



HEALTH CARE POLITICS & GOV

## COMMENTARY

# How extremists are exploiting transgender kids to undermine our free democracy

GUEST AUTHOR

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📷 Hundreds gather at a rally to support abortion rights at the Ohio Statehouse, Columbus, Ohio. (Photo by Graham Stokes for the Ohio Capital Journal. Only republish photo with original article with which it appears.)

Here in Ohio and across the country, the promise of a representative legislative process has been shattered by anti-transgender extremists' misinformation and censorship.

Over the past few weeks, legislation barring transgender young people from school sports teams and restricting their access to healthcare has advanced through our legislature. Violence has loomed over committee hearings: advocates bravely testifying in opposition have faced [intrusive and aggressive questioning](#) from lawmakers debating their very right to exist.

I've been a policy advocate for years, and this year's legislative session is unlike any I've seen before. With a broad anti-transgender bill now [passed by the House](#) and moving on to the Senate, the violence of this year's legislative process could soon become enshrined into law.

For years, far-right politicians have used dangerous rhetoric to push us to this civic precipice. In the leadup to 2024 elections, they are continuing to [stoke fear](#) that American families are in danger in an attempt to rile up their base, simply because transgender people are becoming more visible in public life. This is a [coordinated](#) and [well-funded movement](#) by extremist groups including the Alliance Defending Freedom, Family Policy Alliance, Heritage Foundation, and [Ohio's Center for Christian Virtue](#), among others, who have realized that while most Americans understand the importance of democracy, they don't know much about what it means to be transgender. These fringe groups are exploiting the public's lack of understanding to scapegoat transgender people and use anti-transgender bills as a vehicle for anti-democratic attacks on our basic freedoms.

Advocates nationwide tell me they're facing similar legislative attacks, from bills restricting gender-affirming care in [Georgia](#) and [Kentucky](#), to anti-trans sports bills in [Texas](#), to bills barring students from using school bathrooms in [Arkansas](#) and [Iowa](#), among many, many others. This year, [nearly a third](#) of transgender youth are at risk of losing access to care that has been endorsed by every major U.S. medical and mental health organization. This care is essential and life-saving.

Advocates have testified again and again that bills that strip parents and doctors of their ability to seek out appropriate medical care for transgender children take a devastating and [proven toll](#) on young peoples' wellbeing. These bills, which target a small minority and distract from the real issues facing families, are a corruption of our legislative process and an undeniable symbol of the coordinated extremist campaign disrupting democracy and spreading misinformation nationwide.

They are also facing extensive legal challenges: federal judges have blocked, paused or limited enforcement of anti-trans bills in [Alabama](#), [Arkansas](#), [Indiana](#), [Florida](#) and [Missouri](#), and Oklahoma has agreed not to enforce its ban while litigation advances.

The corruption of our legislative process doesn't end when bills are introduced: across the country, far-right lawmakers emboldened by the support of national extremist groups have disrupted hearings and debates by silencing their colleagues and inviting misinformation onto the floor.

Parents, health professionals, educators and even children have testified before lawmakers that refuse to meet their eyes, and who invite pseudo-”experts” and [extremist activists](#) to [spew misinformation](#) at [hearings nationwide](#) – a page out of the playbook of anti-abortion rights organizers that privileges extremist propaganda over the lived experiences of constituents.

Here in Ohio, for instance, a hearing for a bill aiming to take privacy and rights away from parents went viral when a testifying extremist accused non-Christians of [demonic possession](#). In Texas, LGBTQ+ advocates were forcibly [removed from the Texas State Capitol](#) and banned from entering the Capitol building for a year for displaying a banner reading “Let Trans Kids Grow Up.”

In Nebraska, an attorney filed an [ethics complaint](#) against a lawmaker with a trans child, harassing her with a formal investigation. In [Tennessee](#) and [Montana](#), right-wing politicians censured and expelled their colleagues, attempting to silence representatives Justin Jones, Justin Pearson and Zoey Zephyr after they spoke out for gun control and transgender rights. This is not normal, and we shouldn’t pretend that it is.

The rise of legislative attacks on the transgender community and attempts to silence advocates at state capitols is no coincidence. Both are insidious tactics to undermine democracy and consolidate power, while disregarding the will of voters and the needs of communities.

To defeat these attacks, we have to work together. I recently met with Representative Zoey Zephyr, the Montana lawmaker who stood against misinformation and the corruption of our institutions and legal systems, and was ultimately barred from the floor of her state’s House of Representatives for opposing anti-trans legislation.

I hope our elected officials will take inspiration from Rep. Zephyr’s commitment to her constituents. It’s time for all of us to come together to hold lawmakers accountable for their anti-transgender extremist stunts, keep violence out of our legislatures, and demand real representation for the year to come.

*Maria Bruno, Esq., Public Policy Director, joined Equality Ohio in August 2021. Maria is a lifelong Ohioan and lifelong advocate. She directs Equality Ohio’s legislative strategy and engagement for state, local, and federal public policy. This includes working to advance inclusive, smart, equitable laws that value and protect all identities. Equality Ohio also works to stop proposals that would further harm LGBTQ+ Ohioans and other marginalized communities. Maria and her team work to ensure that decision-makers directly hear from and work with impacted community members by educating the general community about the lived realities of LGBTQ+ people, directly lobbying decision-makers, and empowering LGBTQ+ Ohioans to engage in legislative advocacy. We work to change hearts and minds to create a state that is inclusive, accepting, and loving for all Ohioans.*



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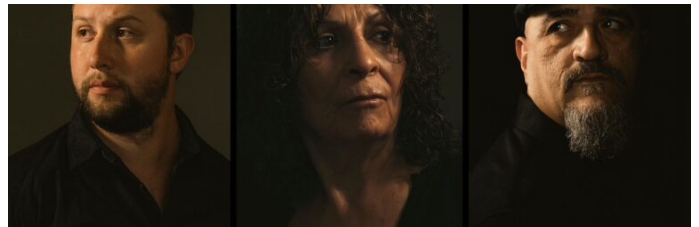
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