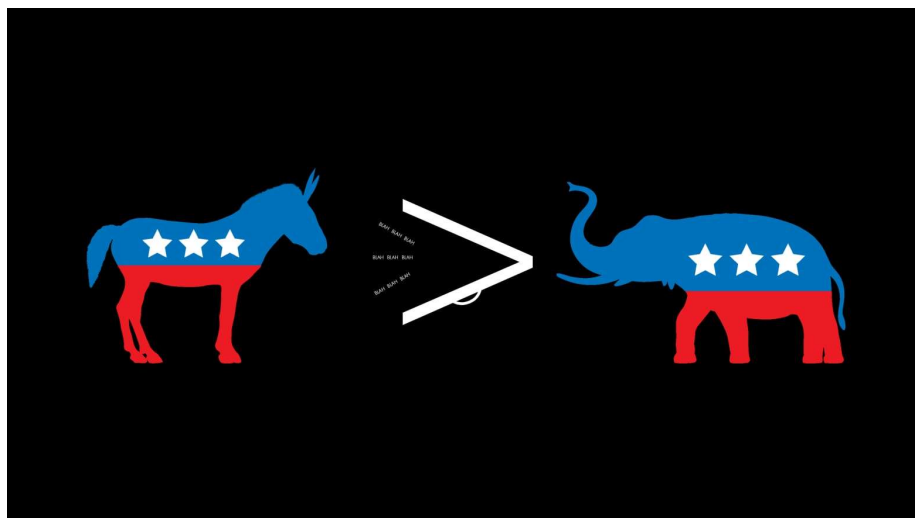


## **If Dems Fought an All-Out Culture War, They'd Win** **Republicans are the ones attacking our cultures and freedoms, and it is time for Democrats to fight back aggressively.**

Wajahat Ali Published Aug. 04, 2022 8:03PM ET



*Illustration by Elizabeth Brockway/The Daily Beast*

The GOP's furious desire to transform America into Gilead gives Democrats a perfect opportunity to turn the tables in the upcoming midterm elections, but only if they go all-in and commit to fighting the culture war.

Earlier this week, passionate opponents of Roe v. Wade were eagerly expecting conservative Kansas voters to allow the Republican-dominated state legislature to potentially outlaw abortion.

In a stunning plot twist, Kansas voters rejected the hateful amendment by a nearly 20-point margin.

Surely, there can be only one explanation: latte-loving, vegan liberals, who eat avocado toast and change pronouns as frequently as their hybrid vehicles, emerged and voted en masse from their biodegradable plastic bubbles. Nope. Turnout was enormous across the board, even in solidly red conservative and rural areas. It seems that a majority of Americans in the 21st century recognize women as human beings who deserve to have autonomy over their bodies, and they refuse to be handmaidens subservient to a radicalized GOP that won't rest until it creates a Christian theocracy.

A Monmouth Poll released this week backed it up. American voters' top concern after

economic policy (24 percent) was abortion (17 percent) and gun control (17 percent). The right to privacy is a “kitchen table” issue after all. There’s something about losing a 50-year constitutionally protected right to people who claim to be “pro-life” that seems infuriating and hypocritical when juxtaposed to videos of children in school trying their best to outrun bullets because many Republicans refuse to support gun control. Even with inflation, a pandemic, disinformation, and high gas prices, a majority of Americans still want Democrats to retain political control.

Those numbers are astounding in light of President Biden's dismal approval ratings, which have hovered in the high 30s, and the fact that, historically, the president’s political party gets trounced in the midterms. None of this data tracks the normal political trends. Then again, nothing has been normal since a corrupt vulgarian was narrowly elected president in 2016. Now, we’re dealing with an increasingly hostile GOP that believes the big lie, loves assault weapons more than our kids, rejects science, and is willing to potentially ban contraceptives and end marriage equality. It seems the modern GOP, backed by right-wing hacks in black robes, won’t rest until it aggressively takes away our freedoms and chokeholds this country back to 1953.

The question remains whether Democrats will respond to the changing landscape or will they play it safe and refuse to engage in hot-button cultural issues for fear of alienating these mythical moderate voters from the heartland? Journalist Julio Ricardo Varela, founder of Latino Rebels, remains skeptical. “Even after it was clearly proven that a multiracial, multiethnic coalition led to the historic victory of Barack Obama in 2008, it still seems as if 2022 Democrats have completely forgotten about those years and are stuck in the mid-90s again, fearing that being ‘ethnic’ will upset white voters,” he told me.

Being timid, defensive, and afraid is a losing strategy according to Anat Shenkar-Osario, president of ASO Communications, who runs weekly focus groups where she tests messaging strategies with potential voters. According to her, Democrats must rise up and fight if they want to win over surge and swing voters and energize their base. “Democrats need to go on offense, because people are hungry for a demonstration of leadership,” she told me, citing swing voters who are “attracted to decisiveness for its own sake, irrespective of the content of that decision.”

She said this explains why they find Republicans appealing even as they consistently describe them to her team as “evil,” “snakes,” and a party that “doesn’t care about anybody but themselves.” Republicans appear to use their power to just get shit done and carry out their agenda, regardless if it’s popular. Shenkar-Osario said the testing reveals that expressing passion and certainty makes these voters feel they are listening to a leader and “someone who is picking up the staff and being a shepherd.”

In the aftermath of the Dobbs ruling, however, that passionate anger and leadership was missing from the Democratic Party. Even though they were given ample notice that Roe was going to be overturned thanks to a leaked draft opinion, Democratic leaders

responded with lame fundraising emails and empty, pathetic calls to vote in the midterm. It was left up to Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and a few others such as Senator Elizabeth Warren, to go on talk shows, connect the dots for people, offer solutions and reflect the people's righteous rage.

Professor Anthea Butler, author of *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*, shared that disappointment and told me that Democratic voters are often "disgusted with [the party's] inaction and ineffectual messaging," which is disconnected from the urgency of the moment. However, she believes Democrats have an opportunity right now to finally respond in a way that "could effectively dismantle the Republicans pseudo morality campaign by pointing out the cruelty and real-life results of their fundamentalist regressive social policies which will turn the nation into an uneducated mass of conspiracy-inspired, lackluster human beings."

Shenkar-Osario agrees and her data backs it up. According to her, the Democratic message should be simple: "Trump Republicans will take away our freedoms." That message triggers loss aversion, a phenomenon in which people are more motivated by averting a potential loss than assessing a future gain. "Once you have a thing, even if it's not that great a thing, you are not excited to lose it," Shenkar-Osario explained, recalling how people barricaded the Congressional floor when Republicans made threats to eliminate the ACA during Trump's presidency. Repeating a simple, effective message works, resonates with voters, and according to Shenkar-Osario, "breaks the noise."

That "noise," or "flooding the zone with shit" according to Steve Bannon, has been dominated by the right-wing media ecosystem that manufactures remakes and reboots of the Southern Strategy that was unleashed during the civil rights movement to terrify the white majority to vote against their own interests. Everyone by now has heard their verbal excrement: "immigrants will take your jobs," "CRT is erasing our history," and "Democrats will take away your guns and freedoms." Republicans fuel a manufactured culture war by activating a permanent status threat in which a new group, whether its immigrants, Black people, Muslims, feminists, LGBTQ, or Teletubbies, will take over straight white people's dominant place in the hierarchy. It's a vomitorium of projection, fear-mongering, and hateful slogans that get repeated non-stop on Fox and the right-wing to the point where it becomes gospel. Sadly, it works.

The reality, however, is that Republicans are actually attacking our culture and our freedoms. They're banning books, punishing teachers, threatening businesses, suppressing votes, attacking the US Capitol, taking away our freedom to elect our President, and ending a woman's right to have an abortion.

When Democrats call out the Republicans' hateful vision, and in turn offer a compelling and clear alternative narrative, they win. Recent examples include Michigan State Senator Mallory McMorrow who chose to respond to her Republican colleague's hateful "groomer" accusations with a viral video in which she clearly articulated her identity as a

white, straight, Christian mom whose values inspire her to reject the GOP's "hollow, hateful scheme" and anti-LGBTQ bigotry. She promised that Democrats "will not let hate win." McMorrow's passion and clarity were rewarded with a huge spike in donation and media engagement, and her speech is being used as a template for Democratic messaging. Shenkar-Osario told me that when they tested McMorrow's speech with and without her references to race, the one naming race was far more persuasive across a sample of 5,000 voters. So much for not engaging in the culture war.

Governor Gavin Newsom is another excellent example of a Democrat going on offense. On Independence Day, Newsom dropped an ad in Florida listing all the ways "freedom is under attack by Republican leaders," such as book bans, voter suppression, speech restrictions, and the criminalization of women and doctors. He invited Floridians to join him in California, a state run by Democrats where they protect and defend freedoms. This was exquisite trolling according to Shenkar-Osario, but more importantly, it was very effective and memorable messaging.

As Democrats prepare to head to the 2022 midterms facing a fully radicalized GOP that adulates traitors, religious extremists, criminals, and Christian nationalists like Marjorie Taylor Greene, they must bring brass knuckles to the knife fight, take out the Republicans' knees if they go low, and fully engage in the culture war in defense of women, people of color, the poor, and other marginalized communities being steamrolled by the GOP hate machine.

Shenkar-Osario's message for Democrats is simple: "Stake your turf, go on offense, and say what you're for always—that performs better in the field, and performs better with the masses. If your words don't spread, it doesn't work."

It's time for Democrats to speak up and say the words.