How Kansas Kept Abortion Legal

When voters, even in a deep-red state, had the chance to decide for themselves, they protected abortion rights.

AMY LITTLEFIELD
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Bill Miller is an accredited journalist at the UN for the Washington International and has written extensively on UN issues. He is the Principal of Miller and Associates International Media Consultants, which created the Global Connection Television concept.

Bill developed an interest in international issues and the UN when he served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic. In his first year he worked as a community developer in a remote rural area; his second year he was Professor of Social Work at the Madre y Maestra University in Santiago, the country’s second largest city.

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A debt of gratitude: Activists demonstrate in front of the White House on August 25, the day after President Biden announced $10,000 in student loan relief for most borrowers.
There is no going back. Now that the president has canceled student debt once, he can do it again.

ERE DAYS BEFORE FEDERAL STUDENT LOAN PAYMENTS WERE SET TO RESUME, President Biden announced his plan for student debt cancellation: up to $10,000 for borrowers with incomes under $125,000 a year and up to $20,000 for Pell Grant recipients.

Many progressives have rightly criticized the limitations of Biden’s announcement. Rebecca Mosier, a 54-year-old from Oklahoma with $127,000 in student debt, described the plan as “a one percent off coupon,” or akin to when customers at the Sonic Drive-In where she worked would leave a handful of pennies in the tip jar. Biden’s relief also does little to address the racial wealth gap trapped inside of student debt. It still leaves millions of borrowers with six-figure balances and does little to address predatory lending terms that have swollen debts across generations. We can expect student debt to continue to plague senior citizens present and future.

The grumblers aren’t wrong. But the fact that progressives are complaining at all is a testament to how far the movement to cancel student debt has come. Our expectations have been raised.

Let’s be clear: Biden did not want to grant debt relief to borrowers. As a senator, he spent his career defending creditors and restricting relief options for student debtors. If Biden had wanted to cancel student debt, he would have done it two years ago. If Biden had wanted to cancel student debt, he would have followed through on his campaign promise to cancel a minimum of $10,000 of it for everyone—and all undergraduate student debt for public college and HBCU graduates. If Biden had really wanted to cancel student debt, he would have enacted a different policy. Biden didn’t want to cancel student debt. But organized debtors made him do it anyway.

Since Biden took office, organized debtors have pressed him to make good on his campaign promise. Defying the silence, shame, and atomization that characterize indebted life, debtors have come together and spoken up. They have assembled at city councils, union halls, and faculty senates throughout the country and passed resolutions calling for full cancellation. They have written op-eds. They have signed petitions, sent letters to Congress, called their senators. They have marched around the Department of Education building blowing trumpets, calling for the walls of debt to fall. They have piled into buses from the valleys of Georgia to remind President Biden of a critical truth: As the midterms near, the fate of our democracy rests in large part on the president’s willingness to move the dial on debt cancellation. They have pledged to go on a debt strike when their payments turn back on, warning Biden that they can’t pay their student loans—and they won’t pay them.

There is no going back. Now that the president has canceled student debt once, he can do it again. Seasoned labor organizers often say that the best organizer is a bad boss. For debtors, perhaps the best organizer is a debt that could be abolished—but still hasn’t been. The critical omissions of Biden’s policy point to where the movement—and the country—need to go next.

Because the goal isn’t just to cancel debt. The goal is free higher education for all who want it. Just three years ago, Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Pramila Jayapal proposed a bill calling for full cancellation of student debt and free public college for anyone with a family income less than $125,000 a year. That bill did not pass. Biden’s skimpy plan hits none of the 2019 plan’s transformative notes. But the College for All Act has not been forsaken. Each barrier the movement has encountered has offered an indicator of where and how power can be built. When Congress failed to take up their vision, debtors shifted to what can be accomplished with the president’s pen.

And if the president’s pen fails to provide the cancellation debtors need, they will organize to win it. An application to receive relief? An opportunity to form solidarity to collectively complete the paperwork. An end to the payment pause? More ammunition to build a loan strike. Federal guarantees to loan servicing companies? A chance to highlight their obscene profits.

For the movement, Biden’s cancellation is the confirmation of a method: Debtors, when organized, have power. They will continue organizing to use it—for as long as it takes.

Eleni Schirmer is a writer and a research associate with the Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy at UCLA.
Sanctuary City?

Yes, New York City is more welcoming to immigrants than Texas—but there’s much more it could do.

INCE AUGUST 5, TEXAS HAS BEEN SENDING BUS-LOADS of migrants—at least 900 people so far—to New York City after they’ve been processed and released by Customs and Border Protection. In New York, they can “receive the abundance of city services and housing that Mayor Eric Adams has boasted about within the sanctuary city,” Texas Governor Greg Abbott told reporters. “I hope he follows through on his promise of welcoming all migrants with open arms so that our overrun and overwhelmed border towns can find relief.”

The fact that most asylum seekers have no plans to settle in border towns is immaterial to Abbott’s stunt. For his purposes, all that matters is the appearance of chaos—and that’s exactly what he’s providing. Adams says Abbott’s administration has refused to coordinate with the city and hasn’t even disclosed when buses are expected to arrive or how many people are on board. When officials in New York complain about being overwhelmed, Abbott gets to accuse liberals who claim to support immigration of “hypocrisy,” as he did on Sean Hannity’s show.

Abbott has indeed revealed the inherent contradiction of so-called sanctuary cities, though not in the way he thinks. Sanctuary cities, including New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago, commit to limit their cooperation with federal immigration agencies. But there’s no legal definition of what a sanctuary city is, and while Adams has said that it is the city’s “responsibility” to help arriving asylum seekers, that promise has proved to be largely hollow. For the most part, it’s local immigrant advocacy organizations and mutual aid groups that have been handling the intake and providing migrants with the resources they need to start life in a new city. And while it’s true that the city has placed some migrant families who have nowhere else to go in homeless shelters, Adams has accused migrants of straining the city’s overburdened shelter system—even though his first budget proposal cut $615 million from the Department of Homeless Services. In his eight months in office, Adams has reinitiated a war on so-called quality-of-life crimes, disproportionately targeting working-class people of color, many of whom are undocumented. This is the actual hypocrisy of tough-on-crime sanctuary cities: Their leaders purport to welcome immigrants, and may even make some efforts to do so, while presiding over a criminal legal system that punishes them at the earliest opportunity.

For instance, the NYPD has been confiscating mopeds, which delivery workers, many of whom are immigrants, say they need to do their jobs. The city requires mopeds to be registered with the DMV and for their drivers to be licensed, stipulations many undocumented immigrants may be unaware of. While undocumented immigrants can apply for driver’s licenses in New York, it’s likely that some are afraid that doing so will put them on the radar of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Advocates say the NYPD has been seizing legally operated mopeds, too, and not giving delivery workers a chance to get their vehicles back. Adams is also increasing enforcement against street vendors. In May, officers arrested a woman for selling fruit in a subway station without a license.

Everyday criminalization disproportionately harms immigrant New Yorkers. Shortly after Donald Trump took office, the NYPD tried to assuage people’s fears by saying no one would get “deported for jumping a turnstile.” But as Gothamist reported, any two convictions for crimes “involving moral turpitude,” including turnstile jumping and petty theft, can qualify someone for deportation, even if they have a green card. This year, Adams said he wants district attorneys to start prosecuting people for fare evasion again.

In fact, every time someone is arrested in any city, their data is sent to federal criminal databases accessible by ICE. The NYPD doesn’t honor ICE detainers, meaning it doesn’t hold people after they’ve made bail so ICE can pick them up. But ICE can still arrest people elsewhere. In 2018, the agency made headlines for arresting immigrants at courthouses in New York.

Still, it’s undeniable that New York City is friendlier to immigrants than Greg Abbott’s Texas is. Immigration judges in the city are far more likely to grant asylum than their counterparts in Texas, and both the city and state governments have attempted to protect immigrants in other ways. Anyone who lives in the city can get an IDNYC card regardless of immigration status, and that information isn’t shared with federal law enforcement. Migrants arriving from Texas have obtained the ID cards in order to work while they wait for their asylum claims to be decided in court. During the pandemic, the state’s Excluded Workers Fund distributed up to $15,600 to New Yorkers who weren’t eligible for unemployment or federal relief, including undocumented immigrants. The city even passed a noncitizen voting law that would have allowed legal permanent residents and people with visas to vote in municipal elections, though it was struck down by a judge as unconstitutional. These efforts, while well-meaning and often helpful, are only a starting point. One of the simplest ways New York could help immigrants is by ending the prosecution of “quality of life” crimes that so often lead to ICE arrests and deportations.

Governor Greg Abbott has indeed revealed the inherent contradictions of sanctuary cities, but not in the way he thinks.
Progressives Split

_A centrist wins a crowded Democratic congressional primary in New York._

**Comment / Joan Walsh**

**CONSIDER THESE NUMBERS: 38,142 AND 16,686.** The first is the number of voters who chose self-described progressive candidates in the Democratic primary for New York’s 10th Congressional District in late August. The second is the number who chose Daniel Goldman. Nevertheless, Goldman, a centrist—for the district, anyway; he’d be regarded as a liberal in the rest of the country—walked away the winner. How did he come out ahead when he garnered only 26 percent of the vote in a field of 12 and when more than twice as many progressive votes were cast against him? Because three popular politicians split those votes—leaving the second-place finisher, Working Families Party—endorsed state Assemblywoman Yuh-Line Niou, trailing Goldman by only about 1,300 votes.

Some of the blame goes to progressives themselves, who failed to get out of their own way and unite behind one candidate. Some goes to a system that allowed Goldman, a Levi Strauss heir, to put just under $4 million of his own money into the race. Some goes to the AIPAC-affiliated United Democracy Project, which funded a phantom PAC called New York Progressives that spent around $400,000 smearing Niou with mailings that distorted her progressive positions as well as slamming her, unfairly, as a foe of Israel and an anti-Semite for her stance on the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement.

But since Goldman was declared the winner—though Niou hasn’t conceded as of this writing, because there could be as many as 13,000 absentee ballots still uncounted—I’ve wondered how much progressives really could have done. Who, for instance, might have had the clout to pull together Congress member Mondaire Jones and City Council member Carlina Rivera to insist they back Niou, even after several polls, including one a week before the election, showed her running a strong second to Goldman? Jones is a sad story: Redistricting put Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee chair Sean Patrick Maloney in the same district as Jones. Instead of challenging Maloney, Jones decamped to Brooklyn and the crowded 10th District race.

Who had the sway to tell him not to do that? Who could have persuaded him to stay and fight Maloney? House Speaker Nancy Pelosi endorsed Jones in his new district, rather than telling him to stay put and challenge Maloney or telling Maloney to run in the adjacent district. The Democratic establishment preferred to see one of the first gay Black members of Congress defeated than to have their fundraising titan lose his seat, an embarrassing signal nationally. So bye-bye, Mondaire.

One progressive organization did have clout with all three candidates: New York’s Working Families Party. It has endorsed Jones, Niou, and Rivera in the past; couldn’t it have had some sway? As Sochie Nnemeka, the party’s New York director, told me before the election, “We should align as progressives behind the strongest candidate, to defeat a self-funded, self-avowed moderate, in one of the most progressive districts in the country.” But she ducted a question about whether the WFP was using its influence to make that happen. If it did, it wasn’t obvious—or effective.

How much influence would the WFP have had, anyway? The party has regained a lot of strength since former governor Andrew Cuomo tried to destroy it after the WFP encouraged the candidacy of challenger Zephyr Teachout in the 2014 gubernatorial primary. But it lost a lot of union support as a result of Cuomo’s political assault, and union endorsements were split among Jones, Niou, and Rivera in this race.

And we can’t take it for granted that Rivera’s and Jones’s support would have gone to Niou if those candidates had retreated. The three have different bases and a few different political stances. But the notion that Jones’s and Rivera’s respective 11,777 and 10,985 voters would not have gone disproportionately to Niou, especially if the pair endorsed her, is implausible to me.

Some supporters are urging Niou and the Working Families Party to run against Goldman in November on the WFP line. In one way, it’s a safe move, since there’s no chance the seat will be lost to a Republican. But there are risks. The Democratic power brokers will go all in for Goldman, and Pelosi would be thrilled to have a self-funding multimillionaire in her caucus. Bronx Representative Ritchie Torres, once a WFP endorsee but less progressive than he used to be, endorsed Goldman on Thursday, as if to send a message to Niou and the WFP. Pro-Israel groups, which are bringing down even Jewish progressives like Representative Andy Levin of Michigan, would savage Niou, no matter how much criticism they might come in for. The WFP would risk reanimating the tension with mainstream Democrats that has eased since the Cuomo grudge match.

Plus, post-election analysis shows that at a time when Americans are telling pollsters that “threats to democracy” represent the nation’s greatest challenge, Goldman had a political lane to himself in the primary. As the lead attorney for House Democrats in Trump’s first impeachment and a well-known Trump critic on MSNBC, he has a hold on so-called “resistance liberals” in NY10.

Despite his Wall Street and real estate support, there is a chunk of the 10th that sees him as progressive. A general election race between Goldman and Niou would be fascinating. It would also be a political bloodbath. I don’t think the country needs that heading into these crucial midterm elections.
Crisis of Confidence

Two visions of national pride compete for dominance in the poorest country in the European Union.

Unique among nations in my experience, Bulgaria is resistant to flattery. I visited the Balkan country in 2006, when it was suffering from the aftereffects of shock therapy—the euphemism for an ill-planned and corrupt transition from a decrepit state socialism to casino capitalism. The scenes I saw at that time were familiar in all the former Warsaw Pact nations: an emptied countryside, the degradation of public spaces, obvious mafiosi lording over the citizenry. In this environment, many Bulgarians looked to the West for hope. Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004, the European Union in 2007.

Returning to Bulgaria in 2022, I initially thought that at least the EU membership was a success. The country, to my outsider’s eyes, seemed much more prosperous. Roads that had been rugged terrain were now paved; omnipresent cranes testified to robust development; and the capital city, Sofia, had an effervescent nightlife.

But my optimism foundered against the rock of Balkan cynicism. In truth, Bulgaria remains the poorest country in the EU. Many Bulgarians feel that EU membership has been a mixed blessing. It has intensified a brain drain as talented youngsters move elsewhere, and the country’s demographic future is bleak. Bulgaria’s population peaked at nearly 9 million people in 1985. It currently has 6.8 million and is expected to shrink to less than 6 million by 2050. Bulgaria is experiencing the fastest population decline of any country in the world.

An argument on a streetcar in Sofia proved instructive. A middle-aged man noticed that my wife, Robin Ganev, was speaking English to our daughters. He turned to a friend and said in Bulgarian, “These English people, what did they come here for?” Robin, who was born in Bulgaria, looked him in the eye and patriotically responded, “I am Bulgarian. I came here to show the kids where I am from.” The truculent passenger refused to yield: “What for? This country won’t be on the map soon. I hope someone comes and conquers us soon.” Robin valiantly tried to make her case, responding, “Don’t say that. There are many good things here.” The Bulgarian had the Beckettian last word: “No. There’s nothing here.”

The streetcar passenger was extreme in his nihilism, but more sober variations of pessimism are rife in Bulgarian public life.

National pride is the subtext of the failure of former prime minister Kiril Petkov’s government, which lost a no-confidence vote in June. Petkov came to power at the end of 2021. His background marked him as a Western-oriented politician: Born in Bulgaria, he moved with his family to Canada when he was 14. His education was in Canada and the United States.

Petkov sided with NATO in the Russia-Ukraine war: He expelled 70 Russian diplomats and resisted Russia’s call to pay for its gas in rubles. Bulgaria depends on Russian gas, and there were fears that the country could have faced a winter of fuel shortages.

This pro-NATO, anti-Russian stance put Petkov at odds with much of the political establishment and public opinion. Along with Serbia, Bulgaria has traditionally been one of the most pro-Russian nations in Europe.

In Sofia, I talked to Velislava Dareva, a historian and journalist known for her sharp dissents from government orthodoxy. She had been a dissident under communism and remains a dissident against the new NATO order. Petkov’s decision to give full support to NATO makes no sense, Dareva told me. “Bulgaria is a member of the EU and NATO on the one hand, but that shouldn’t mean we have to destroy our relationship with Russia,” she said. “Bulgaria as a member of these organizations shouldn’t behave as a vassal and do whatever they are told.”

The political crisis in Bulgaria, then, is a battle between competing visions of national pride. For Petkov, Bulgaria stands to gain by being a pillar of NATO. But for his critics, being in step with NATO is a sign of weakness.

It’s possible to imagine a better future, in which Bulgaria becomes a bridge between Russia and the West. It is perfectly situated to serve as a conduit and cultural translator. But that requires an end to hostilities, which is unlikely to happen anytime soon. If Europe coalesces into a new permanent cold war, then Bulgaria is likely to suffer even greater marginalization.
Objection!
Elie Mystal

Dark Money Windfall

With the help of $1.6 billion, right-wing supervillain Leonard Leo is about to wreak serious havoc.

Imagine how Lois Lane would feel if she found out that a rich industrialist gave Lex Luthor $1.6 billion to start mining Kryptonite. Her comic-book howl is the only thing I can think of that might approximate my own reaction to the news that electronics magnate Barre Seid gave conservative kingpin Leonard Leo $1.6 billion, tax-free, for his new “nonprofit” venture, the Marble Freedom Trust. The most effective villain in America just got a literal fortune to play with.

Leo is the longtime leader of the Federalist Society; as such, he is as responsible as any single individual can be for the conservative takeover of the judicial branch. He has nurtured the careers of countless conservative judges and helped develop the theories of law that give more rights to gun owners than to the half of the population that has a uterus. He’s been instrumental in lobbying Republican politicians to support his judicial candidates. Most important, Leo has been able to get buy-ins from various Republican constituency groups, like the gun lobby and the religious right, to functionally cede the judicial nominations process to him and his organization. Justice Samuel Alito may have killed Roe v. Wade, but it was Leo who fashioned the murder weapon and put it in his hand.

Leo and the Federalist Society have accomplished all of this on a relatively small budget. The society’s 2020 tax filing lists just north of $20 million in revenue. In addition, Leo is at the center of a network of conservative nonprofits that have raised millions in “dark money” donations—more than $250 million between 2014 and 2017 alone—to help remake the judicial system, according to The Washington Post.

This might sound like a lot, but the sad reality is that buying the Supreme Court, as Leo and the Federalist Society have effectively done, is incredibly cheap. To put the money spent on the judiciary in context, the two major candidates in the 2020 presidential election raised $1.8 billion, and an estimated $14 billion was spent on the election as a whole. The 2022 midterms are projected to rack up a $9 billion advertising tab. Obviously, winning the White House and the Senate are important steps along the road to political domination, but winning the judiciary offers something more: Once a group like the Federalist Society influences the selection of even one Supreme Court justice, that justice serves for life and doesn’t have to run every two, four, or six years; they are then perfectly positioned to shape the laws determining who has rights, who gets to vote, which party wins an election. In this way, Leo has been able to shift the balance of power in this country for a fraction of the cost of influencing the popular vote.

Given what Leo managed to do with a quarter of a billion dollars, the prospect of what he will do with $1.6 billion is downright terrifying. While we don’t know precisely how he intends to use the money, the Marble Freedom Trust’s stated mission—described in tax filings as “to maintain and expand human freedom consistent with the values and ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States”—is plenty ominous when you consider who the drafters of the Declaration and the Constitution considered entitled to “human freedom,” and who they did not.

The other hints are no less reassuring. The Marble Freedom Trust’s filings suggest that it’s involved in funneling dark money to a series of conservative interest groups, including some, like the Rule of Law Trust, that Leo himself helms. Another group, the Donors Trust, is well-known for shoveling funds to what Mother Jones described as “anti-union legal shops, climate change deniers, pro-life advocates, libertarian think tanks, media watchdog groups, and a panoply of other right-leaning causes.” And a third, the Concord Fund, more familiarly known as the Judicial Crisis Network, is infamous for pushing right-wing judicial nominees and defending alleged attempted rapist Brett Kavanaugh.

Robert Maguire, the research director of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics, summed up the threat this way: “I’ve never seen a group of this magnitude before,” he told CNN. “This is the kind of money that can help these political operatives and their allies start to move the needle on issues like reshaping the federal judiciary, making it more difficult to vote, a state-by-state campaign to remake election laws and lay the groundwork for undermining future elections.”

My own worry is that this donation will allow Leo to spread his particular poison to the state courts. There are only 870 federal judgeships, and Leo really needs only half of them in his pocket to get what he wants. But there are over 30,000 state court judges, most of whom have to run for their position in local elections.

These judgeships are the next logical step for the con-
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To secure the hot, new Ultra Accel II formula, buyers should contact the Sears Health Hotline at 1-800-713-9044 TODAY. “It’s not available in retail stores yet,” says Dr. Sears. “The Hotline allows us to ship directly to the customer.” Dr. Sears feels so strongly about Ultra Accel II, all orders are backed by a 100% money-back guarantee. “Just send me back the bottle and any unused product within 90 days from purchase date, and I’ll send you all your money back.” The customer is responsible for the return shipping.

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Conservative legal movement. Its control over the federal judiciary, and especially the Supreme Court, means that fewer broad constitutional rights will exist for women, people of color, and the LGBTQ community, and more power will be given to the states. The next thing for the movement to do is to control the power of state legislatures by controlling state courts. Already, we’ve seen important fights at the state level about protections for voting rights, transgender rights, and abortion rights, as conservatives have taken the federal government out of the equation. If people like Leo want to continue suppressing the rights and dignity of others, dominating state courts is the way to go. And it shouldn’t be that expensive to do, given how little attention is paid to state judicial elections. A few dollars to vet Republican judicial nominees here, one or two shameless attack ads on the slate of Democratic nominees there, and it won’t be hard to get a slate of conservative judges elected, even in a “liberal” state.

Leonard Leo is smart. Like Lex Luthor, he knows where to find the power in this system. He understands how institutions work. He understands how to make the law. Now he’s adding “rich” to his list of powers. It’s going to take a whole Justice League to stop him.

My own worry is that this donation will allow Leo to spread his particular poison to the state courts.

Elderly Statesmen

The Democratic Party’s politics are as out-of-date as its oldest members.

IANNE FEINSTEIN is 89, STENY HOYER is 83, NANCY Pelosi and PAT LEAHY are 82, and Bernie Sanders is 80. Ben Cardin is 78, Richard Blumenthal is 76, Jeanne Shaheen is 75, Elizabeth Warren and Ron Wyden are 73; Debbie Stabenow is 72 and Chuck Schumer is 71. And that’s just the Democrats. In total, 46 percent of Senate Democrats and 40 percent of Democrats in the House are 65 or over. (Republicans in Congress are also way up there, but that’s their problem.) Unlike Europe, where leadership is comparatively youthful, America is a gerontocracy: President Biden is 79, and the average age of current Congress members is the highest it’s been in 20 years. That’s not good!

Is it ageist to point out what the problems are? I’m a year older than Schumer—in fact, we were in college together, although I didn’t know him—so I can say freely: No, it is not. For one thing, not too long from now, many of these fine people will be incapacitated or dead. Who will take charge then, if younger people have not been brought in and prepared? And by younger, I don’t mean sixtysomethings. Half the US population is under 40. With the best will in the world, someone born during the Truman administration can barely grasp what life is like for them.

I think a lot these days about what it means to grow older. One has more experience, and hopefully more wisdom and patience, with a broader perspective on life. I can’t believe how hard and judgmental I used to be! But at the same time, one is shaped by one’s circumstances, which may not be relevant later on. When I was young, rent was cheap, college was (more) affordable, and you could live in New York City with a part-time job and not need five roommates to survive. It isn’t easy for my generation to understand the very different economic conditions of people in their 20s and 30s. If you’re going to be paying off student loans till you’re 40, you might as well have—yes—that avocado toast and a $5 latte to go with it.

Would a younger set of Democrats put more energy into doing something about student loans, housing costs, or the astronomical childcare costs that keep mothers at home when they want to go to work? Very likely—it was young people who pushed Biden to announce student loan forgiveness. Would a new crop of Democrats be less likely than their elders to hope for fellowship and compromise across the aisle, which existed in Pelosi’s and Biden’s early years in politics but is a pipe dream today? That seems likely too. They’ve never known a time when Republicans were sane.

It was shocking to see Dianne Feinstein praise the tepid Amy Coney Barrett hearings as “one of the best” she’d participated in, which left her with “some ideas perhaps of good bipartisan legislation we can put
together.” Not to mention that she followed these remarkably clueless statements by hugging Lindsey Graham. A lot of liberals considered this proof that Feinstein was senile, and maybe it is, but it also shows how old habits of comity and compromise die hard. After all, these oldsters have been in the Senate together for decades.

And that’s part of the problem. Amassing ever more power and privilege, sheltered from everyday struggles by personal wealth and a bevvy of staffers and flatterers, constantly mingling with the comfortable and powerful—most of us would find it a challenge to keep our bearings. It’s amazing that Bernie Sanders is still crusading for universal health care and not relaxing into speaking at AARP conventions and penning books with titles like *Veggies for All: Bernie’s Guide to Health at Any Age*.

I’m not saying younger politicians are automatically more in touch with the struggles of ordinary people or are ready to help them. Kyrsten Sinema is only 46, and she’s basically Joe Manchin (74) in a dress. Sometimes age really is just a number: I was appalled when Alessandra Biaggi (36), who ran for Congress in New York’s Rockland County and parts of Westchester County against Sean Patrick Maloney (56), tweeted this bizarre insult to middle-aged women: “At the risk of sounding ageist, it’s still important to ask: when a majority of Congress is past child-bearing age, how fierce can we expect their fight to be?”

Past childbearing age? What is this, *The Handmaid’s Tale*? Nice, too, how she singled out women when her opponent is a man.

Still, age isn’t just a number. It’s reality, too. Consider Ruth Bader Ginsburg. If she had retired at 80, when Obama was president and Dems controlled the Senate, we’d be living in a different world. But despite having several kinds of cancer, and despite the pleas of friends and admirers, she hung on. Vanity? Love of the work? Maybe she thought Hillary Clinton was sure to win and would eventually nominate her replacement. Now we have to watch RBG’s legacy destroyed by Amy Coney Barrett, who is only 50. Life expectancy on the Supreme Court being what it is, she will probably outlive most of you reading these words.

Many people can’t retire for financial reasons, but that is not the case for the political elites I’m writing about here. They could all have wonderful second careers: teaching, writing, lecturing, sitting on philanthropic boards, fundraising for worthy causes—or even unworthy ones. They could take up gardening or painting or Chinese cooking. They could learn Portuguese or raise Abyssinian cats. If you have health, there is no shortage of things to do in this world. My retired friends are all as occupied as when they had jobs and as happy, too—maybe happier. Some of them wish they had retired earlier, because there are things they would have liked to do that are now physically beyond them.

You’ll notice I’ve said nothing about whether Biden should run in 2024, when he will be 81. I have no idea: I’m for the safest option, whoever that is. But then I am 72 and cautious. Chalk it up to experience.
Recent reports of teachers leaving schools ahead of the new year come as no surprise: They are underpaid, overworked, on the front lines of the pandemic, and dealing with the increasing politicization of their profession. And if they raise concerns, teachers are rebuked, told to continue selflessly performing their work out of a commitment to their students.

So while it is impossible to say whether there is an actual teacher shortage, as the United States does not collect timely data on teacher employment, what is certain is that teachers are unhappy: A recent survey from the American Federation of Teachers, one of the largest teachers’ unions in the country, shows that an overwhelming 79 percent of teachers are dissatisfied with their working conditions. Moreover, 38 percent indicated that they were likely to leave their job in the next two years.

To be sure, this is not a new problem—teacher turnover has long been a struggle—but it is one that is felt unevenly.

This is not just a question of education. Public schools are essential community institutions, where many children—especially low-income children and students of color—receive food, essential health services, education, and child care. During the pandemic, when government aid fell short, teachers stepped up to make sure students and their families had what they needed to weather the crisis.

This is exactly why there is a need for strong teachers’ unions that can advocate for solutions that center the needs of students—starting with better teacher pay and increased funding for schools. Improved working conditions will help to attract and retain high-quality teachers, who are essential to positive student outcomes.

Teachers’ unions are advocates for education spending. A 2019 study in Education Policy showed that, while the 2008-9 recession led all states to reduce education spending, states with strong teachers’ unions cut less, and those that prohibited collective bargaining by teachers cut disproportionately more. However, collective bargaining is effective in raising education expenditures and teacher pay only when teachers also have the ability to strike. Indeed, teachers’ strikes in 2018 led to increased education spending and teacher salaries around the country.

Unfortunately, Democrats as well as Republicans have been undermining teachers’ unions under the guise of “freedom” and “equality.” In terms of education policy, the Obama administration came to a mutual understanding with the Republican Party, embracing “school choice.” This reform resulted in an expansion of charter schools, which are publicly funded, privately operated, and overwhelmingly nonunionized.

This privatization of schools through charters undermined public school teachers’ union membership and threw a wrench in organizing efforts because, in many states, charter schools do not need to adhere to the collective bargaining agreements of public schools in the same districts. Therefore, the growth of charter schools has undercut the ability of teachers’ unions to fight anti-“critical race theory” laws, spending cuts, and more.

Thankfully, Joe Biden stated on the campaign trail that he was not a fan of charters and has since proposed stricter criteria for charter access to federal funding. Nevertheless, the damage is done, and while the Democratic Party has cooled on charters, it continues to join Republicans in rhetorical attacks on teachers’ unions.

After losing the 2021 Virginia governor’s race, Democrats gave credence to a false narrative that teachers’ unions threaten the party’s electoral prospects. Some Democrats attributed Republican Glenn Youngkin’s win to his denunciation of school closures, blaming unions rather than the failed government response to Covid-19.

In fact, voters who cited “critical race theory” as their most important issue overwhelmingly voted for Youngkin. Overall, teachers’ unions saw dramatic losses in membership in the 2020-21 school year, aligning with national downward trends in union membership across sectors. While some have predicted that the pandemic might spark a resurgence in the labor movement, overall trends in union membership numbers don’t seem to support the assertion—at least not yet.

Given these attacks and the potential teacher retention crisis, stronger teachers’ unions present a tangible opportunity for educators to grow their power and for the United States to bolster an education system that has been neglected for decades. If Democrats want to show that they support student access to quality education, they must protect teachers and teachers’ unions.

Emelia Gold is a research and program associate at the Brennan Center for Justice. Nicholas Rabb is a computer science and cognitive science PhD candidate at Tufts University.
Freedom for Ukraine

A demonstrator at the Ukraine Freedom Parade in Berlin’s city center on August 24. Thousands of people marched to show their support for the country on Ukraine’s Independence Day. The day also marked six months since the start of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

### By the Numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rise in the average cost of an undergraduate education between 1980 and 2018</td>
<td>169%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum amount owed by one in five Black teachers</td>
<td>$100K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of federal student debt President Biden’s plan forgives for most borrowers</td>
<td>$10K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average base salary for full-time public school teachers in 2017-18</td>
<td>$59K</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approximate number of unfilled teaching positions in Nevada</td>
<td>2.7K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated number of teachers’ strikes that took place across the US between 2007 and 2019</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Philadelphia school district workers who authorized a strike ahead of the 2022-23 school year</td>
<td>2K</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### Overheard From Those Going Through the Boxes Found in Trump’s Basement

- “Some hamburger menus (with stains) seem to be Right next to our plans for the South China Sea.”
- “I’ve just come across some old bills—all still owed.”
- “I wonder if this is the nuclear code.”

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**SNAPSHOT/Carsten Koall**

**Deadline Poet**
How Kansas Kept Abortion Legal

When voters, even in a deep-red state, had the chance to decide for themselves, they protected abortion rights.

AMY LITTLEFIELD
THE LAST PATIENT OF THE DAY SAT IN A BLUE RECLINER IN THE RECOVERY room at Trust Women in Wichita, Kan. It was late afternoon on August 1, one day before Kansans would vote on whether to keep the right to abortion in the Kansas Constitution. April, a patient from Oklahoma City, had spent much of the day lying on a leather couch, watching The Simpsons on her phone, waiting for her cervix to dilate so doctors could complete her abortion. Soon, she’d climb into her friend’s car to start the two-and-a-half-hour drive home. That didn’t seem so bad compared with the experiences of some of the women she’d met that day. One told April she had paid $800 to fly to Kansas with her husband. Another drove nine hours from Houston and had to be back there for work the next day. A third started out from Dallas at 2 am. Those were the ones who’d made it.

The ones who hadn’t made it to their appointments were from Tulsa, Dallas, and smaller towns in Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas—towns four or nine hours deep into a solid wall of more than half a dozen states where legal abortion is gone. Bans in Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Mississippi have forced patients into a bottleneck that ends in Kansas—a state with a history of violent anti-abortion activism, where “pro-life” conservatives have slashed public school budgets and bestowed tax cuts on the wealthy. Now it was the first state to hold a vote on abortion rights since the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade with its ruling in Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization in June. The nation was watching. Pundits saw the vote as the first sign of whether the court’s decision might propel Democrats to victory in the November midterms. For staff at the clinic in Wichita, the stakes were more immediate. They wanted to keep their jobs. They wanted to be there for patients like April.

“I got an abortion here in 2013,” Samantha Treat, a nurse with a soothing voice in a pink flowered scrub cap, told April as she bent down to take her vitals. Treat was a mother of three going through a divorce when she found out she was pregnant with twins by a man she barely knew. Back then, Treat said, she had a choice: drive three hours to the nearest abortion clinic in Kansas City or wait a few weeks for the Wichita clinic to reopen after it had closed in 2009 following the murder of its owner, Dr. George Tiller. “I know two of the girls I met in the waiting room with me, they were in the same situation,” she added. Then she walked out to the parking lot.

The amendment to strip the right to abortion from the Kansas Constitution was supposed to pass without a hitch. Republicans, who hold a supermajority in both chambers of the Kansas State Legislature, scheduled the vote for an August primary, when the turnout tends to be half of that in a general election. They knew that top-tier Republican contests in August would draw Republicans to the polls. Almost 30 percent of Kansas voters are unaffiliated, and many of them might not realize they can vote for a ballot measure even if they can’t vote for the party candidates. Voter suppression tactics like a deadline to register three weeks before the vote would disenfranchise young voters, who were more likely to oppose the amendment—including Samantha Treat’s 18-year-old son, who put a “No” bumper sticker on his car but failed to register in time to vote.

Then, five weeks before the August 2 election, the Supreme Court overturned Roe. In Kansas, voter registration surged 1,000 percent the day of the decision. In the five counties where the campaign Kansans for Constitutional Freedom was running the ground game, the number of volunteers knocking on doors to defeat the amendment quickly swelled tenfold to 500, according to spokesperson Ashley All. The campaign’s partner organizations were canvassing throughout the state, even deep in the areas that Donald Trump won by a wide margin in 2020. In Crawford County, in the southeastern corner of Kansas, a woman incensed by the overturn of Roe organized a few of her friends to knock on 1,600 doors in the waning weeks of the campaign. The “No” campaign triumphed there by 1,110 votes. People were designing their own lawn signs and ringing their neighbors’ doorbells.

Voter registration surged 1,000 percent in Kansas the day the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade.

“I chose to wait,” Treat said. April didn’t reply. She hadn’t had the option of waiting. Oklahoma banned abortion in May. Now Kansas was voting on whether to allow its state legislature to follow suit. After she was cleared to go home, April sat watching the clinic’s security camera for the arrival of her friend’s SUV. It felt “insane” to her, she said, that anyone had a say in what people did with their own bodies. “No woman actually wants to go get an abortion—they have a reason why,” April said. “My reason: My son is just about to be 10 months old. I don’t need to have another newborn here anytime soon.”
Supportive clergy delivered sermons on abortion; youth activists launched a horse-themed campaign called Vote Neigh.

“It was already a given that the majority of Kansans and the majority of Americans would oppose something like this,” says Rija Nazir, a 21-year-old senior at Wichita State University and the lead organizer for Vote Neigh. “Our job really was to find those people, let them know what was happening, and get them out to the polls.”

In an effort to reach Republican and unaffiliated voters, Kansans for Constitutional Freedom focused its messaging on the right of Kansans to make health care decisions “free from government interference.”

“For a lot of people, abortion is not a partisan issue, even though it’s something that is always discussed in a partisan frame,” All says. The focus on “constitutional freedom,” she adds, was intended to account for voters’ complex feelings about abortion while encouraging them to vote “to protect the constitutional rights of women to make that decision themselves.” The name was vague enough that it left some voters confused about which side the campaign was on.

But the official message was far from the only one that reached voters. On a highway overpass, I saw a person standing with a hand-lettered poster that read: “Birth control is next.”

“Can we count on you to vote no?” the person asked.

“We already know how Roe v. Wade was overturned, I was furious about it,” Stephanie Lebeda, a 46-year-old postal worker, says.

“I just feel like I have to get out here,” says Truelove, who’s 30 and just graduated with a master’s degree in health care administration. She’s soft-spoken and at times seems nervous talking to strangers, but she’s out here because she’s horrified by the idea that her state might ban abortion.

“Abortion access is a huge determinant of health,” she says. “It’s a huge determinant of the wellness of communities and the wellness of children and families.”

This afternoon she’s being shadowed by Courtney, a 24-year-old native Kansan who has never canvassed before. Courtney tells me that her Republican father has been phone-banking for the first time in his life, too—calling voters and telling them to preserve the right to abortion in the state.

No one answers at the first two doors in the quiet hamlet of cul-de-sacs and manicured lawns. At the third house, a man answers the door. Truelove asks for the woman whose name is on her list of voters identified as likely to oppose the anti-abortion amendment.

When Megan Dominguez appears at the door in sparkly sneakers, Truelove asks, “Can we count on you to vote no?”

“Definitely,” Dominguez says. “I will be there.”

Standing in the entrance to her home, Dominguez says she’s always been pro-choice, but the stakes feel higher now. Her sister lives in neighboring Oklahoma, where abortion is banned and where CVS has asked its pharmacists to verify that the prescriptions for drugs used to treat miscarriages, cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, and ectopic pregnancies won’t be used for abortions. “That made it even scarier and made it really hit home that, OK, we have to get out there and vote,” she says.

Dominguez is not the only pro-choice person who’s been transformed by this moment into an angrily pro-choice person. “I’ve never put a sign in my yard before,” says Stephanie Lebeda, a 46-year-old postal worker. She and her husband, Jon, have pitched a red sign on their lawn that reads “Vote no on 2, stand for liberty.”

“When Roe v. Wade was overturned, I was furious about it,” Stephanie says. “I actually shed a few tears about it, too.”

Before moving to the next house, we take refuge from the baking heat under the roof in front of the Lebedas’ garage. Jon comes running after us with three bottles of water. This small gesture of solidarity buoys the canvassers. They need the encouragement: Plenty of people don’t want to talk, or else tell the canvassers they’re voting against them.

“We already know how we’re going to vote,” one man says, answering the door in a T-shirt that reads “Jesus is my savior, Trump is my president.”

Truelove doesn’t feel the need
to ask which way that might be. At a house with three white cars in the garage, a woman tells us she’s voting yes; she attends an evangelical church where the preacher delivered a sermon in favor of the anti-abortion amendment. Churches, especially the Catholic dioceses, are the main financial backers of the amendment. But that doesn’t mean everyone in the pews agrees. We meet a lifelong Catholic who’s had no trouble ignoring the call to vote yes in her church bulletin. A young teacher whose minister spoke against abortion that morning tells us she hasn’t made up her mind yet but is leaning toward voting no. “Doesn’t mean I agree with abortion,” she says, “but I also don’t believe in making decisions for other people.”

We walk from one American-flag-adorned lawn to the next. With their beige siding and brick, the houses all start to look the same. But moments of hope punctuate the day.

“I’m voting no! No! No!” Yolanda Adams says, passing to talk to the canvassers as she pulls out of her driveway. “It’s a woman’s body. If you’re telling me somebody gets raped and they’ve got to have a baby, that’s crazy.”

What is clear by the end of the afternoon is that people are taking this vote personally. A Black executive tells us that she sees in the Supreme Court’s overturn of Roe a potential threat to her own interracial marriage. A registered Republican who has been through fertility treatments says she’s been trying to get her mother to understand that banning abortion could impact those treatments, too.

But the most encouraging sign is the two young women I’m following, neither of whom has ever canvassed before, and the fact that, long after the sweat has started running into my eyes and I’ve begun staring longingly at strangers’ swimming pools, they keep going. It takes four hours, but we get to every door on the list.

The energy surrounding this moment reminded me of another grassroots uprising that transformed Kansas politics. In 1991, the militant anti-abortion organization Operation Rescue, led by Randall Terry, descended on Wichita and targeted Tiller’s clinic, one of the few refuges for patients who needed abortions later in pregnancy. The 46-day campaign of blockades and stadium-size gatherings resulted in over 2,600 arrests of anti-abortion demonstrators, who crawled under cars and blocked clinic entrances. At the behest of police, clinics agreed to shut down for a week. Chroniclers described the gathering as a kind of anti-abortion Woodstock—a moment when the anti-abortion movement reveled in its newfound power. “This was where the Kansas conservative movement got an idea of its own strength,” Thomas Frank wrote of the so-called Summer of Mercy in his 2004 book What’s the Matter With Kansas? “This was where it achieved critical mass.”

That critical mass would shift the direction of the Republican Party in the state for decades to come. Abortion opponents ran for state legislative posts and county precinct committee positions, taking over the party. In Sedgwick County, home to Wichita, abortion opponents—who had held less than half the positions in the county’s Republican leadership—surged to an 83 percent majority the year after the Summer of Mercy. The pattern was repeated across the country in the years and decades to come, as the religious right surged to power in states, wrapping an economic agenda that favored wealthy corporations in anti-abortion rhetoric to rile up a dedicated swath of the voting base. In Kansas, this formula would culminate in the 2010 election of Governor Sam Brownback, a Catholic zealot known for implementing tax cuts for the wealthy that paved the way for budget cuts that destroyed the state’s schools and highways.

Three decades after the Summer of Mercy, it’s now the Summer of Our Discontent—as the nonprofit news outlet the Kansas Reflector has called it—and cracks are forming in the conservative stranglehold on states like Kansas. I traveled to Wichita to find out whether the grassroots effort there to defeat the anti-abortion initiative might mark a turning point for the abortion rights movement in the way that the Summer of Mercy had been for abortion opponents 30 years earlier. Following the overturn of Roe v. Wade, abortion rights supporters across the country began channeling their outrage into grassroots political participation in numbers that were unprecedented. Was this the moment when the movement to restore access to abortion would achieve its own critical mass? In Wichita, I saw evidence all around me that it was.
On the day before the vote, the staff members open the phone lines at Trust Women in Wichita. Within an hour and a half, they’ve filled all the appointment slots for the following Monday. The number of calls has been so high since Texas banned abortions after six weeks of pregnancy last September. Since the Supreme Court overturned Roe, the call volume has been as high as 1,000 a day, 100 an hour. In the past, Stormi Herbison would make about 12 appointments on a normal day. At 1 pm today, she and her colleagues have booked 52—for patients from states including Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas. The phone is still ringing.

“And they just don’t quit,” says Herbison, a tough-talking woman with purple streaks in her dark hair. A sign over her desk reads: “This girl runs on caffeine and sarcasm.” Herbison comes from a tiny town in Kansas; her mom still asks her if she’s gotten a real job. “I say, ‘No, I still like what I do, and I’m still employed, and you’re still not paying my bills, so don’t worry about it,’” she says. Herbison didn’t expect this job to last, but three years later, she’s still here. She likes helping patients who are struggling—like the 17-year-old from Texas she spoke with earlier this morning, who seemed to just need someone to tell her that her decision was OK.

As Herbison talks, she keeps her pale blue eyes focused on the screen in front of her, where she’s labeling documents that go into medical charts. The phone rings. Herbison exhales sharply and answers. It’s a patient who’s at three weeks, too early for an ultrasound to confirm the pregnancy is in her uterus. More patients have been calling too early to be seen, terrified they will lose their chance at an appointment if they wait. Herbison tries to call back when she’s further along.

The next call is from Texas, a man who needs to book a surgical abortion for his wife. Herbison tells him to call back in a week, when they might have more appointments available. Thirty seconds later, the phone rings again. When Herbison tells the caller there aren’t any slots left for surgical abortions, the patient chooses a medication abortion instead. That way she can make an appointment 10 days from now, instead of having to try her luck with calling again. The address the patient gives is two hours away, in Edmond, Okla.

This system of opening the schedule a week ahead of time is the fairest option the staff have come up with under patently unfair circumstances—when patients desperate for appointments vastly outnumber the slots available. The need from Texas alone is unrelenting; Texas residents sought more than 55,000 abortions in 2020, the year before the six-week ban took effect. Kansas providers handled just 7,500 abortions that year. The Wichita clinic is undergoing a long-delayed renovation to expand its capacity, but it will still be able to handle only a fraction of the region’s need. The staff here didn’t cause this chaos, but they’re absorbing the suffering it’s led to. Herbison visibly struggles at times to keep the exhaustion out of her voice. She’s developed a way of coping with dry humor. In the recovery room, I hear Ashley Brink, the clinic director, commiserating with coworkers using a metaphor Herbison gave her to describe the feeling of being emotionally drained by the end of the day.

“It’s like those geckos that lose their tail or a leg, and you’re like, ‘Oh, there it goes,’ but then the next morning it starts to sprout a new one,” Brink says, laughing. “It might be a different color, it might be turned a different way, it might not work fully, but it can still show up and it can still be a gecko.”

“I’m the gecko!” her co-worker laughs.

Brink wears a T-shirt that reads “Keep abortion local!” and has a coat-hanger tattoo behind her ear and a papaya tattoo—the fruit is sometimes used in abortion training because it resembles a uterus—on her arm. She’s from a small town north of Topeka. In 2009, when an anti-abortion extremist shot and killed Dr. Tiller, people from her town celebrated. By then, Brink, whose mother raced cars and worked as a mechanic, had learned to think for herself. Now she runs Tiller’s clinic. And she wants people to understand that Kansas—the site of abolitionist John Brown’s uprising against slavery and of the Populist movement in the late 19th century—is every bit as capable of producing someone like her as it is someone like Sam Brownback.

“When people talk to me, they assume that I’m not from Kansas,” Brink says. But she’s the granddaughter of farmers, the daughter of Kansas. “I am who I am because of the people who raised me, and they raised me here in this state.”

Behind Brink, Dr. Christina Bourne, the clinic’s medical director, commiserates with coworkers using a metaphor that echoes the clinic staff with a contagious energy and warmth. Under her direction, back in the recovery room, workers move like a well-oiled machine, updating a giant whiteboard with patient information, sipping from super-size cans of Red Bull, releasing the tension with dark humor. During downtime, they muse about the next day’s vote, which
will determine whether they will be able to continue this work that feels more like a calling.

“I don’t want to go back to knee replacements,” a nurse named Kate says as she drops white chalky tablets of misoprostol for medication abortions into orange bottles.

She and the rest of the staff are afraid that this scene, all of it, the mundane and the extraordinary, could end soon. It has felt that way for a long time.

R. GEORGE TILLER WAS A REPUBLICAN, before the party changed. Born in Wichita in 1941, Tiller intended to become a dermatologist. But when his physician father, Jack Tiller, died in a plane crash in 1970, Tiller came home and discovered that his father had been offering abortions before it was legal to do so. After Roe v. Wade was decided in 1973, patients asked George to offer abortions, like his father had—and he did. He remained a Republican until at least the early 1990s, when anti-abortion protesters were blocking his clinic.

“In August 1992, furious after four protesters chained themselves to his clinic gates, Tiller stormed out of the clinic dressed in a lab coat, walked to the gate and grabbed a microphone from a stunned TV camera operator,” journalists Judy Thomas and David Klepper wrote for The Kansas City Star. “Then he lashed out at President George H.W. Bush and the Republican Party, saying they were controlled by ‘religious fanatics.’”

Perhaps one of the few remaining standard-bearers for the dying breed of Republican that Tiller used to be is Jan Kessinger, a former management consultant and associate publisher of a produce industry newspaper, who spent four years in the Kansas legislature before his decision to defend abortion rights cost him his seat. I meet with Kessinger on my way out of town. He lives in a generous home in a cul-de-sac in the moneyed enclave of Overland Park, a suburb of Kansas City. Kessinger is a jovial man with a penchant for winking and an admiration for selective parts of Richard Nixon’s presidency. He leads me to an air-conditioned sun porch overlooking a garden with animal statues symbolizing his family members—the statue representing him is the lion. “Because I have courage,” he says sheepishly.

In 2016, under Governor Brownback, Kansas had become a laughingstock of late-night television. Brownback had slashed income taxes as part of an “experiment” that had defunded schools so severely that the courts declared it to be a violation of the state Constitution. “The state was on the verge of bankruptcy,” Kessinger says. “I mean, we were a joke.” Kessinger ran for a seat in the legislature and won. Part of a cohort that opposed the Brownback experiment, he set about restoring income taxes for wealthy corporations like the Wichita-based Koch Industries, the empire of the billionaire brothers David and Charles Koch. But it was his support for abortion rights that seemed to get him into the most trouble. In 2019, Republicans tried to pass a bill requiring patients to be told they could “reverse” the abortion pill; Kessinger said he looked into it and discovered that the bill was based on “quack science.” The Republican effort to override Democratic Governor Laura Kelly’s veto of the bill failed by a single vote—Kessinger’s.

That same year, the Kansas Supreme Court ruled that there was a constitutional right to abortion in the state. Kessinger refused to go along with the plan to repeal that right—the plan that culminated in this year’s August 2 vote. So a coalition comprising kansans for Life, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Koch brothers–backed Americans for Prosperity poured money into a right-wing primary challenger, Jane Dirks, who ran on restricting abortion and cutting taxes. She defeated Kessinger in the primary, then lost to a Democrat in the general election.

The way Kessinger sees it, the Republican Party’s extremism, wildly out of step with voters, cost the party a seat. He thinks the pattern will be repeated. “I expect Democratic Party rolls to bloom,” he says. There are signs that’s already happening. Even in rural counties that are solidly red, people were turning up in unprecedented numbers to Democratic Party meetings in the weeks leading up to August 2. “And I don’t see the Republicans responding,” Kessinger says. “I don’t think they realize that they woke up a giant—the silent majority.”

O N AUGUST 2, THE MORNING OF THE VOTE, I STOP BY REFORMATION LUTHERAN CHURCH, where George Tiller was murdered. Like many of the churches in Wichita, this one is serving as a polling place today. A line of voters wends its way through the carpeted foyer where Tiller’s body lay. The line stretches out the set of brown double doors and into the parking lot. I meet a petite woman wearing a wide-brimmed sun hat that she put on because she thought she might have to wait in a long line outside.

(continued on page 31)
IN JUNE, AT THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION’S ANNUAL MEETING IN ANAHEIM, CALIF.,Albert Mohler Jr., the president of the denomination’s flagship seminary and one of its leading theologians, was asked whether he believed that women who have abortions should be prosecuted for murder. Mohler acknowledged that there could be gray areas, such as miscarriages, but came down on the side of criminalizing women. “There are many cases in which, demonstrably, there is not just an abortionist who should face criminal consequences, but a woman seeking an abortion,” he said to applause. “That is something we believe the law should pursue.” Law enforcement could pursue such cases, he added, if the final version of the Supreme Court’s opinion in Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization, eliminating the constitutional right to an abortion, resembled the draft that had leaked in May.

Ten days later, after the Supreme Court handed down its opinion, Mohler celebrated the end of Roe v. Wade on his daily podcast, The Briefing. The majority opinion, he said, amounted to “a reversal of a revolution,” one that could lead to the demise of other Supreme Court decisions reviled by the Christian right, including Obergefell v. Hodges, the 2015 decision enshrining marriage equality as the law of the land. “I rejoice in this day,” Mohler said, praising in particular a shift away from the influence of Chief Justice John Roberts, who “was unwilling to stand with the majority of conservative justices” to invalidate Roe. The court’s center of power, Mohler continued, now...

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rested with a “resurgent conservative majority” led by Justice Samuel Alito, who, with his majority opinion, had “stuck a dagger in the heart of liberal jurisprudence.”

Mohler’s jubilation over the death blow to liberal jurisprudence echoes the recent history of his denomination, which underwent its own right-wing radicalization in the 1980s and ‘90s. Known to its proponents as the “conservative resurgence” (and to its critics as the “fundamentalist takeover”), the radicalization of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) fueled the rise of the modern religious right and its formal marriage to the Republican Party. That transformation has reverberated throughout our politics, as Southern Baptists have forged unprecedented alliances with Catholics and other conservative Christians in a quest to drive progressive advances back to the margins, much as they had driven liberals out of their own denomination. In the years since the takeover, the homophobic, transphobic, and patriarchal views cemented in official Southern Baptist statements have become the gospel of the denomination and its 14 million members, a bellwether for tens of millions of other evangelicals, and the lodestar of the Republican Party, whose leaders have sought the moral imprimatur of popular Southern Baptist leaders. The reach of this regressive theology into our national politics is now at a historic apex, with Dobbs energizing the right’s pursuit of even more punitive crackdowns on abortion and a revitalized offensive against LGBTQ rights.

From the presidency of Ronald Reagan through that of Donald Trump, Southern Baptist leaders played influential roles in blessing Republican presidential candidates, vetting Supreme Court justices, and shaping policy. Just as the SBC’s conservatives seized control of their own denomination, purging moderate pastors and churches, the religious right took over the GOP, playing a key role in turning it into today’s Trumpian party of white Christian nationalism.

The SBC’s “determination to make one view of the Bible—their view—the test of religious truth was political dynamite.”

—Bill Moyers

The history of the conservative resurgence begins in Texas, where Paul Pressler, a Southern Baptist layman and state appellate court judge, and his friend Paige Patterson, the president of Criswell College, part of the influential First Baptist Church in Dallas, set out to cleanse the denomination of attempts by liberals to dilute the dogma of “biblical inerrancy.” As Pressler told the journalist Bill Moyers in 1987, he became aware of the alleged drift of Southern Baptist theology via a medium strikingly familiar to any observer of the contemporary right’s backlash against pluralism: textbooks. Pressler told Moyers that a student in his Bible study group who attended Baylor University, a Southern Baptist school in Waco, Tex., had told him that the freshman religion textbook said there were errors in the Book of Daniel.

After investigating this supposed transgression, Pressler said, he resolved to ensure that no one at the helm of any Southern Baptist institution would ever again allow any suggestion that the Bible was not 100 percent true. He traveled the country, urging Southern Baptists to attend the denomination’s annual meeting and elect leaders who would “make the proper appointments to change the trustees so that the trustees could properly function in correcting the problems at their institutions.”

Pressler’s plan, executed with Patterson, would alter the course of American politics. Pledges to respect “biblical inerrancy” became the litmus test for leadership positions within the denomination. The SBC also enforced traditional gender roles and barred women from preaching. In 1979, Pressler advocated for the election of the anti-gay crusader Anita Bryant to a top leadership position within the denomination. This was two years after Bryant had founded the organization Save Our Children to force the repeal of a gay rights ordinance in Miami. (Her slogan “Homosexuals cannot reproduce, so they must recruit” has been revived in the form of Florida’s current “Don’t Say Gay” law, also rooted in homophobic tropes that queer people “groom” children.) Bryant lost the SBC race, which Pressler attributed to the unwillingness of Southern Baptists to elect a woman to the post. But Bryant’s anti-gay politics would become the cornerstone of the religious right’s strategy for seizing power within the GOP.

By 1979, the year the religious right was coalescing around the candidacy of Ronald Reagan (not a regular churchgoer) over the reelection bid of Jimmy Carter (a liberal Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher), the fundamentalist takeover of the SBC was complete. For Southern Baptists like Moyers, it was a travesty and “alien to my experience growing up” in his own church in Marshall, Tex. In his 1987 broadcast on
the conservative resurgence, Moyers lamented the expulsions of more liberal-minded churches and officials from the denomination and the jettisoning of the Southern Baptist tradition of respecting the line between church and politics. The fundamentalists' "determination to make one view of the Bible—their view—the test of religious and political truth," Moyers said, was "radical, and for America it's political dynamite, because how Baptists read the Bible affects how they cast their ballots."

Pressler was lionized in Republican circles for his role in leading the conservative resurgence. He joined the Council for National Policy, the secretive, agenda-setting brain trust of the right founded in 1981, serving as its president from 1988 to 1990. When President Reagan nominated Robert Bork for the Supreme Court, Pressler and Patterson supported him and met with White House staff to strategize. And in 1989, President George H.W. Bush's religious adviser, Doug Wead, recommended Pressler for a post as director of the Office of Government Ethics, writing in a memo that Pressler possessed "tremendous integrity and moral qualities" and that his nomination would send a strong signal" to evangelicals that "we want to include their ideas, their values and their leaders in this administration. A routine background investigation found unspecified "ethics problems" with Pressler's nomination, however, and it was withdrawn. Yet Pressler retained his status as an elder statesman in Republican and evangelical politics. In 2012, he hosted influential conservatives at his Texas ranch, where they decided to endorse Rick Santorum for president. In 2015, Pressler endorsed Ted Cruz, saying he had known the rising Republican star since he was a teenager.

The growing conservative Christian legal movement also sought Pressler's imprimatur for its efforts to build law schools that would teach its approved version of jurisprudence. In 2007, Louisiana College, a Southern Baptist school in Shreveport, announced it was launching a law school that would be named after Pressler. The school appointed religious right luminaries like James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family; Tony Perkins, the president of the Family Research Council; and Ted Cruz to its board. At a 2010 press conference announcing the acquisition of a building for the school, Pressler said, "Law is the way we maintain society, and without the Christian concept, and without the Christian dedication, there is no way that democratic government is going to operate effectively." Pressler recognized elected Republicans in the audience, including a young state legislator from Texas, Bryan Hughes, who, he promised, would be an "outstanding Christian" lawmaker. (Hughes would go on to become a coauthor of SB-8, the 2021 Texas law that bans abortion at six weeks and offers a $10,000 bounty to private citizens who sue anyone who helps a person get an abortion.) After raising $5 million, acquiring a building, and starting construction, the college ultimately abandoned its plans for the law school in 2014.

Richard Land, a protégé of Pressler's who was hired in 1988 to lead the SBC's policy arm in Washington, D.C., now known as the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, became one of the leading public figures in the religious right and one of the foremost advocates for a full-on alliance between evangelicals and the Republican Party, according to Aaron Weaver, a scholar of the Southern Baptist Convention. Land became a go-to source for journalists looking for a quote about evangelicals and politics, and Time magazine named him one of the country's 25 most influential evangelicals in 2005, a year considered a high point of evangelical influence in Washington because of their proximity to the George W. Bush White House. When Land left his post in 2013 amid controversies over alleged plagiarism and racist comments, he was lauded within Southern Baptist circles for his role in bringing the denomination's opposition to abortion and LGBTQ rights to the fore.

"No one in our lifetime has had a greater impact on the social and ethical attitudes and actions of Southern Baptists than Richard Land," said Jimmy Draper, a former SBC president, in a keynote address at a 2013 dinner in Land's honor.

Other Pressler protégés have become powerful figures in the ongoing effort to pull the Texas Republican Party ever rightward. Jared Woodfill began practicing law with Pressler in the mid-2000s, after Pressler retired from the bench. Pressler, Woodfill told me in 2017, introduced him to Steven Hotze, a doctor, a supplier of dietary supplements, and a Christian nationalist political activist; the pair have used their organization, Conservative Republicans of Texas, to attack those Republicans who were insufficiently right-wing and to condemn LGBTQ people as "perverts," "deviants," and "sodomites." Woodfill and Hotze were the architects of a 2014 anti-trans campaign in Houston that provided a template for anti-trans activists across the country.

More recently, Hotze has embraced Trump's lies and conspiracy theories about a stolen election. In April, he was indicted for a convoluted scheme in which he allegedly hired a former Houston police officer to root out supposed voter fraud in the 2020 election. Prosecutors said the former cop surveilled an air-conditioning repairman he falsely believed was carrying ballots in the back of his van and tried to run...
him off the road. Hotze has denied the allegations. Woodfill, who is representing Hotze, did not respond to a request for comment.

Bush responded by sending video greetings to the SBC gathering. “You’re living out the call to spread the Gospel and proclaim the Kingdom of God,” he said. “Thank you for your strong voice in the public square.” The Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Prevention Act did not become law until 2009, when Barack Obama was president.

On August 12, more than 40 years into the SBC’s march toward imposing its homophobic, patriarchal theology on American politics and law, the denomination revealed that the Department of Justice was investigating allegations of sexual abuse against members of its clergy. The announcement came three months after a blistering report, prepared by the independent consulting firm Guidepost Solutions, documented over two decades of sexual abuse (including rape), cover-ups, and the mistreatment and intimidation of survivors. The SBC had retained Guidepost under pressure, following the publication of an explosive 2019 investigation by the Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News that documented hundreds of instances of abuse. The Guidepost investigators found that Southern Baptist leaders had kept a secret database of convicted sex offenders within their fold—but had never told the churches where they worked as employees or volunteers, an effort to protect perpetrators and shield the denomination and churches from lawsuits. The report implicated some of the most powerful Southern Baptist religious and political leaders, either for engaging in sexual assault themselves, covering up abuse by others, or vilifying survivors and their advocates as perpetrators of, as one put it, “a satanic scheme to completely distract us from evangelism.”

The sexual abuse—which dated back decades, to before the period covered by the Guidepost report—coincided with the conservative resurgence’s old guard, called abortion “the greatest moral crisis of our generation.”

Southern Baptists also led the way in injecting homophobic theology into public policy and legislative debates, wielding their influence as the nation’s largest Protestant denomination, with the theological clout to influence tens of millions of other evangelicals. In official denominational statements, they repeatedly condemned homosexuality as a “perversion,” “deviant behavior,” evidence “of a depraved nature,” and “an abomination and shameful before God.”

At a 2007 meeting, as Congress debated an anti-hate-crimes bill named for Matthew Shepard, the gay college student who was tortured to death in Wyoming in 1998, the SBC adopted a resolution urging lawmakers and then-President George W. Bush not to support the legislation because “the Bible is clear in its denunciation of homosexual behavior.” Because of such biblical teachings, they contended, “our Founding Fathers and early laws opposed its practice in American society.” The resolution also stated, invoking a well-worn trope, that a hate crimes law would be used “to actively punish Christians who peacefully voice their moral opposition to homosexual conduct.”

In 2001, to completely distract us from evangelism.
2017, Gareld Duane Rollins Jr., who had been a student in one of the judge’s Bible study classes, sued Pressler, alleging that Pressler had raped him for decades, beginning in 1980, when Rollins was 14 years old, and continuing through 2004. Pressler, now 92, has denied the charges. However, in 2004, according to court records reported by the Houston Chronicle, Pressler agreed to pay Rollins $450,000 as part of a legal settlement stemming from charges of physical assault. (The Texas Supreme Court ruled in April 2022 that Rollins’s sexual assault claims were not barred by the statute of limitations, because the trauma had caused Rollins to suppress those memories for many years.)

In the course of Rollins’s suit, two additional men came forward charging that Pressler had abused them as well. One, Toby Twining, filed an affidavit describing how Pressler, whom he met through a church youth group in the 1970s, frequently took the group on weekend trips, compelled Twining to sleep in a bed with him, and had grabbed his penis in the sauna at a Houston country club. The other, Brooks Schott, alleged that he met Pressler in 2016 while working at Pressler and Woodfill’s firm and that Pressler had invited him to use his hot tub. “When the ladies are not around, us boys all go in the hot tub completely naked,” Pressler told him, according to Schott’s affidavit. Pressler has denied these allegations. Woodfill, who is representing Pressler, did not respond to a request for comment.

In 2018, seven months after Rollins filed his lawsuit against Pressler, an audio recording leaked in which Paige Patterson could be heard arguing that women abused by their husbands should not get divorced but rather “be submissive in every way that you can.” One month later, Patterson was ousted from his position as president of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The seminary’s leaders said Patterson had covered up for a rising star preacher who had sexually abused congregants, suppressed reports of sexual assault, blamed survivors, and tried to “break down” a woman who reported a rape. Patterson did not respond to a request for comment.

Despite the disgrace of both its architects, the conservative resurgence is still seen by top SBC leaders as the high-water mark in the denomination’s history. At the 2019 annual meeting in Birmingham, Ala., Greear called the conservative resurgence “a gift from God.” As recently as May 2022—two weeks after the release of the Guidepost report—Robert Jeffress, the pastor of First Baptist Dallas, a megachurch with deep ties to the conservative resurgence, hosted Patterson as a guest speaker. Jeffress called Patterson a “gifted theologian, writer, and preacher of God’s word.” He went on to emphasize that “what Southern Baptists will always be indebted to Dr. Patterson for is this: About 45 years ago, he began to notice the erosion in our schools, our seminaries, in a belief in the inerrancy and inspiration of our Scripture. And he led the effort to turn the largest Protestant denomination in the world back towards a solid belief in the inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture.”

Jeffress was one of several Southern Baptist megachurch pastors who were close to the Trump White House. He was one of Trump’s staunchest defenders when Trump was accused by more than a dozen women of sexual abuse and assault. When I asked him in 2019 about those accusations, Jeffress replied, “Why haven’t any of these accusations gained traction somehow?” He added, “I very much stand against sexual abuse of any kind. These are allegations, and in our country you are innocent until proven guilty, and the president has not been proven guilty in any of this.” When I pointed out that we’d all heard Trump admit to assaulting women in the Access Hollywood tape that was uncovered in 2016, Jeffress retorted, “I happened to be with him two days after that tape was revealed, and I said it on television: Those comments were indefensible, they were awful, but they weren’t enough to make me vote for Hillary Clinton.”

Today, a faction within the SBC with even more radically patriarchal views is attempting its own takeover. Tom Ascol, a Florida pastor who ran unsuccessfully for president of the denomination this year, is one of the leaders of a contingent that represents “a strong segment of Southern Baptist pastors” pushing for a more “masculine, muscular Christianity,” said Brian Kaylor, a minister and the editor of the newsletter Word and Way, which covers the inner workings of the evangelical world. “I think it helps explain part of why there’s been such a problematic response, at times criminal response, to sexual abuse claims over the past few decades,” he said. The election of Bart Barber, a Texas pastor and the more establishment candidate, favored the status quo over a more extreme move to the right. Still, as Kaylor has documented, (continued on page 30)
Cleaning Up Rhode Island
The Rhode Island Political Cooperative is taking on the Democratic establishment and rebuilding community trust.

The Grassroots Group is restoring a sense of community to elections by making a commitment that no candidate will stand alone.

When one of Jennifer Rourke’s opponents in a critical Rhode Island state Senate race violently attacked her at a late June abortion rights rally in Providence, she was shocked. “I didn’t see it coming,” Rourke recalls. “When I looked to the left, [Jeann Lugo] was punching me in the face.” Lugo, an off-duty Providence police officer, struck Rourke repeatedly, leaving her with impaired hearing.

Chaos ensued. It was dark. People were yelling. State Senator Jeanine Calkin, a friend and fellow activist who was toward the back of the crowd of 1,500, called gubernatorial candidate Matt Brown, who was near the front with Rourke, to ask what was going on.

“I know something happened because I saw all this movement, and then I just saw Co-op bodies swarm around Jennifer,” Calkin says. “Everyone came out of the crowd and just surrounded her.”

Brown assured Calkin that Rourke was safe. The members of the Rhode Island Political Cooperative had their candidate’s back. “My family was right there for me,” Rourke says of the people who rushed to protect her as she was being assaulted.

The Co-op, as everyone calls it, is a political movement that is all about defending its candidates, the hundreds of activists who pour long hours into its campaigns, and the long-neglected Rhode Island communities where it is renewing electoral politics as a vehicle for transformative change. One of the most remarkable political initiatives in modern American politics—and already one of the most successful—the Co-op is addressing the great challenge of an electoral moment in which divide-and-conquer campaigning, viscerally negative television advertising funded by corporations and billionaires, and fake news stories about dubious wedge issues have left voters feeling disconnected from politics. This grassroots group in the nation’s smallest state is restoring a sense of community to elections by making a commitment that no candidate will stand alone in the fight against the most powerful political and economic interests in the state and nation. “There’s such a strong, entrenched, corrupt Democratic Party machine here in Rhode Island,” Calkin explains. “We asked: How do we build our own machine that gives resources and knowledge and training and everything a candidate who’s never run before needs to win elections? Our answer was that we had to do it ourselves. So that’s what we did.”

Formed in 2019 with the audacious goal of upending the historically corrupt, corporate-aligned politics of Rhode Island, the Co-op is not a traditional campaign organization, not a political action committee, and not a political party. It’s a movement with big ideas for expanding access to health care, raising wages, and tackling climate change in the Ocean State. But its biggest idea is that the Democratic Party can be moved away from its centrist and corporate moorings to become a genuinely progressive force in politics. That prospect has relevance for progressives in Rhode Island and a lot of other states. It also has relevance at the federal level of a country where the fight to make the Democratic Party a force for fundamental change is an ongoing struggle.

The Co-op is currently running more than two dozen candidates in Rhode Island’s September 13 primaries for statewide posts and legislative offices. Its goal is to build on the success of the 2020 campaign, which saw eight Democratic candidates who were endorsed by the group win hard-fought primaries, a result that led WPRI-TV, the local CBS affiliate, to report that “the progressives really came out strong with a lot of energy.”

A number of Co-op candidates are all but certain to win this year. Others face uphill battles. There are no assurances that the group will be able to deliver on its promise to provide Rhode Island with “A Whole New Government.” But if the Co-op achieves the sort of breakthroughs that candidates and organizers say are possible—particularly in legislative races—it promises to make Rhode Island the kind of “laboratory of democracy” that US Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis suggested 90 years ago would position states as the generators of big ideas for how to solve national problems.

Although most of the attention on the battle for control of the nation’s 50 statehouses centers on the partisan fight between Democrats and Republicans, the Rhode Island competition is a reminder that even when Democrats are in charge, they are not necessarily champions of progressive policies. That has long been an issue of concern in Rhode Island, a state that has not backed a Republican for president since 1984 and where the Democratic congressional delegation includes Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, a star of the Judiciary Committee and a favorite of liberals nationwide. Despite their current domination of the state capitol, Rhode Island Democrats have a history of compromising with corporate
The candidates the group endorses refuse corporate money and take positions on tax policy that are unlikely to attract wealthy donors.

2014 New York Times review of the Shor-McCarty survey noted, “It’s common for Republican officials in heavily Democratic Northeastern states to be moderates. What makes Rhode Island stand out is the number of conservatives within its Democratic legislative supermajority. The median Democrat in Rhode Island was more conservative than in all but 13 state legislatures, scoring directly between Georgia and Indiana and far to the right of those in Connecticut or Massachusetts.”

As the parties have moved further apart in recent years, Rhode Island’s Democratic legislative leaders have remained outliers: A striking number of the party’s top members earn high marks from anti-abortion groups and the National Rifle Association.

While moderate Republicans and an independent (Lincoln Chafee) have occasionally held Rhode Island’s governorship in recent decades, the Democrats have controlled both chambers of the state legislature since 1958. And they’ve often enjoyed supermajorities, making the legislature the defining force in the governance of the state. Yet instead of delivering for the people in a state where almost 12 percent of residents live below the poverty line, where housing prices are skyrocketing, and where income inequality is a serious issue, Rhode Island’s legislative Democrats have distinguished themselves by their close ties to the business community, compromises on social issues, and questionable ethics. Multiple legislators, including a former speaker of the state House and a House Finance Committee chair, have been jailed in the past decade on charges of influence peddling, bribery, and raiding campaign funds. The Democratic-controlled legislature passed a voter ID law that was so strict that Republicans in other states have cited it as a model for their voter-suppression initiatives. Some Rhode Island Democratic legislators still tout their “A” ratings from the NRA, and even after the mass shootings this spring in Buffalo, N.Y., and Uvalde, Texas, Rhode Island legislators did not respond to calls from their constituents for an assault weapons ban.

“There are Democrats who are anti-abortion, there are Democrats that are pro-gun in our legislature. They’ve been around forever. They call themselves Democrats, but they are really Republicans—right-wing Republicans—in everything but name,” says Ellie Wyatt, a retired high school special education teacher who has long been active in local and state Democratic politics. Wyatt, who turned out on a scorching hot Saturday morning in late July for the launch of the Co-op’s door-to-door canvas drive in North Providence, says, “Changing the legislature is the key to changing politics in Rhode Island, and the way to change the legislature is by winning these Democratic primaries for the state House and the Senate.”

Wyatt has been working for years to move her state’s Democratic Party in a progressive direction. That Saturday morning, she was surrounded by young activists who were using phone apps to identify the doors they would knock on over the next few hours. This combination of the old-school, people-powered politics of neighborhood and community with new technology is central to the Co-op’s campaigning strategy. The candidates the group endorses refuse corporate money and take positions on tax policy that are unlikely to attract contributions from wealthy donors. As Calkin, a cochair of the Co-op and one of its most successful candidates, says, “I’m fighting for Rhode Island’s working families, not corporate lobbyists or party bosses.” To wage that fight, says organizer A.J. Braverman, the Co-op has developed a model for campaigning in which dozens, sometimes hundreds, of activists show up whenever one of its candidates needs to gather signatures to get on the ballot or knock on a few thousand doors before Election Day.

Or is threatened—as Rourke was on the night of June 24, shortly after the Supreme Court issued the Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization decision that overturned the protections for abortion rights established in its 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling. “Running by yourself is not fun,” Rourke says. “But with the Co-op, you’re not running alone. You have a community that shares ideas, that shows up when you need help, that is there for you when you’re in a tough spot.”

A relative newcomer to electoral politics, like most other Co-op candidates, Rourke was encouraged by Calkin and others to take on the overwhelming task of challenging powerful Rhode Island Senate majority leader Michael McCaffrey in 2018 and again in 2020. McCaffrey, a social conservative who opposed a 2019 measure to create a state-based protection for abortion rights, had served in the legislature since 1995 and had frequently run unopposed in past primaries. Rourke, a mother of four who campaigned while helping several of her kids manage education at home during the pandemic, came within 550 votes of beating the incumbent. Following the playbook of the Co-op, where she has emerged as a key leader, Rourke kept right on campaigning. She expected to face McCaffrey again in this year’s primary and then to take on Republican nominee Jean Lugo in November. But then Lugo struck her at the abortion rights rally. Arrested and charged with assault and disorderly conduct, Lugo ended his campaign amid the flurry of national media attention that the assault attracted.
The co-op has pursued a mission with a politics built on personal relationships, a support structure designed to assure that candidates have the strategic help and resources they need, and shared values. Candidates sign on as supporters of a platform that they pledge to implement if elected: a $19-an-hour minimum wage, a state-based Medicare for All health care system, a plan to cap rents and build 10,000 affordable homes, and a Rhode Island Green New Deal that would make the state a leader in reaching net-zero emissions by 2040.

The Co-op is not the only progressive project that is focusing on these sorts of issues at the state and local levels. Other groups—such as the Vermont Progressive Party, Reclaim Chicago, and the Courage California coalition—recognized the need to challenge entrenched Democratic machines and have built...
meaningful movements to do so. But the Co-op, which is part of a network of state-based progressive political projects known as Renew U.S., has been strikingly ambitious. And it has already enjoyed considerable success when it comes to upending Rhode Island politics. Its candidates dislodged powerful incumbents such as Democratic state Senate Finance Committee chair William Conley, who represented East Providence. Conley lost his race to Cynthia Mendes, a working-class single mom who once supplemented her income by cleaning the mansions of millionaires in the uber-expensive enclave of Newport. “We’re not going to stop until we’ve replaced every corporate sell–out politician in this state with leaders who will stand up for our communities,” Mendes said after the primary win that assured she would become a state senator.

Now Mendes is running for lieutenant governor on a ticket with Brown and as part of a slate that includes candidates such as registered nurse Lenny Cioe, who is challenging Senate President Ruggerio. “My opponent says, ‘You’re a politician,’” Cioe says as he knocks on doors in his North Providence neighborhood with Brown. “I say, ‘No, I’m a nurse that wants to change politics.’” Cioe almost beat Ruggerio in 2020, and he’s running hard to finish the job this year.

Whether Brown ends up in the governor’s mansion is an open question. Brown and Mendes are

“My opponent says, ‘You’re a politician.’ I say, ‘No, I’m a nurse that wants to change politics.’”

—Lenny Cioe, a candidate for the state Senate

with what pundits in Rhode Island and nationwide have identified as a populist moment. “For decades, the people in power have fought for giant corporations and the ultra–wealthy,” declares their manifesto. “Matt and Cynthia are doing things differently. They are not taking any money from corporate lobbyists, corporate PACs, or fossil fuel executives. Instead, they are running alongside dozens of candidates—nurses, teachers, social workers, people who have spent their lives fighting for their communities—to build a whole new government.”

When I meet with Mendes in a second-floor workspace above a bustling downtown Providence street, she is taking a quick break between campaign stops to read a few pages from a favorite book by Audre Lorde. The poet and civil rights activist once wrote that when she examined the words to fit a world in which we had already seen up close."

There’s not a lot of time for poetry reading on the campaign trail. But Mendes is always looking for ways to frame the message that the people of Rhode Island have the power to transform the politics of their state and their nation. “The first step is the work of imagination,” Mendes says. “We’re building a movement of people who recognize that it doesn’t have to be this way.”

(continued from page 25)

Ascol’s campaign broke ground by reaching out beyond Southern Baptist circles to right–wing media personalities like Charlie Kirk.

At the SBC’s 2019 annual meeting in Birmingham, the muscular Christianity group held a side conference titled “Mature Manhood in an Immature Age,” which featured some of the most openly misogynistic commentary I’ve witnessed in nearly two decades of covering the religious right. Ascol disparaged “soft men” as the “bane of a society,” because “they leave women and children without a protector.” He added that there was “nothing soft about Jesus,” who was never “triggered.” A “soft man,” he added, “has no business in the ministry.”

For abuse survivors, the denomination is far from “woke.” Christa Brown sees a direct line from Southern Baptist theology to the sex abuse scandal and related cover-ups. “I believe that unless and until Southern Baptists are willing to fully interrogate their own theology, this kind of conduct will remain a feature within their faith,” she said. For example, the concept of wifely submission that is part of “The Baptist Faith and Message” is “an authoritarian theology that promotes male headship and female submissiveness as being divinely ordered.” For Brown and other advocates for survivors of abuse, the policies enacted at the annual meeting this year in Anaheim in response to the Guidepost report were decidedly tepid. Attendees, known as “messengers,” voted to adopt two measures: the creation of an accessible database of abusers and the formation of a task force to study the recommendations of the Guidepost report. SNAP, a national organization that advocates for survivors, was outspoken about the denomination’s refusal to adopt these actions as “very minimal.”

Brown told me that she had been raped in 1969 and that the leaders of her childhood church knew about it at the time. She went to the SBC in 2004 and then went public in 2005. She called for specific safeguards against abuse in 2006, some of which the denomination has still not adopted. For her, watching Trump rise with the support of prominent Southern Baptists was like a repeat of the sideliners and shaming of survivors, but on a much larger scale. When she saw leaders like Jeffress “giving support to a president who bragged about assaulting women,” Brown said, “it felt like déjà vu. Their minimization of horrific conduct was a pattern that we had already seen up close.”

Southern Baptist leaders spent decades working to impose their theological views of sex and gender on the country through law and policy, arguing that they represented a “Christian” or “moral” position. But to Brown, they “sacrificed all moral credibility. They normalized and minimized the sexual predations of a president in much the same way that they normalized and minimized the sexual predations of their clergy colleagues.” And, she added, “with nary a care, they left the rest of us—now the whole of our democracy—to deal with the fallout.”
As we walk slowly through the foyer, she tells me in a hushed voice that she was a friend of Tiller’s. Her name is Judy; she doesn’t want to give her last name. “I'm a dyed-in-the-wool Republican,” she says, “but I’m still voting no.”

Across town, in the working-class neighborhood of Delano, Kathy Griffin stands on the street in a pink “Vote No” T-shirt holding a sign that reads: “Laws don’t stop abortion.” Griffin grew up in Mississippi and still has a Southern drawl. In the 1980s, when she was pregnant, a doctor told her that her liver was enlarged and that she likely wouldn’t survive to deliver. Griffin already had a baby at home. She was the sole breadwinner for her family. She had an abortion.

She’s been out here every day, often with her husband, Levi, and sometimes for three times a day. People speeding by honk and wave at her. Many of the drivers know her. Sometimes they bring her doughnuts. An elderly woman, walking with a cane, stops to quietly tell Griffin that she’s with her. On the opposite end of town, Stephanie Lebeda gets in line at her polling place. She’ll wait for an hour and 24 minutes. Rija Nazir will wait for over an hour to vote, too.

At the Trust Women clinic, the staff will push through a harried day that is complicated by a power outage that leaves them working in the dark, buoyed by patients who’ve traveled from the South and are ready to press ahead. “We’re in this together, honey!” a patient from Arkansas tells Christina Bourne, encouraging her as she pushes through yet another unprecedented day.

Later that evening, Bourne and Brink gather with their coworkers at a pub to watch the results come in. They have been hesitant to call it a watch party, because they are braced for a long night or a loss. Pretty quickly, it becomes clear that it’s going better than anyone imagined. Early results show voters defeating the amendment in a landslide. Those projections, almost too astounding to believe, hold throughout the night. When it’s clear they’ve won, the clinic workers begin screaming. They burst into tears. They throw back shots. They come up to Brink, weeping, to tell her how gratified they are that they’ll get to keep their jobs. They let off steam, savoring the rare feeling of victory. They celebrate until one in the morning.

Later it will turn out that 50 percent of registered voters—a third of the Kansas population—cast a ballot that day. Even counties that haven’t voted for a Democratic president since 1964 resoundingly defeated the amendment. “We didn’t just win,” Brink says. “We fucking won.”

In her home east of the city, Stephanie Lebeda and her sons high-five and hug each other. Kathy Griffin, ecstatic, is back out on the street the next morning, shouting “Thank you!” and “Y’all done good!” at the passing cars.

The Trust Women staff take the day off Wednesday. Then the clinic reopens Thursday morning. Patients arrive, with long journeys behind and ahead of them. The phones are ringing again.

“It was a given that the majority of Kansans would oppose something like this. Our job was to get them to the polls.”
—Rija Nazir, a senior at Wichita State University
The idea of an “avant-garde” tends to inspire complex emotions, oscillating between excitement at its glamour and scorn at its pretensions. The term carries an association of being daring, experimental, unconventional; the main body of practice or opinion that it is in “advance” of is usually figured as a monolith of dull orthodoxy. But the label also easily attracts a lightly ironical coating, in which those so designated are held to be exhibiting an excess of self-consciousness or even self-congratulation, plumbing themselves on innovations that others suspect are merely willful or modish. An avant-garde likes to present itself as insurgent and radical, yet the logic of
the metaphor suggests that a new group will soon be coming along to replace it. Today’s avant-garde is always liable to congeal into tomorrow’s orthodoxy.

English-language dictionaries were slow to register the metaphorical sense of this imported term. The 1928 first edition of what we now know as The Oxford English Dictionary gave just one meaning: “the foremost part of an army; the vanguard or van.” Only with the OED’s completely revised 1989 edition was the meaning with which we are now more familiar added: “the pioneers or innovators in any art in a particular period,” with a first usage of this sense dated to 1910. The fact that the dictionary’s illustrative example comes from that year should alert us to the term’s connection with a particular historical moment, while the retention of the French form also ought to signal something about its original cultural setting.

That moment is the focus of David Cottington’s closely argued book Radical Art and the Formation of the Avant-Garde. Although its prose is sinewy and not always easy to digest, the book is ultimately rewarding, identifying and analyzing with exemplary care the conditions in the three decades before 1914 that led to the formation of the original Parisian avant-garde and the markedly different version that somewhat belatedly grew up in London. Although the book is adorned with over 50 beautifully reproduced color plates, it is more a sociology of cultural movements than a conventional work of art history. The 63 pages of endnotes range impressively across social theory and intellectual history as well as across original sources and secondary scholarship in both French and English. Cottington wrote his first book on this subject 25 years ago, which means the present work feels like a deeply considered enterprise.

The term “avant-garde” had been used, mostly as an adjective, to identify various forms of innovative practice in literature and other arts in France in the middle decades of the 19th century, but Cottington is interested in something more specific, both chronologically and sociologically: the emergence of an avant-garde as a “formation” among visual artists in Paris, especially in the decade after 1905. This was not simply a matter of painting differently or of propounding a theory of radical rupture with the past; it involved a set of conditions that enabled a number of artists to become “a collectivity somewhere between a group and a movement,” with its own market but actually stepping outside all such constraints, challenging the whole economic system from a position of proud self-exclusion. This notion of a defining “outsiderism” has been vital to the self-flatteringly romantic view of the innovators in several arts, yet it always falsifies a more complex position: All outsiders are insiders somewhere. Cottington is hardly the first to challenge the traditional story, but he documents in compelling detail the ways in which the activities of even the most innovative painters were embedded in a dense network of small dealers and galeristes, independent art schools, and les petites revues that discussed and promoted their work. “By the beginning of the decade before the First World War,” he writes, “a sector of the contemporary market had become established in Paris that provided the infrastructure upon which an artistic avant-garde was able to build both a collective identity as professionals distinct from the mainstream and to make a living.”

The notion of what Cottington calls “the professionalization of non-entrepreneurial middle-class occupations” across “western societies” is central to his account. This is part of what distinguished the Parisian avant-garde from various “brotherhoods” and “cenacles” that had been established earlier in the century. These latter groups had largely been based on affective ties: They were forms of fellowship built on friendship and shared ideals, whereas the avant-garde, in Cottington’s view, was a group of professionals instrumentally seeking a certain kind of market advantage through technical innovation. This economic purpose distinguished the avant-garde from another social phenomenon with which it is sometimes confused: bohemianism. Though bohemians flaunted their ostensible rejection of bourgeois norms, they did not constitute a formation committed to sustaining an alternative professional practice. Bohemianism was a gesture, often a temporary one undertaken by young men (rarely women) who would soon revert to inherited respectability; belonging to the avant-garde, by contrast, was a career move.

Since Paris in the late 19th century was the undisputed center of European art, large numbers of artists, both French and foreign, flocked there in this period, most of them cobbled together an existence quite outside the established circles of the École des Beaux Arts and “smart” salon art. Cottington calculates that “if we take participation in the Salon des Indépendants and the Salon d’Automne [the two main ‘alternative’ exhibitions] as a rough guide,” then by 1910 there were some 3,000 would-be insurgent artists in Paris. He charts the growing sense of a self-contained professional community beginning with the Neo-Impressionists, including Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, and Camille Pissarro, in the mid-1880s, and the Nabis, including Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard, at the end of that decade. But it was out of the maelstrom of artistic experiment that marked the 1890s and the early 1900s that a true avant-garde formation emerged around Henri Matisse and somewhat lesser-known figures such as Émile Bernard and Maurice Denis. Thereafter, more ambitious dislocations of perspective and proportion led to the early Cubists: Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque.

Though various self-styled “radical” artists had, in earlier years, attempted to find a necessary link between the form of their art and their preferred political and social loyalties, that was not the determining characteristic of the artistic avant-garde in France. Instead, it was what Cottington calls the “technical” of the Paris-based painters in the decade before 1914—their
commitment to making technical experiments informed by the most recent ideas about perception, color, and so on—that marked their distinctiveness. They were professionals, driven more by the goal of expanding the range of visual possibilities than by any large political or cultural position-taking (a contrast might be made here with Italian Futurism). Using a French term coined at the time, one might say that if the explicit motto of aestheticism was “art for art’s sake,” then the implicit motto of the avant-garde was “technie for technie’s sake,” where technie was distinguished from the more general term technique in being relentlessly focused on innovation through reconfiguring the elements of the medium itself.

London, for all its political and financial prominence, occupied a subordinate position as a locus for innovation in the arts, so it was hardly surprising that young British artists, initially encouraged by the example of Rex Whistler, went to Paris in large numbers to envy and to learn. Cottington devotes almost half his book to exploring the different sociological and aesthetic currents shaping the development of modern art in London; these chapters are rich and thickly documented, creating illuminating contexts for understanding such movements as the Bloomsbury Group and Vorticism. He emphasizes the closer integration in London of experimental art with elite social circles, where the right kind of radical chic could provide a form of cultural capital for ambitious patrons and hostesses. There was thus not the thick texture of the café-based, professional artistic and intellectual life that could be found in Paris: “Where is your Montmartre? Where is your Quartier Latin?” asked one bemused visitor.

In Cottington’s terms, the avant-garde was “endogenous” in Paris because it had the infrastructure to support autonomous art movements and groupings. In London, it was “exogenous,” because it relied on interaction with other social forces and structures, notably the aesthetically inclined or raffish element of the aristocracy. The Bloomsbury Group was an obvious example of an “impure” formation: part friendship circle, part aesthetic movement, part deviant fringe of upper-middle-class society. Nonetheless, the painters in the group, above all Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, proved extremely responsive to Parisian experiments, while the art critic Roger Fry, who was looked up to by his younger Bloomsbury associates, helped boost awareness of recent innovations in painting with his celebrated 1910 exhibition “Manet and the Post-Impressionists.” (Fry’s critical commentary and entrepreneurial brio emerge here as crucial for the rapid assimilation of the new styles.)

But Bloomsbury remained a hybrid formation, not a true professional avant-garde. Bell and Grant, for example, went on to devote much of their energy to forms of decoration that drew back from the more daring modes of abstraction, and it was only with the rise of Vorticism, driven by the eccentric brilliance of Percy Wyndham Lewis, that London had, Cottington argues, its “first self-consciously avant-garde grouping.” Even this short-lived movement—more a series of gestures or explosions than a structured campaign—could not resist the embrace of aristocratic patronage and the seductions of mere decoration, and so it never fully attained the social and aesthetic autonomy of its Parisian counterpart.

Radical Art and the Formation of the Avant-Garde does so much, and does it so well, that it may seem ungenerous to raise questions that are beyond the scope of its self-imposed limits, but I suspect that readers will find themselves left wondering about some large loose ends. One is purely historical: If the avant-garde was inextricably tied to the cluster of circumstances in pre-1914 Paris that Cottington identifies, what becomes of the concept, and the formation it describes, as circumstances change? Though his book does not pursue the story into later decades, one can see how, over the course of the 20th century, the locus of such relentless technical innovation moved from Paris to New York, with a succession of theoretically driven “isms” marking the increasingly ambitious and fundamental—though also, to some eyes, increasingly willful—experiments with form. As a corollary of these developments and the growth of a high-ticket market for such works, the avant-garde became the new art establishment. Can we continue to find a useful meaning for this ubiquitous label once that has happened—once, to put it provocatively, “avant-garde art” has become the “academy painting” of the 21st century?

A different, and no less intractable, question concerns what one might call the yield or payoff of such densely contextual studies as this for our understanding and appreciation of individual works of art. To take just one example, Cottington has some acute remarks about how Grant’s The Tub alludes to but differs from Picasso’s Nude With Drapery: “the striations that so startlingly imbricate figure with ground in the latter reduced to rudimentary mimetic patterning by Grant, and the primitivism of his nude a pale, polite Anglicisation of the shocking alterity of Picasso’s figure.” Well, yes, some of the differences between the two paintings might be characterized in those terms, but the more one stares at them (there are good color plates of each in the book), the more one comes to feel that they are the work of two very different painters with different aspirations, sensibilities, and, surely, talents. It is not clear to what extent a deeper knowledge of the sociology of the Parisian art scene in the decade before 1914 helps to explain these contrasts.

More generally, there is a risk that the validation of avant-garde art implicit in this book may prove to be coercive—that it comes to tilt the language of appraisal too much in its favor. There is, it’s quite true, something more domestic and less confrontational about Grant’s painting, but must we conclude that its softer virtues are somehow trumped by Picasso’s radical technical innovations? Why is “shocking alterity” to be preferred to something more immediately recognizable? Is “radical” necessarily the term of highest praise? Beneath the sophisticated analytical surface of Cottington’s book, does there lurk some semblance of the old “story of art” trajectory, which always threatens to become a teleology, an account of the necessary journey toward abstraction?

Radical Art and the Formation of the Avant-Garde is a masterly piece of scholarly cultural history and deserves to be recognized as such. But it would be a pity if it were to reinforce, however indirectly, a tendency to prioritize art that is seen as somehow moving the story “forward.” Precisely because the metaphor buried in the label “avant-garde” possesses a powerful legitimating punch, we must be careful not to undervalue work that fails to contribute to the implied “advance.”
Virtue and Vice

The many Adam Smiths

BY GLORY LIU

Adam Smith is not who you think he is. Long hailed as the founder of modern economics and the father of capitalism, the 18th-century Scottish thinker was not only an economist and the author of The Wealth of Nations; he was also a moral philosopher and the author of The Theory of Moral Sentiments. Smith considered his work in moral philosophy every bit as important as his work in economics (if not more so), and he continually revised The Theory of Moral Sentiments even after he’d completed The Wealth of Nations. In the sixth and final edition of The Theory of Moral Sentiments, published in 1790, Smith even added a peculiar chapter about the psychology of wealth. Writing about the tendency of so many people to admire the rich and neglect the poor, he denounced this disposition as “the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments.”

How to make sense of the two Adam Smiths has bedeviled scholars for well over a century. In the mid-1800s, long before he became the mascot for the University of Chicago’s style of free market economics, Smith was the subject of a debate among his German readers, who struggled to find a way to reconcile his picture of human nature as naturally sympathetic in The Theory of Moral Sentiments with his picture of the self-interested butchers, bakers, and brewers in The Wealth of Nations. The discovery of Smith’s Lectures on Jurisprudence in 1895 only deepened the question: The Lectures clearly showed that Smith was formulating many of the ideas in The Wealth of Nations a few years after he’d published The Theory of Moral Sentiments.

One way to solve the puzzle of the two Adam Smiths is to com-
bine them. In her 2017 book *Private Government*, the philosopher Elizabeth Anderson argued that Smith’s vision of a market-oriented society in *The Wealth of Nations* had a moral impulse behind it. Smith sought to promote social relations that encouraged freedom and equality. Instead of relationships of dependency, subservience, and domination, as under feudalism, he believed that the market had the emancipatory and egalitarian potential to create relationships based on independence, mutual recognition, and equal standing. In another rendering of this argument, articulated by the political theorists Dennis Rasmussen and Ryan Hanley, Smith’s deep concern about economic inequality is linked to our capacity for sympathy and the cultivation of virtue, as he delineated in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. For Smith, Hanley explains, commercialization and the disparities of wealth that come with it “inhibit our most distinctively human trait, namely our capacity for sympathy.”

These combined Smiths let us have our cake and eat it too. We can have free markets, and we can also have morality. We can have economic freedom, but that freedom rests on an orientation—if not a commitment—to one another as moral equals. A capitalist society can’t survive on markets alone; it needs moral defenders as well.

In his new book, *Adam Smith Reconsidered: History, Liberty, and the Foundations of Modern Politics*, Paul Sagar argues that combining the two Smiths in this way is a mistake. Casting Smith as a moral theorist who was also, ultimately, a defender of commercial society misunderstands him as a thinker, Sagar writes. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was not Smith’s philosophical justification for the political and economic system he described in *The Wealth of Nations*. Nor was *The Wealth of Nations* normative in its intent; instead, it was descriptive. The effort to combine the two Smiths also misidentifies the nature of the problem posed by commercial societies. The problem with them is not moral in nature, Sagar asserts, but political.

To make his argument, Sagar offers a portrait of Smith not as an economist or a moral philosopher but as a political thinker par excellence. This is an extraordinarily difficult task, given how crowded the field of Smith studies has become and how contested the meaning of his politics has been since the first wave of revisionist scholarship. Donald Winch’s landmark book *Adam Smith’s Politics* (1978) may have rescued Smith from his neoliberal Chicago captors, but it also retrofitted him in some of the then-fashionable attire of civic humanism and the classical republican tradition. In more recent scholarship, contending versions of a “left” and a “right” Smith have created even more Adam Smiths to reckon with. Those championing a “left” Smith emphasize his humane vision of commercial society, its emancipatory relations, and his willingness to use the state to promote or even enforce the aims of distributive justice; while those endorsing a “right” Smith underscore the beneficial unintended consequences of self-interested behavior, his skepticism of government expertise, and his faith in local knowledge.

A continuation of Sagar’s first monograph, *The Opinion of Mankind: Sociability and Theories of the State From Hobbes to Smith* (2018), the new book wisely eschews these conventions of labeling; instead, Sagar wants his readers to recognize Smith as a political thinker whose central preoccupations were power and domination. To put it bluntly, this is Adam Smith as a political realist. This is a Smith whose contributions to the study of modern politics cannot be reduced to appeals to his moral philosophy, a Smith who saw politics as a distinctive realm of human activity marked by perennial conflict and violence, and one therefore ill-suited to utopian theorizing. This is a Smith who was concerned first and foremost with questions of order and stability, not distributive or social justice. Finally, and perhaps most important, this is a Smith whose politics is characterized not so much by a substantive political position (left versus right; liberal versus conservative) but rather by a distinctive orientation toward the nature of politics itself.

Adam Smith Reconsidered

*History, Liberty, and the Foundations of Modern Politics*

By Paul Sagar

Princeton University Press. 248 pp. $35

Part of the problem with the many Adam Smiths is that we want Smith to speak to us and even for us, especially when we encounter passages that appear to vividly capture our questionable sympathy with the rich or our endless travails in pursuit of material possessions. “When we consider the condition of the great, in those delusive colors in which the imagination is apt to paint it,” Smith writes in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, “it seems to be almost the abstract idea of a perfect and happy state.” Enchanted by this imagination, a poor man’s son labors day after day “with the most unrelenting industry” to “acquire talents superior to all his competitors,” but only in his “last drags of life, his body wasted with toil and diseases,” does he realize that “wealth and greatness are mere trinkets of frivolous utility.” Surely Smith is warning us here about our fascination with wealth and the insatiable desire to keep up with the Joneses. Surely these are the inevitable moral consequences of living in a society with seemingly endless possibilities for production, consumption, and exchange—that is, the consequences of living in a commercial society.

In an exacting rereading of these passages, Sagar contends that scholars have by and large misunderstood (or, at the very least, overinterpreted) Smith’s concerns about the moral corruption, vanity, and deception produced by the delusive pursuit of wealth. That people have a disposition to admire the rich and neglect the poor and to devote themselves “for ever to the pursuit of wealth and greatness” is not a debit on the balance sheet of commercial society. Rather, Sagar asserts, Smith is arguing that this is a universal feature of the human psyche. That we are enthralled with the wealthy is not an endemic pathology of modern commercial societies but, as Smith observes, the complaint of “moralityists in all ages.” The poor man’s son is not a parable about capitalist avarice; instead, on Sagar’s reading, it is about a “quirk of human psychology” and a “quirk of rationality.” Like the poor man’s son, we are enthralled by the idea of acquiring the latest iPhone, the luxury at-home exercise bike, the trendy trainers, but as soon as we’ve expended

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inordinate amounts of money and energy to do so, we begin to crave the next utility-promoting thing.

Sagar’s mode of argument here can be unrelenting. He boldly positions himself against other Smith commentators, whose interpretations he dismisses as “subtly misconstrue[d],” “distorted and anachronistic,” “universally incorrect,” or “all wrong,” and he rests his case on an extensive and almost painstaking exegesis of the text. The book’s first chapter, on “Commercial Society, History, and the Four Stages Theory,” sets the tone: In it, Sagar parses the many distinctions in Smith’s use of the terms “commercial society,” “commercial nation,” and “age of commerce.” For Sagar, each term conveys something theoretically precise. “Commercial nation” denotes a nation engaged in external trade with other countries, while “age of commerce” belongs to Smith’s theoretical model of how human society developed under idealized circumstances. “Commercial society,” meanwhile, refers only to the “internal relations of individuals to each other when it comes to the securing of both the necessities and luxuries of life.” Importantly, the term “commercial society” is both politically underdetermined and connotes nothing about the normative status of its social, economic, and political arrangements.

Sagar pays such scrupulous attention to these kinds of textual details for two reasons: first, so that we are more cautious about reading passages from The Wealth of Nations and The Theory of Moral Sentiments as a prescriptive commentary on commercial society, much less capitalism. Sagar is adamant that we should not see Smith as echoing the lamentations of his near contemporary Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that infamous arch critic of commercial modernity. The Theory of Moral Sentiments, though full of bracing descriptions of the human condition that clearly resonate with life under modern capitalism, simply does not provide us with the textual resources necessary to regard it as an ethical defense of commercial society. Instead, it sets out to do what any text in 18th-century moral philosophy does—namely, to propose an explanation for our various ethical stances. Smith was responding to immediate predecessors like Francis Hutcheson and to contemporaries like David Hume on fundamental questions about human nature (are we selfish or altruistic?) and the source of morality (is it reason or sentiment?), not the specific content of morality and the demands of justice.

Sagar has a second reason to conduct such a fine-grained reading of Smith’s work. By repudiating the notion that Smith saw commercial societies as resting on presumably problematic grounds—vanity, amour propre, the desire for superior status—Sagar shows that Smith’s primary concern was not with the morality of commercial society but with its politics. For Smith, commercial societies were uniquely capable of fostering relations of mutual exchange and economic growth, but they were also uniquely vulnerable to new forms of capture and domination.

Sagar’s reading of Smith, history—not a priori reasoning or moral consensus—provides the material for the analysis of modern politics. History informs theory and the establishment of economic principles. It is also primarily about power and domination. The politics of Europe was never the result of a slow, peaceful extension and evolution of the ancient republics in Greece and Italy, but the legacy of the more immediate experiences of repeated Gothic invasion and histories of plunder. War, not commerce, was the motor of political change, and politics was an arena of domination in almost all societies (not just in Europe) for most of human history. Moreover, opulence often followed violent domination. Tartar shepherding societies and their Eurasian descendants were characterized by vast inequalities in property (livestock, for example), a near absence of laws (or, if laws existed, they were used as instruments of oppression), and what Sagar calls the “extensive domination of the many by the few.” The persistence of slavery even in rich and culturally polished nations illustrates how the history of economic growth and freedom was also “synonymous with the violent mass subjugation of huge numbers of people,” something Smith found ethically abhorrent and economically nonsensical.

All of this reveals, according to Sagar, how concerned Smith was with the question of domination and its antithesis, liberty. At its core, liberty was the absence of domination, or the threat to one’s person and property by social and economic superiors. But for Smith, liberty—and specifically modern liberty—was much more than that: It was realized in the political prerequisites that secured our “deliverance from the spectre of domination,” most significantly the rule of law. Feudal Europe was devoid of this kind of liberty, with warmongering barons constantly attacking their enemies and plundering the countryside to increase their own wealth. With the introduction of foreign luxuries, the barons...
gradually traded away their own power over their direct dependents for “trinkets and baubles,” but this erosion of local baronial power was not enough to secure modern liberty, particularly for the masses. Only with the emergence of systems of laws and the rise of independent judicatures, Smith argued, could security from arbitrary power—whether from the crown or the clergy—be guaranteed. The settlement after England’s Glorious Revolution of 1688 was a major historical achievement in this regard. The separation of powers and the innovation of checks and balances was the exception, not the rule, in that it transformed the law itself into an instrument of liberation rather than oppression.

Yet the rule of law wasn’t a failsafe, in Smith’s view. New threats to liberty arose in the modern commercial societies of Western Europe, in the form of a new kind of special interest group: the merchant class. Political officeholders, according to Smith, were particularly vulnerable to capture by the merchant class because of the nature of political authority in modern European societies. More specifically, the psychological mechanisms by which wealth established its authority made commercial societies susceptible to systemic corruption. Wealth was a uniquely wily source of authority, not only because it was more immediately visible than more “traditional” sources of authority (such as age or abilities), but because it also allowed those who were traditionally outside of power—those not born into the ruling class or clan, for instance—to use their wealth to either influence or reconfigure power entirely. Wealth infiltrated the mind. Thus, by using their wealth “as a psychological lever with which to dazzle those who made state policy,” Sagar argues, the merchant class—from the itinerant burghers of early modern Europe to the members of the East India Company during Smith’s time—was able to achieve more, not by replacing those in power but by working through existing political officeholders and within the framework of the rule of law. The commercial societies of modern Europe were therefore the perfect breeding ground for this kind of political corruption. Mercantile elites leveraged their structural advantage to sway policymakers and force them to do their bidding; legislators were not mere dupes but confederates of this mercantile conspiracy to rig markets in their favor, often with violent consequences.

Smith’s famous—or, rather, infamous—metaphor of “the invisible hand,” in Sagar’s reading, therefore gestures not to the “overweening governmental administrators” but to the private merchant class that colludes with and captures state power. For Smith, the antidote to this two-way corruption—politics corrupting economics and economics corrupting political processes—is not to scale back the state and hope that private actors do the most public good, as some of his libertarian admirers are eager to claim. But he doesn’t offer much solace to his left-wing readers, either. Instead, in Sagar’s view, Smith deliberately offers us no answers in this regard: At best, he is “less than sanguine” about the possibilities of disentangling wealth from power in commercial societies—and at worst, he is despairing.

C an Smith still speak to us if he ends up offering a vision of political realism that does not commend one set of actions over another? For Sagar, he can, though only faintly and from a distance. Sagar’s Adam Smith does not loudly proclaim the virtues or vices of the market, but he does beg us to consider what kind of commercial society we live in. Does the rule of law guarantee our basic security of life and possessions from the violent domination of private actors, either individuals or groups? What happens when wealth and power align in the lawmaking process? What kind of politics do we want in a commercial society?

Thinking with Smith the way Sagar has in this volume is sobering. The politics of our commercial society render modern liberty a fragile achievement, constantly threatened by the corruption of politics by private economic interests or the manipulation of the economy by political interests. Commercial societies can prosper or perish at the hands of merchants. The politics of commercial societies must therefore take seriously the ways in which political domination entrenches itself through inequality, and it must confront the fact that we too often rely on the political judgment of a few officeholders to harness the economic power of corporate interests without bending society to their will. In Smith’s view, such a capacity for wisdom and good judgment will always be in short supply. This may not be the Adam Smith we want, but it is certainly the one we need.
[Take immortality, God, but give]

Take immortality, God, but give me this cold apple cellar. Take the souls and other toys, but let us live: not-Adam and not-Eve not your son’s—my son’s life.

Wet hole in a cellar with wooden floor—is a Promised Land.

But no, we need cement floors and the smell of cats and mattresses and a bunch of soiled blankets. The city breathes though they poke us with missiles’ needlework. Watch: a mad tailor makes of a city a headless costume without hands. This is your human being, God, and not a retail display mannequin.

The future is a door of mud glass, the color of raw diamond.
And our land is decorated with bloodied fragments of cement walls.
I see a soldier's hat diving in snow after my neighbor Miss Valya.
The murderers are lit from inside by the saliva of their sick ideas.

I see them twelve miles off.

As the thoughts jump like pebbles on thick ice, the breath turns into a white seaweed.

We are holding hands while night hungry like an animal sniffs at balconies, eyes whiten: is anyone here alive?

The walls of this town are tossed out of the ground with their roots, the staircases are torn up like unfinished poems.

The body on the asphalt is a black-red sleeping bag—is that a person? I don’t know. Is that a person? The evening jumps.

We have no place on this earth, you and I, God, but you can’t drown in the sea of blood, sea free of people. Watch: these centipedes of tanks crawling on their mechanical knees won’t swallow this street, that street, this street.

DMITRY BLIZNYUK
(Translated by Katie Farris and Ilya Kaminsky)
When black people say “no” or one of its variants in response to some stressful or hazardous situation, we both affirm and negate the circumstances before us. An assertion of agency, “nope” acknowledges the problem while also refusing to further engage. To say “nope” is to stretch a moment of fear, intrigue, or suspicion into a chance for self-assessment and playmaking. Can I survive this? Does the risk outweigh the reward? Do I want to be here? Nope? Time for a different move, usually an exit.

Nope, the third feature film from the director and screenwriter Jordan Peele, taps into the sense of apprehension and opportunity that its title evokes. The story follows two siblings from a family of horse trainers, Emerald Haywood (Keke Palmer) and her older brother Otis Haywood Jr. (Daniel Kaluuya), as they deal with an alien force that looms over their Southern California ranch. Inspired by Steven Spielberg blockbusters like Jaws and Close Encounters of the Third Kind, the paranoid thrillers of Alfred Hitchcock and M. Night Shyamalan, and two distinct forms of Americana—UFO conspiracies and frontier lore—Nope uses the Haywood siblings’ quest for family glory to explore the nature of spectacle.

The film isn’t as pointed or distinctive as Peele’s career highlight, Get Out, but it is decisively epic, trading the intricate thematic architecture of Peele’s past movies for widescreen tableaux and outsize thrills. A reflection on the dangers and delights of the entertainment industry, Nope takes a panoramic view of showbiz, nosing around back lots, stalking through animal stables, and probing the psyches of actors and creators. Yet this is not merely another solipsistic story touting the magic of filmmaking, celebrities, and Hollywood insiders. Peele’s survey of how the dream factory sausage gets made is also attuned to audiences, tracing how our bottomless appetite for spectacle warps our sense of danger and challenging the erasure of Black perspectives and contributions within film.
motion pictures. Emerald boasts that her ancestor was “the very first stuntman, animal wrangler, and movie star all rolled into one,” a legacy that she and her brother fail to uphold when they are fired following an outburst by one of their horses. They head home to picturesque Agua Dulce, Calif., and make a stop to sell the horse to a neighboring amusement park called Jupiter’s Claim. It’s implied that the sale will help recoup the money they lost by botching the commercial, but OJ says that when things get better, he plans on buying back the horse, one of 10 he’s already pawned to pay the bills.

The Haywoods get their first whiff of the otherworldly at the end of that lousy workday. The siblings are smoking and drinking in defeat when one of their remaining horses, Ghost, gets loose and nervously gallops around the property. Then the power flickers, and the runaway horse vanishes, its final whinny echoing across the night sky. OJ catches a glimpse of the culprit, a quick-moving oval blur that disappears into the clouds. He is left speechless, certain that he saw a flying saucer and that Ghost is dead. Emerald consoles her brother by hatching a get-rich-quick scheme: If they can score definitive footage of a UFO, which they call the “Oprah shot,” they can sell it and ride off into the sunset.

They buy recording equipment and set it up around the ranch, placing a large plastic horse in an open field as a decoy. The UFO comes, but the plan goes off the rails: They don’t get the shot, they lose a real horse, and Angel (Brandon Perea), the squirrelly technician who mounted all the cameras, learns their secret. After seeing the entity up close, a spooked Emerald wants to abandon the ranch, but OJ declines. “I got mouths to feed,” he says dutifully.

The line rings with irony as Peele re-require time between feedings—traits that underscore Peele’s ideas about what happens when audiences feed spectacles and make them monstrous. OJ suggests they can use these characteristics to snap that elusive Oprah shot, a predictability that betrays the limits of Peele’s reveal, which depends on an alien animal of unknown origin acting like terrestrial wildlife. But the creature’s legibility sets the stage for a thrilling third act replete with stunts (on horseback and motorcycle), an elaborate and colorful trap, a betrayal, and homages to Twister, Akira, and Scorpion King. It is a true spectacle: ornate, indulgent, and riveting.

The popcorn thrills of the concluding set piece also read as a response to the long-standing criticism among Black viewers that horror movies treat Black characters as cannon fodder and downplay or erase Black sensibilities. Black parodists like Keenen Ivory Wayans (Scary Movie), his younger brother Marlon Wayans (A Haunted House), and the YouTube comedy group RDWorld1 have lambasted these tropes for years, but their pastiches prioritize humor over critique. And even when it’s more pointedly satirized—as in Scream 2, which opens with two Black characters being gruesomely killed at a movie theater after one of them bemoans the racism of horror movies—the charge sticks.

Get Out responds to that history by embedding an audience proxy in the story. Rod, the best friend and eventual savior of the main character Chris, heckles his buddy throughout the film, providing running commentary on the ominous undertones—racist comments; creepy, seemingly hypnotized Black servants—of Chris’s weekend getaway at the home of his white girlfriend’s family. “I told you not to go in that house,” he concludes at the end of the film.

Nope’s staging is more naturalistic. Peele trusts his overwhelmed characters to forge a path through the story’s obstacles and fears without obvious metacommentary. Although the Haywoods both utter “Nope!” as they wrangle with the wild animal on high, it’s always clear why they stay and fight and what they seek. That legibility is the film’s boldest spectacle, and the biggest point of departure from Peele’s work thus far. The heroes of Nope do not want simply to survive or “not die first” or “tell everyone”; they want to live.
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Letters

Studying Ecology

Re “The Tick Apocalypse,” by Jimmy Tobias [Aug. 8/15]: Among recent advances in our understanding of Lyme disease, a 2021 work by Howard Ginsberg and fellow biologists established why the disease is so rare in the southern US, despite the occurrence of the appropriate tick vectors. In brief, these ticks show a strong preference for reptiles rather than mammals, and these reptiles are poor hosts for the Lyme bacterium. Indeed, the research points to the importance of studying animal ecology and supporting land use and management plans that promote reptile populations. As winter temperatures continue to rise with climate change, their numbers may grow in higher latitudes and lower the incidence of the disease.

Manuel Lerdau
Department of Environmental Sciences
University of Virginia

 Pipelines to Plowshares

Two powerful streams of thought that challenge the necessity for violence in the struggle against climate change deserved more consideration in Thea Riofrancos’s otherwise helpful review of Andreas Malm’s book How to Blow Up a Pipeline “[‘A Burning Planet,’ Aug. 8/15]. Gorgeous and mysteriously compelling at first, it merits reexamination after reading Gregory Afingonof’s informative article, at which point you realize that it simultaneously conveys the ideas and the emotive punch of Sorokin’s writings.

Sean Brady

Graphic Depictions

The illustration by Lily Qian for the review of Vladimir Sorokin’s novel Their Four Hearts is magnificent “[‘Pure Negation,” Aug. 8/15]. Gorgeous and mysteriously compelling at first, it merits reexamination after reading Gregory Afingonof’s informative article, at which point you realize that it simultaneously conveys the ideas and the emotive punch of Sorokin’s writings.

Walter (Jerry) Kendall
Professor Emeritus
University of Illinois Chicago
School of Law

Campaigns for Social Change

In the Aug. 8/15 issue: “The Tick Apocalypse” incorrectly referred to ticks as insects. In “A Burning Planet,” the name of the Lummi Nation was misspelled. “Selective Empathy,” by Viet Thanh Nguyen, stated that Lt. William Calley was pardoned by Richard Nixon. Calley was not pardoned; after Nixon’s intervention on his behalf, he was paroled and spent much of the sentence under house arrest.

Comment drawn from our website letters@thenation.com

Please do not send attachments.
The organization National Advocates for Pregnant Women has defended the rights of pregnant and parenting people for more than two decades, providing legal services for individuals who have been criminalized as a result of pregnancy, including for a stillbirth, miscarriage, or abortion. Typically, the nonprofit’s clients are women who are disproportionately targeted by surveillance—women who are low-income, of color, and those who use drugs or alcohol. On June 23, NAPW released a toolkit titled “Confronting Pregnancy Criminalization,” a guide for law enforcement officials, defense attorneys, medical examiners, hospital staff, and legislators—all professionals who make decisions that can lead to a criminal investigation—on how to minimize this harm. The next day, the Supreme Court announced its decision in Dobbs, revoking the constitutional right to abortion. With Roe overturned, there will be even more opportunities for the state to scrutinize pregnancy outcomes. Afsha Malik, NAPW’s research and program associate, is a coauthor of the report.

DM: What are some specific pieces of advice that you offer professionals?

AM: With medical examiners, one of the biggest takeaways is to understand that fetal death reports may be used against bereaved mothers to criminalize pregnancy loss. A postmortem report listing maternal substance use as a cause or contributing factor in a fetal death could be used against a mother in a criminal prosecution. They should take extra care in drafting a report and applying the highest standard of evidence. It’s important that everyone knows that medical research does not support a finding of a direct causal relationship between prenatal exposure to criminalized drugs and miscarriage or stillbirth. A lot of the guidance we give is to recognize the deep systemic biases associated with substance use in pregnancy and to counter those biases.

DM: Do you worry that women will be less likely to seek out medical care if talking with a medical professional could put them at risk of arrest?

AM: People are already afraid of what they can say to their medical provider because it can be used against them. That creates distrust, and that also creates an increased level of risk to the health of that person. The medical setting and these professionals will increasingly become arms of the state.

NAPW trainings are available at youtube.com/user/NAPW.

“From 2006 to 2020, there have been 1,300-plus cases of pregnancy criminalization.”
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