**Headline:** How the Kansas Abortion Vote Offers Lessons for Economic Justice

**Teaser:** Using ballot measures and careful, nonpartisan messaging that appeals to fairness, progressives can achieve victories on economic justice and expanded health care access.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

Progressive activists and organizers are eyeing lessons from the resounding victory for abortion access in Kansas where nearly [60 percent of voters](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/08/03/kansas-abortion-amendment/) recently defeated a ban on the politicized medical procedure. Now, the [Fairness Project](https://thefairnessproject.org/) hopes that state-by-state ballot measures can restore the reproductive right to an abortion that the Supreme Court stripped away earlier this year. Such measures can also achieve economic justice victories like increasing the minimum wage and expanding access to paid sick and family leave.

At a time when the GOP has political control of a [majority](https://ballotpedia.org/Partisan_composition_of_state_legislatures) of state legislatures and has imposed its preference for strict control of uteruses and lax control of firearms, low wages for the poor and low taxes for the rich, the ballot measure process may be a powerful direct-democracy solution.

Kelly Hall, executive director of the Fairness Project, [says](https://risingupwithsonali.com/did-kansas-prove-ballot-measures-can-restore-abortion-rights/) that “Kansas is a classic example of the large distance between where the voters and the electorate are, and increasingly where their more extremist legislators are.” It was conservative legislators who placed the abortion ban on the ballot in Kansas—not anti-abortion activists—thinking they could solidify in their state the federal anti-abortion victory won at the Supreme Court in the [Dobbs decision](https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/19-1392_6j37.pdf). Kansas voters proved them wrong.

“What happened in Kansas could be mirror-replicated in states around the country,” says Hall. Indeed, reproductive justice activists in [Michigan](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/abortion-rights-to-be-on-michigan-ballot-this-fall) are hoping to repeat the success of the Kansas vote. They have gone on the offensive and put a ballot measure to voters in order to enshrine abortion access in their state before a trigger law banning abortion can take effect. Advocates of the measure are counting on voters’ common sense prevailing over legislators’ political theater.

Could the political disconnect between state legislators and voters manifest in similar ballot measures, circumventing conservative, anti-democratic political agendas on other issues? Hall says, “When voters in ‘red’ states have been asked to vote on Medicaid expansion, or raising the minimum wage, or ending predatory payday lending, or things that are often associated with the Democratic Party or the progressive wing of the political spectrum… voters vote yes.”

Recall Florida’s 2020 minimum wage increase via a ballot measure. In the same state where Republicans have strong political control over the legislature and Gov. Ron DeSantis emerged as both a [supporter](https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/politics/elections/fl-ne-florida-gop-reaction-20201106-pjqk73ln3jcojggkp2rhezz7ay-story.html) of former president Donald Trump and a [potential political successor](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/06/27/can-ron-desantis-displace-donald-trump-as-the-gops-combatant-in-chief), voters passed a measure increasing the minimum wage to [$15 per hour](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/11/04/florida-amendment-2-minimum-wage/) by 2026. Granted, this is a paltry increase. But the fact that voters chose to raise the wage at the same time that they [picked Trump for president](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-elections/florida-president-results) suggests that on some issues—such as economic justice or even abortion—direct democratic control via ballot measures can be a way to break the political partisan gridlock and further a progressive agenda.

The Fairness Project is “much more focused on citizen-initiated ballot measures” like the Florida wage increase, says Hall, rather than measures put on the ballot by legislators like the abortion ban in Kansas. “We support people coming together, advocates coming together, and doing something that their legislative bodies otherwise will not do,” says Hall.

Already the organization has helped to win wage increases in numerous states. As per a December 2021 [news release](https://thefairnessproject.org/blog/2021/12/30/minimum-wages-rise-thanks-to-fairness-project-ballot-initiative-victories/), “Nine victories raising the wage have come directly from ballot measures or state legislation passed in response to voter-driven initiatives supported by the Fairness Project in the last five years.”

The Fairness Project has also won numerous victories on Medicaid expansion in various states, undermining GOP-led propaganda against President Barack Obama’s 2009 [Affordable Care Act](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2010/09/16/affordable-care-act-helps-america-s-uninsured). Hall touts the “six successful citizen-initiated ballot measures in places from Idaho, to Oklahoma, to Missouri, to Maine,” where voters overrode their representatives to expand Medicaid access for low-income residents.

It’s not as simple and straightforward as putting matters before electorates and expecting them to vote in their own interests, however. Kansas voters didn’t just pick the right to an abortion because they thought sensibly about it. Advocates of abortion access worked hard to promote messaging they knew would appeal to voters across the political spectrum. “We believe every Kansan has a right to make personal health care decisions without government overreach,” Jae Gray, an organizer for Kansans for Constitutional Freedom, [told](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/08/03/kansas-abortion-amendment/) the Washington Post. Gray explained, “that’s obviously a conservative-friendly talking point. We were not just talking to Democrats.”

Hall agrees, saying, “There *is* a lot of hope to be seen on Kansas.” But she maintains that “we need to be looking at this through a nonpartisan lens, through a bipartisan lens, and have odd bedfellows coalitions bringing together nonpartisan messages to voters if we want to put this stuff on the ballot.” This means progressives should not dismiss those voters who are subjected to aggressive messaging and narratives from conservative politicians and media outlets against basic matters of fairness.

In fact, [polls](https://kansasreflector.com/2022/07/20/poll-shows-kansans-closely-divided-on-constitutional-amendment-on-abortion/) conducted ahead of the Kansas abortion vote did not predict victory for abortion rights. Hall says, “the analysis that was done to predict how voters would vote was based purely on their partisan affiliation and whether or not they voted for Democrats or Republicans in the last presidential election.”

It is indeed possible to convince even conservative voters that wages need to rise and that health care should be accessible to all without government controls. The Kansas victory was achieved because abortion advocates “very successfully separated the issue they were asking voters to vote on from partisan identities,” says Hall. “And that has been the [secret to the] success of many other progressive-leaning issue ballot measures in what are usually considered ‘red’ states.”

There are limits to using ballot measures for change. Not all states offer voters the chance to circumvent legislators, and, according to Hall, only 22 out of 50 states in the nation currently have ballot measure processes. And, as such avenues become more useful in enacting progressive measures, state legislators could limit them. Already Florida’s DeSantis [responded](https://www.politico.com/newsletters/florida-playbook/2022/04/04/floridas-ballot-for-now-is-off-limits-to-citizen-initiatives-00022592) to the voter-led increase in the state minimum wage by enacting restrictions on out-of-state contributions and gathering petition signatures for future ballot measures. In doing so, DeSantis has all but ensured that only the state legislature will have the ability to put matters directly before voters.

“There’s plenty of ways to make a difference in this world,” says Hall. Her organization has chosen to focus on ballot measures and is working to “help local advocates at the state level and the municipal level know how the ballot measure works, how they can wield it, and support them.” That support is both financial and advisory so that “when progressives put these issues on the ballot, they win.”