

Some reflections on the Kansas abortion rights vote

Patrick Martin
8 August 2022

Last Tuesday's referendum in Kansas, which resulted in the heavy defeat of an effort by right-wing forces and the Catholic Church to move toward an outright ban on abortion, was a significant political event that raises important issues largely ignored by the political establishment and the corporate media.

By a margin of 59–41 percent, voters rejected a measure to declare that the state constitution does not protect abortion rights. The referendum would have effectively overturned a 2019 ruling by the state Supreme Court that the state constitution's guarantee of "personal autonomy" applies to women making decisions about whether to end a pregnancy.

According to projections by the *New York Times*, a demographic analysis of the Kansas vote "implies that around 65 percent of voters nationwide would reject a similar initiative to roll back abortion rights, including in more than 40 of the 50 states."

There is overwhelming popular opposition to the efforts of the far right to criminalize abortion in the wake of the Supreme Court's reactionary ruling in *Dobbs v. Mississippi*, which overturned *Roe v. Wade* and made it possible for state legislatures to attack this fundamental democratic right.

According to a preliminary accounting of Tuesday's vote, the majority of those who went to the polls chose a Republican ballot, with 451,000 voting in the Republican primary, while only 276,000 cast ballots in the Democratic primary. Another 195,000 did not vote in either primary, but did vote on the anti-abortion referendum, where a "no" vote was a vote for abortion rights.

The total combined turnout of more than 922,000 was the largest ever in a primary election in Kansas, more than any presidential primary, and coming close to the level of voter participation in a general election: 1.1 million voted in the 2016 presidential election, giving Donald Trump a 56–42 percent margin over Hillary Clinton; just over 1 million voted in 2018, when Democrat Laura Kelly was elected governor over ultra-right Republican Kris Kobach.

In every single county in the state, the "no" vote

percentage far exceeded the percentage of the vote in 2020 for Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, by margins ranging from 15 to 25 percentage points. According to one analysis, 14 Kansas counties that voted for Trump in 2020 voted "no" on the anti-abortion referendum. Twelve of the 15 most populous counties voted "no."

While the "no" vote carried urban and suburban areas, as well as college towns—Kansas City, Wichita, Topeka, Lawrence (University of Kansas), Manhattan (Kansas State)—the biggest shift from 2020 came in the less populous rural areas in the western two-thirds of the state, where the "yes" vote won, but only by narrow margins. In one rural county, only 17 percent backed Biden in 2020 but 45 percent backed abortion rights in 2022.

The large voter turnout frustrated the calculations of the anti-abortion groups and the Republican Party, which scheduled the referendum to be held on the date of the primaries, rather than the general election, because the primary electorate was expected to be overwhelmingly Republican, since most independent voters do not participate in partisan primaries and there were no significant contests on the Democratic side.

The vote was a flat rejection of the intervention into politics by the Roman Catholic Church, whose Kansas dioceses spent more than \$3 million promoting a "yes" vote, while out-of-state political action committees linked to the church raised at least \$1 million more. Because the referendum was nominally non-partisan, it was legal for the church to spend money to promote its views, which were also promulgated in countless Sunday sermons.

Kansas is a traditionally Republican state, which has not elected a Democratic senator since 1932 and has voted only once since 1936 for a Democratic presidential candidate (Lyndon Johnson, in his landslide victory over Barry Goldwater). That 1964 vote is the sole Democratic victory in Kansas in the last 21 presidential elections.

Predictably, the Democratic Party immediately latched onto the Kansas referendum result in the hope that appealing to the popular revulsion over the repeal of *Roe v. Wade*

might provide an electoral advantage in the November 2022 midterm vote, now only three months away. Democratic strategists hope the abortion issue will offset the disillusionment among Democratic and independent voters with the failure of the Biden administration to fulfill its campaign promises, and the anger among working people over inflation and the horrific impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Campaign commercials presenting various Democratic congressional and gubernatorial candidates as fervent defenders of abortion rights were being broadcast by the weekend.

The main reaction expressed in media commentaries and by capitalist politicians appearing on the Sunday morning television interview programs was sheer amazement that there was so much support for abortion rights in a state like Kansas, where the supposed propensity among working people for cultural conservatism—at the expense of their economic interests—was memorialized in the 2004 bestseller by Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter With Kansas?*

This only demonstrates the vast gulf between the views of broad masses of working people and the entirely right-wing character of the political “debate” within the ruling elite. The fact is, working people, and particularly the younger generation, are overwhelmingly opposed to attacks on basic democratic rights like the right of women to control their own bodies and make their own decisions about the course of a pregnancy.

They reject the imposition by the government, whether state or federal, of a Christian fundamentalist and Roman Catholic religious doctrine proclaiming, against all scientific evidence, that a fetus is a human being from the moment of conception, when a few molecules of protoplasm have come together to form an embryo that, nine months later, will emerge as a baby.

The WSWS has had many occasions in the past, on matters such as the Clinton impeachment, the war in Iraq, the Bush-Obama bailout of Wall Street and Trump's vicious persecution of immigrants, to note the fundamental conflict between the democratic and humane sentiments of the majority of the American people and the policies of the ruling class.

This is one of the driving forces of the turn by the financial oligarchy towards dictatorship. While spearheaded now by Donald Trump and his fascist thugs, the threat to democratic rights is not the product of the personality of one ex-president, no matter how noxious.

It is the objective outcome of the deepening contradictions within American capitalism. Democracy is incompatible with a social order in which a tiny layer of billionaires and corporate bosses monopolize the wealth, while demanding

endless sacrifices of jobs, wages and living standards from the working class.

And it is a necessary byproduct of the drive of American imperialism towards war with Russia and China, which threatens World War III. The closer the US ruling elite comes towards a major war, the more it demands the suppression of any opposition or dissent at home.

This suggests a final question: What would have been the outcome of a referendum on taxing corporations and the wealthy, guaranteeing the right to vote, putting an end to police violence against working class and minority youth, or requiring polluters to stop poisoning the American people and the planet?

Even more alarming, from the standpoint of the ruling elite, what would be the outcome of a referendum on whether US troops should be deployed to Ukraine, or to any other country in the world? And what about the shipment of vast quantities of weapons, amounting to tens of billions of dollars, under conditions of vast unmet needs within this country's borders?

These questions only underscore the fact that the policies of both capitalist parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, are deeply unpopular. The two-party system, guaranteeing a political monopoly to these instruments of big business, conceals the popular opposition. The Kansas referendum, effectively a “yes” or “no” vote on a basic question of democratic rights, has revealed that, despite the incessant media propaganda to the contrary, the working people of America are moving to the left, not the right.

The fundamental class issues facing the working class will not be settled by referendum votes, but only through bitter class struggles. The first skirmishes are already being fought. This movement must now take an independent political form, on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact