

COMMENTARY

Kansas voters used democracy to stop right wing extremists — but GOP fascism is still on the rise

In Pennsylvania and Arizona, Big Lie supporters have won GOP nominations for governor and other key races

By **CHAUNCEY DEVEGA**

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Pennsylvania Republican gubernatorial candidate Doug Mastriano greets supporters as Jenna Ellis, former Legal Advisor and Counsel to former President Donald Trump, stands on stage during his election night party at The Orchards on May 17, 2022. (Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images)

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ast Tuesday, democracy literally won in Kansas **when voters overwhelmingly rejected an amendment to their state constitution that would have taken away women's reproductive rights and freedoms.**

LThis was the first public vote of its kind in the aftermath of the decision by the right-wing extremist justices on the Supreme Court to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. In one of the best recent examples of democracy and collective action in America, the people of Kansas voted to protect the civil and human rights and freedoms of not just women – but by implication, all people.

Fascism and other forms of authoritarianism seek to control the whole person and limit bodily autonomy and freedom. In that way, limiting women's reproductive rights and freedoms is part of a much larger strategy to end America's multiracial pluralistic democracy. Ultimately, women's rights are human rights, and when women are not allowed to be full and equal members of society the rights of all people are imperiled.

The decision by the people of Kansas to protect a woman's right to an abortion is also a very important lesson in how democracy is not some abstract idea. It is something that real people do, practice, and live.

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At the Huffington Post, Alanna Vagianos highlights how:

But before the landslide win and talks of national political landscapes, it was mostly ordinary people like Janelle Bogart who were doing the real work.

Bogart, a pro-choice organizer with a day job in sales, let HuffPost tag along as she canvassed houses in 103-degree heat in a Wichita suburb a week before the election...

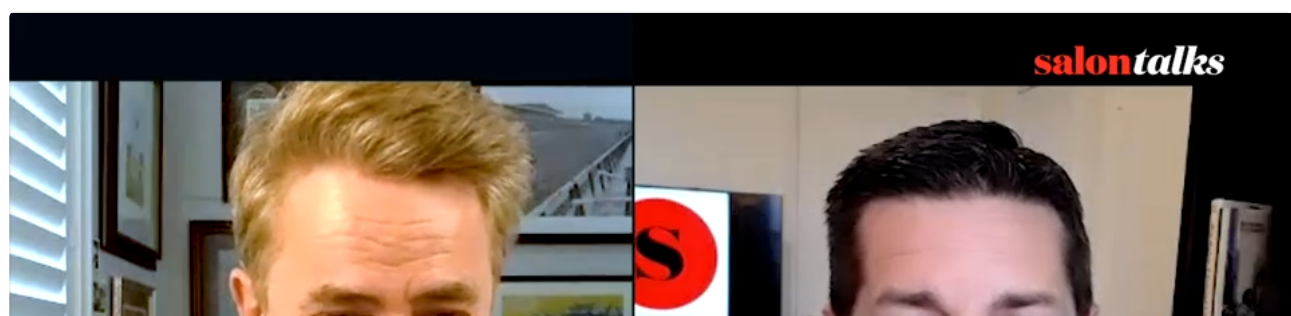
Kansans for Constitutional Freedom, the pro-choice collective that recruited canvassers like Bogart, accomplished what many believed was impossible: A win on abortion rights in a red state after the fall of Roe...

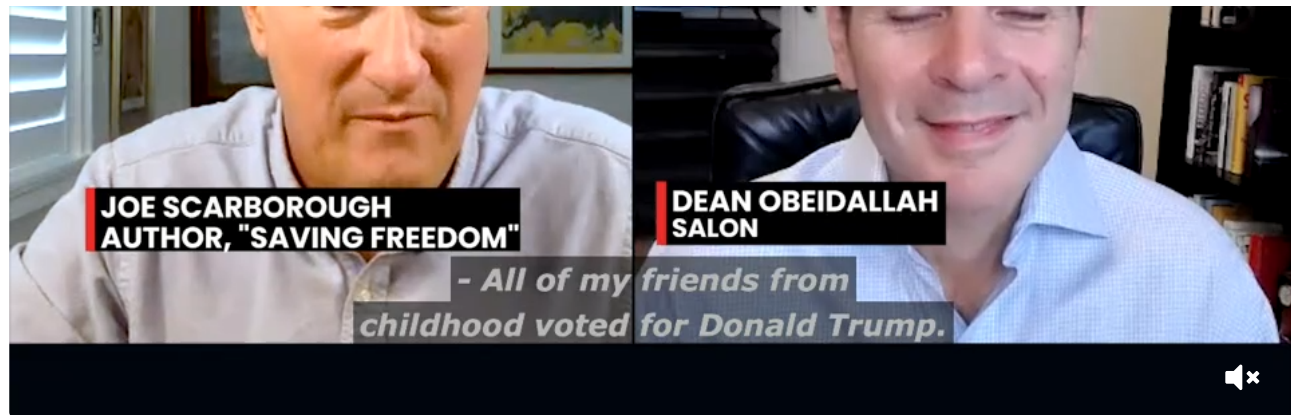
Bogart, the local organizer, appropriately spent election night collecting ballot boxes from polling places. When she finished, she brought pizza to a polling spot where people had been waiting in line to vote for nearly three hours. The 37-year-old said she became emotional when the overwhelming number of pro-choice votes were reported.

"We had a lot of women who put their lives on hold for the campaigning and the marches and the canvassing. With everything that was against us: They tried to put it on a primary ballot, they were spreading lies about what the amendment meant, they were very heavily funded by all the church groups," Bogart said through tears.

"It feels good. It feels like we're unfuckable with. Don't try to come after us because we will organize and get things done."

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In an opinion essay at the New York Times, Sarah Smarsh offered this profile of democracy in action in Kansas:

Lines of Kansas voters, resolute in the August sun and 100-degree heat, stretched beyond the doors of polling sites and wrapped around buildings on Tuesday to cast ballots in a primary election. A few suffered heat exhaustion. Firefighters passed out bottles of water.

When polls closed at 7 p.m. Central time, many were still in line and legally entitled to get their turn. The Wichita Eagle reported that one Wichita woman cast the final vote at her polling site at 9:45 p.m. after waiting in line for nearly three hours. Poll workers, understaffed amid the likely record turnout, worked brutally long hours for democracy...

But Kansans didn't do it alone. Support — donations, text messages of solidarity, a letter of encouragement from Gloria Steinem — came from far and wide, boosting the resources and morale of a place often stereotyped as a conservative monolith and presumed a pointless investment for Democratic campaigns.

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The vote to protect women's reproductive rights and freedoms in Kansas was also the result of highly effective messaging.

At the [Washington Monthly](#), [Bill Scher](#) explains how:

Kansans for Constitutional Freedom, the group that led the campaign to defeat the constitutional amendment intended to permit abortion bans, developed a messaging strategy that resonated across the political spectrum and eschewed purity tests.

"We definitely used messaging strategies that would work regardless of party affiliation," Jae Gray, a field organizer for the group, told [The Washington Post](#). The [results](#) validated the strategy, with the anti-abortion constitutional amendment losing by some 160,000 votes, even while Republican primary voters outnumbered Democrats by about 187,000.

Was the messaging what sealed the deal in Kansas? Trying to parse out which factors mattered in any election is always an inexact science, even more so in a down-ballot campaign that attracted minimal polling. But one on-the-ground reporter, [Gabriella Borter of Reuters](#), tweeted, "Several Kansans I met while door knocking w/ the campaigns said they were personally uncomfortable with/opposed to abortion but didn't like the idea of their daughter/sister/friend

not being able to get one safely if needed. The 'vote no' messaging about gov't mandates resonated."

This campaign was engineered to connect with Kansans of many backgrounds, particularly potential swing voters who could be susceptible to disingenuous messages from the anti-abortion camp. The driving force behind word choices was not satisfying squabbling factions in Washington, D.C.

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The Republican fascists have been routing the Democratic Party and other pro-democracy Americans since at least Jan. 6 and Donald Trump's coup attempt.

Democrats and other pro-democracy Americans must win many more victories after Kansas to keep their momentum because they are quickly running out of time. As the truism goes, both in sports and war, the other team definitely has a say in the outcome.

To that point, the Republican fascists and their Christian theocratic enforcers will do anything to win.

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[What happened in Kansas: Americans know that rights are not just suggestions](https://www.salon.com/2022/08/10/kansas-used-democracy-to-stop-right-wing-extremists--but-fascism-is-still-on-the-rise/)

This will include illegal and unethical behavior to advance their revolutionary struggle to remake American society by returning it to the Gilded Age (if not before). This new-old America will be a society where women, Black and brown people, gays and lesbians, the poor, the working class, disabled people, and other marginalized groups will be treated as second-class citizens under the law as compared to rich white "Christian" men.

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As part of their war against American democracy, the Republican fascists and their forces will also use public office and other trusted positions of power to subvert real democracy and to rule through the tyranny of the minority. The Republican fascists will respect "democratic" outcomes when they win and use the Big Lie and other fantasies and conspiracy theories to reject the results of elections when they lose. This strategy will fully undermine the American people's faith in the legitimacy of the country's democracy and government, which is central to the Republican fascists' overall strategy.

While democracy was winning in Kansas, in other states across the country fascism and authoritarianism were on the march.

In Arizona, Republican primary voters chose supporters of the Jan. 6 coup and the Big Lie — **Kari Lake**, **Abraham Hamadeh** and **Mark Finchem** — to be their nominees for governor, attorney general and secretary of state, respectively. Doug Mastriano, **a supporter of the Big Lie with ties to right-wing Christian extremists**, also won the Republican gubernatorial nomination

in Pennsylvania. These states will play a key role in the Republican Party's plans to subvert and steal future presidential elections.

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As the battle for democracy escalates across the country, it remains critically important to not confuse the symptoms and the disease: Trumpism and the larger neofascist movement are the result of much deeper systemic, cultural and institutional problems in American society.

Some of these problems include white supremacy, racism, nativism, hostile sexism, misogyny, extreme wealth and income inequality, a culture of violence and cruelty and spectacle, anti-intellectualism, loneliness and social alienation, future shock, social dominance behavior, a corporate news media that prioritizes profits over truth-telling and being unapologetic advocates of democracy, a broken public school system, widespread mental pathology and other anti-social and anti-human behavior, religious extremism, a hollowed out social safety net, ailing social democracy, gangster capitalism, and many other crises including global climate disaster.

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Most importantly, on a fundamental level, today's Republican Party and larger "conservative" movement does not believe in democracy if it means that Black and brown people and other marginalized groups have the same say in society as white people.

Moreover, public opinion polls and other research have shown that many white Americans – especially Republicans and Trump followers – support authoritarianism and ending democracy if it means that "people like them" are not the dominant and most powerful group in American society.

When the Republican fascists and other members of the white right and "conservative" movement declare their love for King Trump or some other tyrant it is not hyperbole. These are deeply held beliefs.

These authoritarian and fascist desires are especially powerful among white right-wing Christian evangelicals who want to end secular multiracial society.

In such a political worldview, women's reproductive rights and freedoms must be extinguished because sexual freedom is deemed to be a threat to their theocratic authoritarian view of society.

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In an essay here at Salon, Amanda Marcotte explains more:

The romanticization of female death and pain is part of the larger right-wing Christian view of womanhood. Baked into their ideology is that women are put on Earth to suffer and sacrifice. Women exist only to serve the desires of others. Women shouldn't have wants and needs outside of self-sacrifice, which is why anti-choicers tend to insist that women should be glad to die in childbirth or happy to give birth to a rapist's child.

In a recent essay that merits being quoted at length, Umair Haque details how **Christian nationalism is at its core a violent authoritarian anti-woman ideology**:

In other words, this is a thinly, barely veiled form of fascism. It's often called Christofascism, which may be a more accurate descriptor of it altogether. The central idea is that only some are fully deserving of personhood, and personhood yields power over the rest, because the pure and true are superhuman, while the rest are subhuman, undeserving, unworthy. Of what? Of everything that the true and pure decide. As we'll see shortly, everything from basic freedoms to a modern society altogether. Ultimately, fascism in all its

forms is about the pure and true having the power of life and death over the impure and faithless.

As we're going to see, that is exactly what this movement wants for America — and to reduce Western democracy too, as well.

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Haque continues:

Where else have we seen movements like this? In the Islamic world, of course. And the best analog for this movement and what it hopes to do modern democracies is the Taliban and ISIS. No, I'm not kidding, and I don't think I'm really exaggerating, either. This is America's Taliban — and it's baying for blood, lusting for power.

Let's take a simple parallel. The Taliban doesn't let women have rights. What just happened in America? Women don't have basic rights anymore. When Roe ended, it took with it women's rights of movement, expression, association, privacy, speech, and more — all the basics. Women can now be hunted and jailed for "attempting to leave the state" for the wrong reasons, which means of

course that their communications can be monitored, because how else would you know, which means that their rights to travel, speak, associate freely are gone. And it's not just women — people of any kind can be punished for "aiding and abetting" women.

The results might be different, in ways — and on the surface, no, American women aren't wearing veils. Yet. But the principle? And the politics? It's exactly the same...

All that should sound a little, well, fascist to you. Because here it is. The separation of a society into people and subhumans, the former having the power of life and death over the latter. Any vaguely thoughtful person should be able to see with utterly chilling clarity how the end of Roe is all these things: a giant leap towards theocracy, executed for reasons of religion, which gives the faithful and true the power of life and death over a social group that they regard as impure and faithless. Women.

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Democrats, progressives, liberals and others who believe in pluralist secular democracy must accept the reality that such irrational and fantastical beliefs cannot be debated or otherwise compromised with as part of "normal politics". Christian fascists — like authoritarians more

generally — must be totally defeated. Seeking consensus or otherwise negotiating with them is actually a form of surrender.

As the saying goes, "If your vote didn't matter, they wouldn't fight so hard to block it".

That is true. However, voting by itself will not save American democracy and women's civil and human rights or those of the American people more broadly. This is especially true when the Republican fascists and the larger white right and their movement have total disregard and disdain for real democracy.

As seen with the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, the LGBTQ rights movement, the labor movement and other freedom struggles, winning and protecting a true "we the people" democracy demands vigilance and a long-term commitment to such values across all areas of life.

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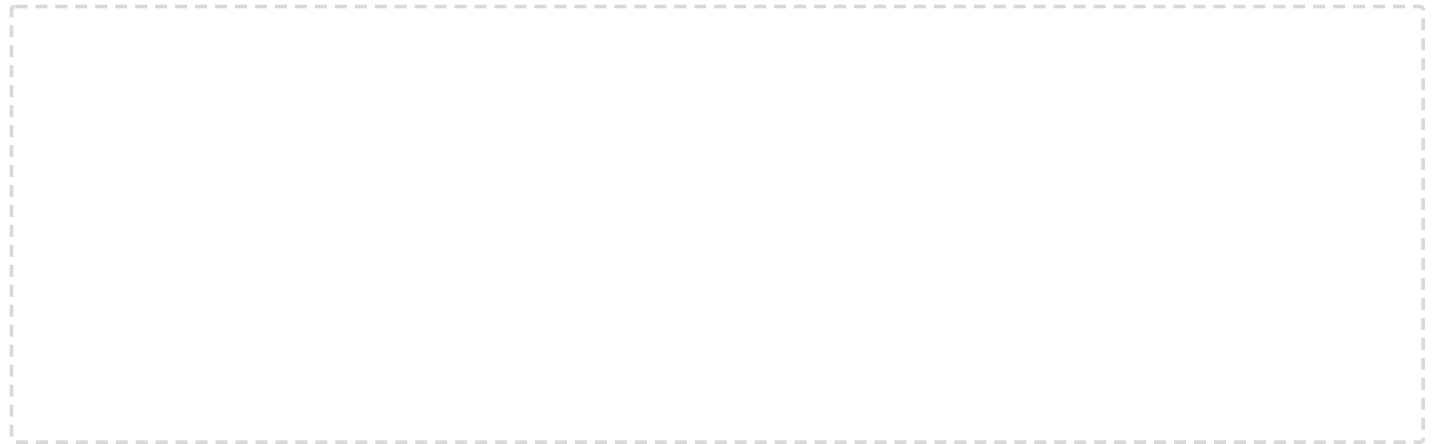
Chauncey DeVega is a senior politics writer for Salon. His essays can also be found at [Chaunceydevega.com](https://chaunceydevega.com). He also hosts a weekly podcast, [The Chauncey DeVega Show](#). Chauncey can be followed on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

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