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# Zoey Zephyr Banishment Spotlights Rise Of GOP Far-Right Caucuses

Across the country with varying levels of success, the groups have followed the playbook of the House Freedom Caucus.

**AP** Matthew Brown and Sam Metz

Apr 29, 2023, 08:46 AM EDT





BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The banishment of transgender lawmaker Zoey Zephyr from Montana’s House floor has showcased the rising power of hard-line conservatives — organized under the banner of the State Freedom Caucus Network — who are currently leveraging divisive social issues to gain influence in 11 statehouses.

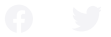
In Montana, they led the charge to enshrine a ban on gender-affirming care for minors that the governor signed Friday. In South Carolina, they slowed the budget process this year with failed amendments to punish universities with diversity programs. And in Wyoming, they tried to make certain library books “crimes of obscenity.”

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Across the country with varying levels of success, the groups have followed the playbook of the House Freedom Caucus, an eight-year



the [U.S. Congress](#) to the right.



After debuting on the second anniversary of the January 6 siege on the U.S. Capitol, the Montana Freedom Caucus' 21 members over the past two weeks successfully pushed GOP leaders to punish Zephyr, a Democrat, following her statements and actions in support of the transgender community.

The dispute brought Zephyr a national stage from which to advocate for transgender issues. Though she's seized the moment and drawn support from the left, her elevated profile could work to the GOP's advantage as Republicans try to paint [Democrats](#) as extremists heading into 2024, said University of Montana political analyst Robert Saldin. U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, a moderate Democrat and farmer, will be up for reelection in a race considered pivotal for control of the Senate.





Mont., on Wednesday, April 26, 2023. Republicans in Montana's House of Representatives voted to ban Rep. Zephyr from the chamber, following her support for protesters who disrupted the body's proceedings earlier in the week. (AP

Photo/Tommy Martino) VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

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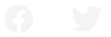
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“This is what the Freedom Caucus folks wanted,” said Saldin. “Now Zephyr is the second most well-known Democrat in Montana. To the extent that she’s the face of the party in Montana, that’s great for the Freedom Caucus.”

Zephyr’s punishment appears unprecedented in Montana. It comes after the state’s political landscape careened sharply Republican over the past 15 years, giving the GOP a two-thirds supermajority in the statehouse. That shift sidelined the thinning ranks of Republican moderates — and brought to the fore social issues once on the legislative fringe.

“They like to call us extremists, but we’re seeing the extremists on the left take front and center stage here,” said Montana Freedom Caucus chairwoman and state Sen. Theresa Manzella. “We’re getting behind the right issues, the issues that are dear to our hearts and those of our constituency.”



Zephyr by using the wrong pronouns to describe her. Matizella indicated that will continue.

Montana's Republican House Speaker stopped recognizing Zephyr's requests to speak on April 18 after she told colleagues they'd have blood on their hands if they restricted gender-affirming medical care. Days later, Zephyr was ousted from the floor on a party-line vote for the remainder of the session, accused of egging on boisterous demonstrators in the House gallery who had demanded she be allowed to speak.

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FILE - Rep. Andy Biggs, R-Ariz., center, speaks as members of the House Freedom Caucus hold a news conference at the Capitol in Washington, Friday, March 10, 2023. The banishment of transgender lawmaker Zooley Zephyr from Montana's House floor has showcased the rising power of hardline conservatives who are leveraging divisive social issues to gain political influence. From left are Rep. Clay Higgins, R-La., Rep. Michael Cloud, R-Fla., Rep. Bob Good, R-Va., Rep. Andy Biggs, R-Ariz., Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, Rep. Ralph Norman, R-S.C., and Rep. Lauren Boebert, R-Colo. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite, File) VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

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State Rep. Bob Phalen, a Freedom Caucus member and eastern Montana farmer, said the moves against Zephyr capped a session in which the caucus played a key role passing laws banning gender-affirming care for minors and restricting the dissemination of pornography. The group now includes one-fifth of statehouse Republicans and Phalen said he expects it to grow with the addition of freshman lawmakers whose votes aligned with Freedom Caucus priorities and will thereby earn entry.

Phalen, like others in the caucus, described this week's disruption on the House floor as "a riot or insurrection" — employing the same language that's been used for the Jan. 6 siege by supporters of Donald Trump.

The State Freedom Caucus Network is the brainchild of Republican strategist Andy Roth and U.S. Rep. Andy Biggs of Arizona, who in the lead-up to the 2020 election devised expanding the House Freedom Caucus model to the states.

The network uses House Freedom Caucus members to establish state-level affiliates, with congressmen including Biggs, U.S. Rep. Matt Rosendale of Montana and U.S. Rep. Ralph Norman of South

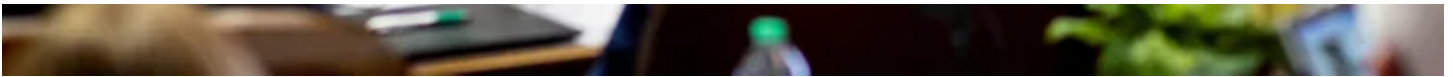


create a pipeline of conservative lawmakers to higher office. Each backed Trump's false statements about fraud in the 2020 election.

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Since its founding, the national network has supported Republican primary candidates with modest funds for attack ads in at least one state, but it's primary function has been to advise lawmakers on policy and strategy, Roth, the network's president, said.





Montana State Representative Zoey Zephyr speaks as a motion to bar her from the House chamber was discussed, at the Montana State Capitol in Helena, Montana, U.S. April 26, 2023. Rep. Zephyr will still be able to vote on bills remotely. REUTERS/Mike Clark NO RESALES. NO ARCHIVES MIKE CLARK VIA REUTERS

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The state-level strategy mirrors that of the House Freedom Caucus, which led the GOP rebellion against U.S. Rep. Kevin McCarthy’s bid for Speaker in January, extracting major concessions from leadership and coveted committee assignments.

“We’re trying to expose the hypocrisy that is going on in every state, especially in red states,” Roth said. “Liberal Republicans are going to the voters and saying, ‘I’m conservative. Elect me to the Statehouse,’ and then getting there and voting exactly opposite.”

Biggs, the former Freedom Caucus chair who challenged McCarthy, said freedom caucuses “create leverage points to try to advance a conservative cause.”

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“Leverage is the key,” Biggs said. “When I have something you want, and you feel like you need to have it, then you can’t get it anywhere





The majority of the 11 states with caucuses are controlled by Republican governors and Legislatures. Roth said that's by design. The national network advises its state members to "be loud" against Republicans who have compromised on fiscal and cultural conservative principles, Roth said.

Freedom caucuses from Idaho to Pennsylvania have focused on abortion, crime and how race, gender and sexuality are navigated in schools and state offices. They've also frequently targeted what Roth called "corporate welfare" including tax incentives designed to lure Hollywood film productions to Wyoming.

The group's rise in Montana follows the departure of lawmakers like former state Sen. Duane Ankney, who was among of a group of moderate Republicans that routinely negotiated with Democrats to break budget impasses. With Montana Republicans now in firm grip of power, Ankney said they no longer need Democratic agreement — or even to engage public debate.

"There's people up there that have an agenda, and it doesn't have to do with jobs and the economic health and well being of Montana," said Ankney, who served four terms in the state House and Senate before leaving the Legislature in January.

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Metz reported from Salt Lake City. Associated Press reporters James Pollard in Columbia, South Carolina, and Mead Gruver in Cheyenne, Wyoming, contributed to this story.

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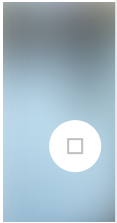
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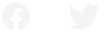
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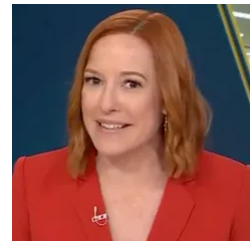
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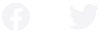


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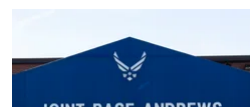
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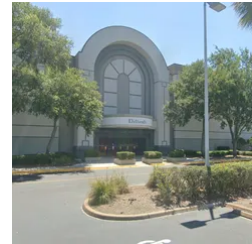


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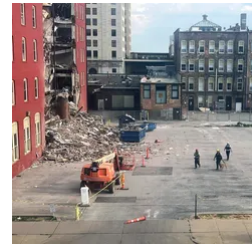




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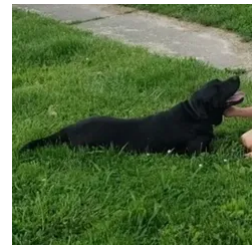
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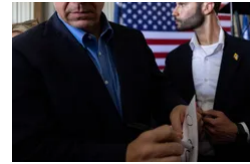
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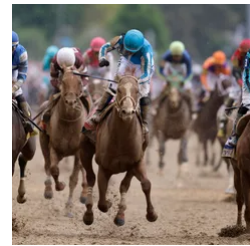
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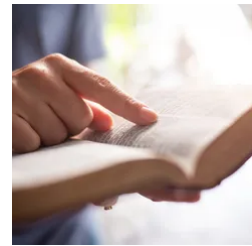
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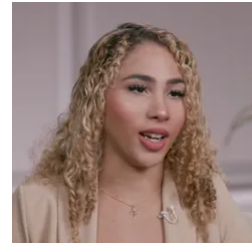
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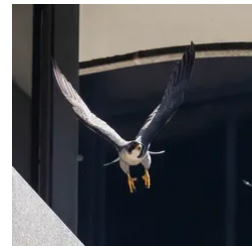
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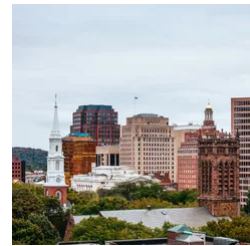
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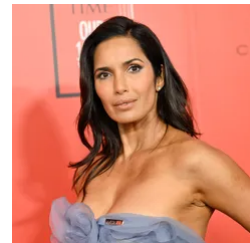
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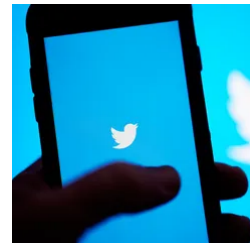
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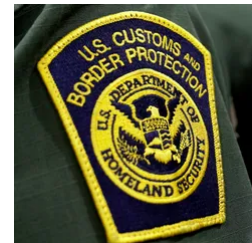
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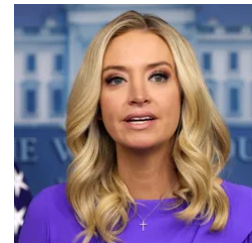
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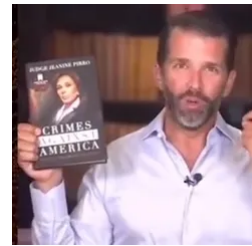
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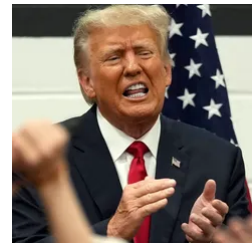
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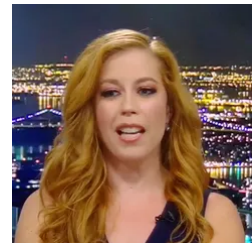
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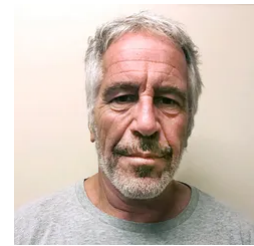
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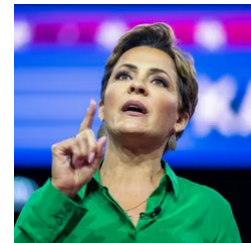
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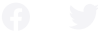
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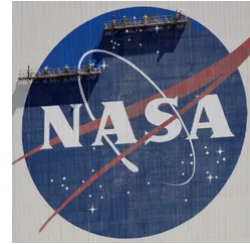




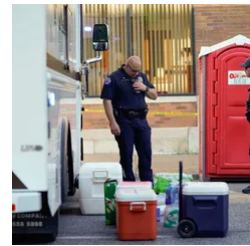
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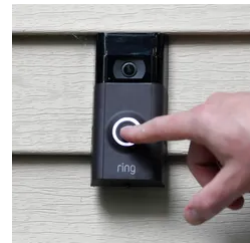
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