

Landslide vote to defeat anti-abortion initiative in Kansas

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An anti-abortion initiative was overwhelmingly defeated in a referendum held Tuesday in the US state of Kansas. As of this writing, more than 534,000 votes against the referendum initiative have been counted, as compared to under 375,000 in favor, a margin of 59 percent to 41 percent.

The outcome of the referendum, which saw unexpectedly high voter turnout, is a popular rebuke to the reactionary nationwide offensive against abortion rights following the US Supreme Court's decision abolishing the constitutional right to abortion in June.

The vote was a rare and exceptional opportunity for American voters to express their views on a political issue directly, without being distorted by the framework of the two corporate-controlled parties or the various institutions of the American government, all of which are viewed with mistrust and outright hostility by masses of people.

The outpouring of popular opposition to the Republican-led attack on abortion rights in a heavily Republican “red” state exposes the anti-democratic character of the entire American political system.

The Kansas legislature, including its Senate and House of Representatives, has a combined total of 115 Republicans and 50 Democrats. If America was a healthy democracy, one would expect, based on this distribution, that a Republican referendum put to a popular vote would pass by a greater than two-thirds majority. Instead, the result was a resounding defeat for the Republicans.

The vote is a debacle for the state's Republican leadership, which spent vast sums campaigning for the referendum, hoping it would ratify the reactionary campaign against abortion rights. Also taken by surprise was the American media establishment, which has been devoting disproportionate attention to the campaigns of far-right candidates in the Republican primaries and which widely predicted a closely contested outcome in Kansas.

Republicans in the state legislature mounted the referendum in response to a 2019 decision by the Kansas Supreme Court that the state's constitution protects the right to abortion. The referendum initiative would have amended

the state constitution to say that it does not protect the right to abortion, clearing the way for the legislature to pass laws outlawing or limiting access to the medical procedure.

Presented as the “Value Them Both Amendment,” the initiative was backed by the Catholic Diocese in Kansas, which spent \$5.4 million campaigning for it, as well as numerous evangelical Christian groups.

Tuesday's vote underscores the fact that the American population is well to the left of the political establishment, including both of its political parties—even in a relatively rural and “conservative” region like Kansas, where some 850,000 voters are registered Republicans, compared to around 500,000 who are registered Democrats.

As the *New York Times* grudgingly admitted, “abortion rights performed better than Mr. Biden, and opposition to abortion performed worse than Mr. Trump.”

The *Times* noted that in Wyandotte County, which includes Kansas City, Kansas, Biden received 65 percent of the vote in 2020, but 74 percent voted in defense of abortion rights. In the most populous county in the state, Johnson County, Biden won in 2020 by 53 percent, but 68 percent voted yesterday for abortion rights.

Yesterday's vote disproves all attempts to justify the Democratic Party's failure to wage an aggressive struggle to defend democratic rights with the claim that the American people are “conservative.” On the contrary, it is the Democratic Party that is holding back the population. If the Biden administration and the Democrats made a genuine effort to mobilize popular sentiment in favor of the defense of abortion rights—which they have no intention of doing—such an effort would meet with an overwhelmingly positive response.

Given this expression of popular sentiment in Kansas, where a greater proportion of the population lives in rural areas than the national average, one can infer that a referendum defending abortion rights would win by an even greater margin in any of the large urban metropolises in California, Texas or New York.

Within Kansas, the urban population centers rejected the

initiative by huge margins. In Douglas County, where the main campus of the University of Kansas is located, the initiative was voted down by a staggering 81 to 19 percent. In Sedgwick County, which includes the city of Wichita, the initiative was defeated by 58 to 42 percent.

Wichita was the site of a right-wing terrorist attack on May 31, 2009, in which physician George Tiller was murdered by anti-abortion fanatic Scott Roeder. Tiller had been the target of relentless and vicious personal attacks by right-wing media, with Fox News calling for him to face “Judgment Day.”

As medical director of Women’s Health Services, Tiller had been compelled to wear a bulletproof vest in public. He survived an earlier attempt on his life by an anti-abortion terrorist in 1993.

It is significant that the population of Wichita, now given an opportunity to express itself directly on the issue of abortion, voted in favor of abortion rights by a two-thirds majority.

Among those counties voting against the initiative was Crawford County in rural southeast Kansas, which includes the small city of Girard, where the socialist *Appeal to Reason* newspaper was once headquartered. Published from 1895 until 1922, the *Appeal to Reason* had a wide circulation among largely immigrant coal miners in the region. In Crawford County, the ballot measure was defeated by 55 to 45 percent.

These facts underscore that the violence and virulence of the Christian fundamentalists seeking to ban abortion are not a reflection of widespread popular support. On the contrary, these forces are compelled to resort to terror and state repression to enforce their views because a majority of the population is against them.

The vote also exposes the lie that in overturning *Roe v. Wade* the Supreme Court was motivated by a desire to return the decision on abortion rights “to the people,” as suggested in the profoundly anti-democratic majority opinion written by Associate Justice Samuel Alito. The author of that ruling recently gave a smug and provocative speech defending his decision at the right-wing “Religious Liberty Summit” in Rome, Italy.

These religious zealots and those who pander to them all received a richly deserved black eye in Kansas on Tuesday.

For its part, the Democratic Party will seek to cynically capitalize on the mass support for the defense of abortion rights in its midterm election campaigns. Responding on Wednesday to the outcome of the referendum in Kansas, Biden attempted to position the Democrats as the beneficiaries. “The voters of Kansas sent a powerful signal that this fall, the American people will vote to preserve and protect their right and refuse to let it be ripped away by

politicians,” Biden said.

The defense of this key democratic right cannot be entrusted to the party that bears no small responsibility for the Supreme Court’s decision in June. For a half-century after the Supreme Court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade*, the Democrats refused to codify the right to abortion in federal law, despite countless promises and opportunities to do so.

On October 9, 2019, for example, while he was a contender for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party, Biden tweeted: “*Roe v. Wade* is the law of the land, and we must fight any and all attempts to overturn it. As president, I will codify *Roe* into law and ensure this choice remains between a woman and her doctor.”

This election promise, like innumerable promises by Democratic candidates throughout the preceding decades, was forgotten as soon as Biden won the election, clearing the way for the Supreme Court’s decision in June of this year.

Despite the overwhelming support expressed in the referendum, the right to abortion remains highly vulnerable throughout the country and in Kansas itself, where it rests on a 2019 state Supreme Court decision in a case called *Hodes & Nauser v. Derek Schmidt*. This decision was based on an interpretation of the general provision in the 1859 Kansas state constitution that guarantees “equal and inalienable natural rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The 2019 decision held that this state constitutional provision protected the right to abortion, such that even if the federal Supreme Court found that the right was not protected by the federal constitution or laws, Kansas residents would still be protected.

As the decision in June by the US Supreme Court demonstrates, a decision acknowledging a democratic right by one set of judges can, with the stroke of a pen, be turned into a decision abolishing that right by a different set of judges.

Like the defense of all democratic rights, the defense of the legal right to abortion can be carried out only through the independent mobilization of the broad masses of the working population, who, as the referendum in Kansas indicates, overwhelmingly support the defense of abortion rights.



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