not believe that he
48 needs to focus on Republicans in the next election cycle.

49 “Even in a lot of the legislative districts where we lost
50 Democratic incumbents, Kamala Harris won by more than 20
51 points,” Francis told *The Commons*, acknowledging that the state
52 needs “a Vermont Democratic Party that is by all means pursuing
53 every vote.”

54 “But frankly, the reality of the electorate in Vermont is
55 that we don’t need to win a single Trump voter to win
56 overwhelming majorities in the House and the Senate,” he said.

57 “We need to keep our Democratic coalition together,
58 and we need to make serious inroads and outreach to
59 independents,” Francis said. “So that’s the work we’ll be looking
60 to do. But I don’t think Donald Trump had any real reason to do
61 with why we lost ground last year.”

62 The VDP’s biggest hurdle is that it has been unable to
63 mount strong gubernatorial candidates who could run viable
64 campaigns to compete against the popular Scott.

65 In the 2024 election, 266,439 voters cast a ballot for
66 Scott in a state that counts 95,430 registered Republicans.

67 Scott is now serving his fifth term in office “after winning
68 a majority in every city and town in the state in the last election,”
69 according to his website. It is not known if he will run again for
70 an unprecedented sixth term in office.

71 Nobody knows who might run for governor on the
72 Republican ticket if Scott decides to retire, nor have clear
73 candidates emerged to run on the Democratic or Progressive
74 tickets.

75 “If the VDP could snap their fingers and produce a
76 candidate, we sure would,” Francis said. “So it’s not that easy.”

77 He listed “some great candidates who would make great
78 governors.”

79 “Certainly, State Treasurer Mike Pieciek, Secretary of
80 State Sarah Copeland Hanzas, and Vermont Attorney General
81 Charity Clark come to mind,” Francis said. “But it’s a personal
82 decision for them to make. I’ve got full respect for that. I’ll let
83 them make their decision.

84 “Certainly, as a party, we want the strongest and most
85 credible candidate for governor that we can get. I think the work
86 ahead for us to help make that happen is to build the grassroots
87 infrastructure and to raise the resources of the party to ensure that
88 we can support strong candidates for statewide office. So that’s
89 what I’ll be focused on.

90 “You know, I certainly look forward to working with our
91 nominee, [whoever] that is,” Francis said. “But the VDP doesn’t
92 get to force anyone to run against their will.”

93 Francis said a lack of funding hampered Democrats in
94 the last election.

95 “You know, we didn’t run a single television ad in
96 Vermont last year,” Francis said. “And Vermont is the cheapest
97 media market in the country. So we need to raise more funds
98 between the party and our candidates, especially for elections
99 like lieutenant governor, to be more competitive.”

100 **Local roots run deep**

101 Francis grew up in Putney. “I went to Putney Central
102 School,” he said. “I went to Brattleboro Union High School. I
103 went to the University of Vermont. I’m proud of all of that. I grew
104 up here. I want to live here.”

105 He and his wife, Olivia Wolfe, a physical therapist, live
106 in Westminster.

107 The new chair managed now-U.S. Rep. Becca Balint's
108 first campaign for the Vermont Senate when he was just out of
109 high school.

110 Often described as a "political operative" or
111 "consultant," Francis spent five years as a researcher at Global
112 Strategy Group, a national Democratic polling firm based in New
113 York City.

114 "That's research consulting for campaigns all over the
115 country," Francis said. "I started in New York City, and then six
116 weeks after I started, Covid happened. The company let me go
117 home, and I never had to return."

118 Francis is now the associate director of marketing and
119 communications at Landmark College in Putney. He will not be
120 leaving his job at Landmark, because the VDP chair does not
121 come with a salary and benefits.

122 "There have been times when it's been a stipended
123 position," Francis said. "There have been times when it has not. It
124 largely revolves around how fundraising is going. So we'll see."

125 **Much work to do**

126 The Democrats have a lot of work to do to engage and
127 energize its grassroots activists around the state, Francis said.

128 "We also need to engage our elected leaders around the
129 state, whether that's state legislators, city council or selectboard
130 members, and certainly our candidates for statewide office,"
131 Francis said. "So I look forward to working with them to do that
132 and to better support our grassroots work."

133 Fundraising, however, remains his highest priority.

134 According to public records filed with the Federal
135 Election Commission (FEC), the VDC received approximately
136 \$352,000 in funds from Jan. 1 to Oct. 31 and spent
137 approximately \$364,500, with a little over \$85,600 cash on
138 hand.

139 "Most important is what we call the Dem Club, where
140 people donate every month," Francis said. "You know, folks are
141 chipping in \$5 or \$10 a month, and that adds up. It makes a big
142 difference for the VDP's budget. We've got hundreds of those
143 folks all over the state who support us that way, and we really
144 appreciate it."

145 FEC records show that of almost \$49,000 in 298
146 individual donations to the VDC this year to date, 183 donations
147 were contributions of \$100 or less from 44 donors.

148 "But we want to grow those numbers because that's one
149 of our strongest fundraising lines that we have," he continued.
150 "It's very important to us."

151 Doing so entails going around the state, attending
152 meetings, making phone calls, and engaging directly with donors
153 who can help the party raise the resources it needs to win some
154 of these tough elections.

155 Francis also wants to build new coalitions and strengthen
156 old ones.

157 "For example, the labor movement," he said. "We should
158 be working with them to make sure they can support the
159 Democratic Party here in Vermont, much like they do in other
160 states. We'd be proud to earn that support."

161 Vermont needs a strong Democratic Party now more than
162 ever, Francis said.

163 "We need to ensure that our government reflects our
164 values," he said. "We need to take on the runaway inflation that
165 we see in our economy, the inflation that's pricing out working
166 families and small businesses.

167 "We need a Democratic Party that can work to meet
168 those challenges, and I'm clear-eyed that that's going to have to
169 involve improving things at the Vermont Democratic Party
170 without a doubt," Francis said. "But I'm excited to take on that
171 challenge."

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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VIDEO:

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LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

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