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## Obama Gets Midterm Do-Over For Dems

By Bill Barrow

Associated Press

ATLANTA, Ga. (AP)—Barack Obama is trying to do something he couldn't during two terms as president: help Democrats succeed in national midterm elections when they already hold the White House.

Of course, Obama is more popular than he was back then, and now it's President Joe Biden, his former vice president, who faces the prospects of a November rebuke.

Obama began a hopscotch across battleground states Friday in Georgia, and he traveled Saturday to Michigan and Wisconsin, followed by stops next week in Nevada and Pennsylvania.

The itinerary, which includes rallies with Democratic candidates for federal and state offices, comes as Biden and Democrats try to stave off a strong Republican push to upend Democrats' narrow majorities in the House and Senate



and claim key governorships ahead of the 2024 presidential election.

With Biden's job approval ratings in the low 40s amid sus-

tained inflation, he's an albatross for Democrats like Sens. Raphael Warnock of Georgia and Catherine Cortez Masto of Nevada. But party strategists see Obama

as having extensive reach even in a time of hyperpartisanship and economic uncertainty.

"Obama occupies a rare place in our politics today," said Da-

vid Axelrod, who helped shape Obama's campaigns from his days in the Illinois state Senate through two presidential elections. "He obviously has great appeal to Democrats. But he's also well-liked by independent voters."

Neither Biden nor former President Donald Trump can claim that, Axelrod and others noted, even as both men also ratchet up their campaigning ahead of the Nov. 8 elections.

"Barack Obama is the best messenger we've got in our party, and he's the most popular political figure in the country in either party," said Bakari Sellers, a South Carolina Democrat and prominent political commentator.

Obama left office in January 2017 with a 59 percent approval rating, and Gallup measured his post-presidential approval at 63 percent the following year, the last time the organization surveyed former presidents. That's considerably higher than his ratings in 2010, when Democrats

lost control of the House in a midterm election that Obama called a "shellacking." In his second midterm election four years later, the GOP regained control of the Senate.

Swimming against those historical tides, Biden traveled Thursday to Syracuse, New York, for a rare appearance in a competitive congressional district. After months of Republican attacks over inflation, he offered a closing economic argument buoyed somewhat by news of 2.6 percent GDP growth in the third quarter after two previous quarters of retraction.

"Democrats are building a better America for everyone with an economy... where everyone does well," Biden said.

Yet Lis Smith, a Democratic strategist, said Obama is better positioned to take that same argument to Americans who haven't decided whom to vote for or whether to vote at all.

"If it's just a straight-up ref-

(See **OBAMA**, P. 2)

## Cooper Wants EV Commercial Trucks

CARY (AP)—North Carolina state government will develop a rule requiring van, bus and commercial truck manufacturers to sell more zero-emission vehicles in the state over the next decade, Gov. Roy Cooper said on Tuesday.

Signing an executive order at the North American headquarters of electrical equipment company ABB, Cooper said the proposed rule and other activities he directed would help cut pollution from medium- and heavy-duty vehicles and promote charging and fueling infrastructure needed.

"North Carolina is already a national hub for truck and bus

manufacturing and supply chain development, and we should not miss the opportunity to lead the market-driven transition already underway to cleaner and increasingly cheaper zero-emission technologies that benefit our economy and our communities," Cooper said in a news release.

The anchor of Tuesday's order tells the Department of Environmental Quality to propose the Advanced Clean Trucks Program to the Environmental Management Commission by next May. The commission then would have to sign off on any proposal to make it enforceable.

Six other states have adopted

such a program including California, New York and Massachusetts, Cooper's office said.

Cooper's office said the program would apply to what's called medium- and heavy-duty vehicles, whose gross vehicle weight rating is at least 8,500 pounds, such as delivery vans, garbage trucks, school buses and semi-tractors. It said zero-emission vehicles can include hybrid plug-in vehicles that do have internal combustion engines.

The required sales shares of zero-emission vehicles by manufacturers under the program would increase over time from 10-13 percent in 2026 to 40-75

percent in 2035, depending on vehicle sizes, the governor's office said.

The vehicles targeted for replacement in the program compose just over 3 percent of registered vehicles in North Carolina, but they emit 26 percent of smog-forming nitrogen oxide emissions, according to Cooper's office.

The order comes several months after the Democratic governor unveiled another series of clean-vehicle initiatives, such as directing his Department of Transportation to create a "Clean

(See **COOPER**, P. 2)



### COAST GUARD: 13 RESCUED FROM SINKING VESSEL OFF VIRGINIA

NORFOLK, Va. (AP)—The U.S. Coast Guard, a crew of scientists and others launched an air and sea mission to rescue 13 people, including a child, from a fishing vessel just moments before it sank in darkness early Friday in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Virginia, authorities said.

The 115-foot Tremont fishing vessel collided with the 1000-foot Panamanian-flagged container vessel MSC Rita, about 60 miles from shore, the Coast Guard said in a statement.

The Tremont sent out a mayday call that it was taking on water and sinking with 13 people aboard that was received by watchstanders with Coast Guard Sector Virginia, officials said. That call was also heard by Atlantis, a 274-foot ship operated by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Falmouth, Mass., at about 1:45 a.m., WHOI said in an email to The Associated Press.

The captain of the Atlantis contacted the Coast Guard and motored eight miles west to the fishing vessel.

The Coast Guard launched an MH-60 Jayhawk helicopter crew and an HC-130 Hercules airplane crew from its air station in Elizabeth City, N.C., the Coast Guard said. It also dispatched a motor lifeboat crew from its station in Chincoteague, on Virginia's Eastern Shore, and diverted the Coast Guard Cutter Rollin Fritch to assist.

The Tremont's 12 passengers boarded a life raft, while the captain stayed on his ship, according to WHOI.

The Atlantis launched an inflatable boat that towed the life raft to another fishing vessel, the New Jersey-based Dyrsten, which took on the 12 passengers.

The Coast Guard helicopter hoisted the captain to safety in a basket.

"Moments later, according to witnesses, the Tremont sank," WHOI said in its email.

No one was injured in the collision or rescue, the Coast Guard said. The cause of the collision is being investigated.

"Safety of life at sea is the Coast Guard's top priority," Capt. Jennifer Stockwell, commander of Sector Virginia, said in a statement.

"These are the life-saving missions for which we train each and every day," Stockwell said. "While this morning's events were unfortunate, 13 people were rescued from an extremely perilous situation. The combined efforts of good Samaritans and Coast Guard response assets demonstrates a selfless commitment to others."

The Atlantis happened to be nearby as it was on a three-week mission conducting research dives on seeps of methane gas from the ocean floor, WHOI said. And it was using Alvin, the institution's famed human-operated submersible, which is probably best known for exploring the wreck site of the Titanic ocean liner.

### RURAL AREAS TO GET \$759M IN GRANTS FOR HIGH-SPEED INTERNET

(AP)—The Agriculture Department announced Thursday it is making available \$759 million in grants and loans to enable rural communities to access high-speed internet, part of the broader \$65 billion push for high-speed connectivity from last year's infrastructure law.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and White House senior adviser Mitch Landrieu unveiled the grants during a visit to North Carolina.

There are 49 recipients in 24 states. One is North Carolina's AccessOn Networks, which will receive \$17.5 million to provide broadband service to 100 businesses, 76 farms and 22 educational facilities in the state's Halifax and Warren counties. Both counties are rural and have predominantly Black populations.

"Rural America needs this," Vilsack said. "Rural America deserves this." He made the announcement in front of John Deere equipment, noting that rural areas tend to be where the electricity for cities is generated and where city dwellers and suburbanites go for vacations.

The announcement and visit to North Carolina, a state with an open U.S. Senate seat, come as President Joe Biden and other top Democratic officials are trying to sell their achievements to voters before the Nov. 8 midterm elections. Landrieu, the infrastructure coordinator and former New Orleans mayor, told reporters on a Wednesday call that the Biden administration has already released \$180 billion for various infrastructure projects.

The administration is specifically targeting support for small towns and farm communities, places that generally favor Republicans over Democrats.

"Rural communities are the backbone of our nation, but for too long they've been left behind and they have been underrecognized," Landrieu said. "We all know how essential the internet is in order

(See **STATE BRIEFS**, P. 2)

## Outgoing Senators Back Indian Tribes

By Jay Reeves

Associated Press

MOUNT VERNON, Ala. (AP)—Testifying before Congress, Chief Framon Weaver said his Alabama-based tribe, with roots dating back to the 1830s, held a distinction no one else wanted when it came to being recognized by the U.S. government, a stamp of approval that can mean millions in federal funding for Native American groups.

"It is clear that our tribe, the MOWA Band of Choctaw Indians, (is) the literal poster child for the structural failures evident in the federal recognition process," Weaver told a committee.

That was in 2012, so long ago that Weaver is no longer

chief. The MOWAs are still seeking federal recognition, and they're one of two state-recognized tribes hoping Congress will right what they see as wrongs of the past with the help of two influential U.S. senators who are retiring. It's an issue entwined not just with history but with the possibility of gambling revenues.

Alabama Sen. Richard Shelby, the senior Republican on the Appropriations Committee, is sponsoring legislation that would provide federal recognition to the roughly 6,500-member MOWA Band. GOP Sen. Richard Burr is handling similar legislation for the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina, which with 60,000 members calls itself the nation's largest tribe not recognized by the fed-

eral government.

Both groups contend the process for gaining federal recognition has become adulterated and now favors money over history. They say that's partly because of the billions generated by Indian gambling, something they can't offer because of the lack of federal acknowledgement.

Similar recognition bills have failed repeatedly in the past, and it's unclear whether either one will win approval this year. But the current chief of the MOWA Band, Lebaron Byrd, has taken over Weaver's lobbying effort and hopes a final use of Shelby's pull will mean the difference this time.

"We always are optimists," he said. "We don't give up hope."

(See **TRIBES**, P. 2)

## Affirmative Action Under Threat In Court

By Mark Sherman and Hannah Schoenbaum

Associated Press

CHAPEL HILL (AP)—Once a bastion of segregation, the University of North Carolina now takes account of race to make

up for its sordid history and to increase the number of Black students and other underrepresented minorities on campus.

Its affirmative action program, using race among many factors to build a diverse student body, is similar to plans in place at oth-

er selective public and private institutions.

But a Supreme Court that has twice blessed race-conscious college admissions programs in the past 19 years now seems poised to restrict their use or outlaw them altogether.

The case, following the overturning of the nearly 50-year precedent of Roe v. Wade in June, offers another test of whether the court now dominated by conservatives will move the nation's policies to the right on another of its most contentious cultural issues.

The court is hearing two cases Monday, involving UNC and Harvard, the nation's oldest public and private universities, respectively.

The challengers to the universities' programs have lost at every step as lower courts have rejected their claims that the schools discriminate against White and Asian American applicants.

But Students for Fair Representation, the creation of conservative activist Ed Blum, has always pointed toward the nation's highest court, more conservative now that former President Donald Trump's three nominees are among the nine justices, as the best forum to roll back more than 40 years of court rulings that allow race to be one factor among many in admissions.

North Carolina's flagship uni-

(See **AFFIRMATIVE**, P. 2)



**AFFIRMATIVE**—UNC for Affirmative Action co-directors Christina Huang, Joy Jiang and Adela Zhang discuss plans for an upcoming rally in support of affirmative action at Carolina Coffee Shop in Chapel Hill, N.C., on Monday, Oct. 24. [AP Photo/Hannah Schoenbaum]



# Obama Gets Midterm Do-Over—CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

erendum on Democrats and the economy, then we're screwed," Smith said, acknowledging that no incumbent party wants to run amid sustained inflation. "But you have to make the election a choice between the two parties, crystallize the differences."

Obama, she said, did that in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections "by winning over a lot of working-class White voters and others we don't always think about as part of the 'Obama co-

alition."

He couldn't replicate it in midterms, but he's not the president this time. Smith and Axelrod said that means Obama can more deftly position himself above the fray to defend Democratic accomplishments, from the specifics of the Inflation Reduction Act to the COVID-19 pandemic relief package that many Democrats have avoided touting because Republicans blame it for inflation. Smith said Obama can remind voters of years of Republican

attacks on his 2010 health care law that now seems to be a permanent and generally accepted part of the U.S. health insurance market.

Beyond those policy arguments, Sellers noted that Obama, as the first Black president, "connects especially with Black and brown voters," a bond reflected in the opening days of his itinerary.

In Atlanta, Obama was on stage with Warnock, the first Black U.S. senator in Georgia history, and Stacey Abrams, who's vying to become the first Black female governor in American history. Warnock faces a stiff challenge from Republican nominee Herschel Walker, who is also Black. Abrams is trying to unseat Republican Gov. Brian Kemp, who narrowly defeated her four years ago.

In Michigan, Obama will campaign in Detroit with Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, who is being

challenged by Republican Tudor Dixon, and in Wisconsin he'll be in Milwaukee with Senate candidate Mandela Barnes, who is trying to oust Republican Sen. Ron Johnson. Each city is where the state's Black population is most concentrated. Obama's Pennsylvania swing will include Philadelphia, another city where Democrats must get a strong turnout from Black voters to win competitive races for Senate and governor.

With the Senate now split 50-50 between the two major parties and Vice President Kamala Harris giving Democrats the deciding vote, any Senate contest could end up deciding which party controls the chamber for the next two years. Among the tightest Senate battlegrounds, Georgia, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania are three where Black turnout could be most critical to Democratic fortunes.

Plans have been in the works

for Obama and Biden to campaign together in Pennsylvania, though neither the White House nor Obama's office has confirmed details.

A wider embrace for Obama is a turnaround from his two midterm elections. But it's at least partly a rite of passage for former presidents. "Most of them—maybe not President Trump, but most of them—are viewed more favorably after they leave office," Axelrod said.

Notably, during Obama's presidency, former President Bill Clinton was the in-demand surrogate heavyweight, especially for moderates trying to survive Republican surges in 2010 and 2014. Clinton was a pivotal voice for Obama's reelection effort in 2012, with Obama dubbing him the "secretary of explaining stuff" after Clinton's sweeping endorsement address at the Democratic convention as Obama was locked in a tight con-

test with Republican Mitt Romney.

"Bill Clinton was the MVP for us in 2012," Axelrod said.

Now, Clinton is two decades removed from the White House, and the #MeToo movement has forced some people to reevaluate his history of sexual misconduct allegations.

"It's always been dicey to bring in national Democrats in a midterm, and it doesn't help when they bring a lot of baggage," Smith said of Clinton.

Axelrod was more circumspect, saying simply, "It's a different time."

But he said Obama and Clinton have a similar approach.

"What Clinton and Obama share is a kind of unique ability to colloquialize complicated political arguments of the time, just talk in common-sense terms," Axelrod said. "They're storytellers. I think you'll see that again when he's out there."

## STATE BRIEFS

Continued from page 1

to access lifesaving telemedicine, to tap into economic opportunity, to connect with loved ones, to work on precision agriculture and so much more. That's just beyond unacceptable that that's not available to rural America."

Vilsack said he and Landrieu would "learn firsthand" from people in North Carolina about the opportunities internet access can create. They met with state and local officials including North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper at Wake Technical Community College. They will also hold a town hall in Elm City.

Cooper attributed the broadband advances to the pandemic shutdowns that made people more reliant on the internet.

"It tossed us into the future by about a decade—we had to make something good out of something bad," he said. He added that 1 million of the state's residents have been on the wrong side of the digital divide, something the build-out will help to correct.

Neither candidate in North Carolina's U.S. Senate race—Democrat Cheri Beasley and Republican Ted Budd—was slated to appear at the events.

Vilsack said that past trips show how broadband connectivity is starting to make a difference. While in Nevada this summer, he heard from people in the town of Lovelock who plan to use the improved internet to enhance their emergency responder services and tourism opportunities as well as help high school students who are earning college credit online.

### SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK CLOSES TRAILS WHILE BEARS FEED

GATLINBURG, Tenn. (AP)—Great Smoky Mountains National Park officials have closed a couple of trails until further notice to allow a large concentration of black bears to feed on acorns.

The Gatlinburg Trail between Gatlinburg and Sugarlands Visitor Center and the Twin Creeks Trail between Gatlinburg and the Twin Creeks Science and Education Center are closed, the park said Wednesday.

The trails will stay closed temporarily for the safety of visitors and to allow bears to feed undisturbed on natural foods, the park said.

Bears often feed for more than 12 hours a day in the fall and are sometimes concentrated in places where food sources are abundant, the park's news release said. Normally wary bears may act aggressively to defend such areas.

The animals usually are solitary, but they may be seen feeding closely during the fall.

Bears move around in the fall looking for acorns, sometimes traveling more than 30 miles to feed in a particular spot, the park said. The bears depend on fall foods such as acorns and grapes to store fat reserves for the winter.

The park's website contains information about what to do if you encounter a bear while hiking.

### POLICE CHIEF IN VIRGINIA CAPITAL CITY RESIGNS AMID SCRUTINY

RICHMOND, Va. (AP)—The police chief in Virginia's capital city resigned Tuesday after months of scrutiny for comments he made about an alleged shooting plot.

Gerald Smith resigned Tuesday afternoon and will be on administrative leave through Dec. 31, according to a statement released by a spokeswoman for the city of Richmond. Smith, who served as chief for two and a half years, said at a July 6 news conference that two men had planned a shooting at a Fourth of July fireworks show at the Dogwood Dell Amphitheater.

The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* later reported that records obtained through the Virginia Freedom of Information Act showed that Smith was informed in writing before his news conference that the location of any potential incident was not known. Neither person who was charged in the case is accused of planning a mass shooting.

Acting police Major Richard Edwards has been temporarily appointed as police chief while officials conduct a nationwide search for Smith's replacement.

Smith's July 6 news conference came two days after seven people were killed in an Independence Day parade shooting in Illinois. Smith said a "hero citizen" had contacted police after overhearing a conversation indicating that an attack was being planned on an Independence Day celebration in Richmond.

Two suspects, both Guatemalan immigrants, were charged in state court with possession of a firearm by a non-U.S. citizen. Those charges were dropped after charges against the men were filed in federal court. Federal prosecutors charged one man with possession of a firearm by a non-U.S. citizen. The other man was charged with entering the United States illegally.

Smith was named police chief in July 2020 after previously serving as deputy chief of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department in North Carolina.

Transportation Plan" to reduce carbon emissions.

There are now more than 125 medium- and heavy-duty zero-emission models available in North America, Cooper's office said. Federal laws in 2021 and 2022 include grants and loan programs to support manufacturing as well as some tax credits to replace commercial gas or diesel vehicles that offer up to \$40,000 per vehicle.

Environmental groups praised Cooper's action, which also tells his Cabinet agencies to develop

strategies to improve health outcomes for communities disproportionately affected by air pollution caused by vehicles.

Low-income neighborhoods and communities of color are more likely to be near transportation corridors and freight hubs, according to Cooper's office.

"Implementing this executive order will protect our children's health as well as the climate," North Carolina Conservation Network Executive Director Brian Buzby said in a separate release. "Replacing diesel with

electric trucks over time will massively reduce air pollution exposures for both urban and rural North Carolinians living near roads." Several other groups wrote Cooper in August urging the clean trucks program be adopted.

Any final Environmental Management Commission rule would be subject to additional scrutiny by a state rules panel. It's also possible that the General Assembly could formally vote to block any rule.

In a tweet, Republican House

Speaker Tim Moore said that while the executive action was being reviewed, "I can't help but think that now is not the time for expansive, burdensome new mandates for our trucking industry while inflation and supply chain issues continue to crush NC families."

Cooper joined a multistate memorandum of understanding in 2020 that would seek to increase sales shares of zero-emission medium- and heavy-duty vehicles to 30 percent by 2030 and 100 percent by 2050.

# Cooper Wants EV Trucks—CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

# Outgoing Senators Back... —CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

2027, according to an assessment by the Congressional Budget Office. The largest share, roughly \$247 million, would come from benefits offered by the Indian Health Service, it said.

Both bills are opposed by a coalition of tribes already acknowledged by the U.S. government. A branch of the Bureau of Indian Affairs determines whether groups qualify as tribes through anthropological, genealogical and historical studies.

Groups that lose recognition bids before the agency can challenge those decisions through administrative appeals or lawsuits, something the MOWA have tried and failed. The Lumbee gained partial federal recognition through a bill in 1956 but are still blocked from key federal programs, a decision they continue fighting more than six decades later.

Politics shouldn't be allowed to short-circuit the process that other tribes have used to gain federal recognition, Native American groups opposed to the bills argued during a forum held at the U.S. Capitol in July.

"It is egregious when you can buy your way in," said Margo

Gray, chairwoman of the United Indian Nations of Oklahoma.

Congressional action would encroach on the rights of other tribes by cheapening the process, said Richard French, chairman of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

"When you claim to be someone that you're not, you're messing with the other peoples' sovereignty," he said.

More than 140 tribes are lined up against the bills, opponents say. Both the MOWA Band and the Lumbee Tribe contend history is on their side, even if other tribes aren't.

First recognized by Alabama in 1979, the MOWA Band says it is descended from Choctaws who remained in the area after Native Americans were forced to move west in the 1830s to make way for White settlers.

Purposely keeping a low profile and with only sparse written records to avoid detection after other groups were forced out, the MOWA Band was typically overlooked during the decades when Alabama was segregated by race. Members lived in the same rural community near the Mississippi line where many

remain, said Byrd, the current chief.

The MOWAs sought federal recognition but were refused by the government in 1997 after a study determined the group wasn't part of historical Choctaw groups, and that only 1 percent of its members had documented Indian heritage. Subsequent appeals and a lawsuit failed, leading to the push for congressional action on acknowledgement.

First recognized by the state of North Carolina in 1885, the Lumbee have been seeking federal acknowledgement since 1888. Describing themselves as survivors of tribal nations from the Algonquian, Iroquoian, and Siouan language families, they live mainly in four counties in the southern part of the state.

Lumbee member Arlinda Locklear, an attorney who specializes in tribal law in Washington, D.C., said the passage in 1988 of federal legislation that allowed gambling operations by federally recognized tribes made it more difficult for new groups to gain recognition. Existing tribes didn't want to risk divvying up markets and gaming revenues with upstarts, she said.

"That's what's given the opposition wings in terms of the Lumbee," Locklear said.

While the Indian Gaming Association said revenues nationwide exceeded \$39 billion last year, the Lumbee have denied that gambling is their prime reason for seeking recognition. Instead, the tribes describe gaming as "the least of all motives" for its decadeslong pursuit.

The Alabama tribe nearly a decade ago opened a video gaming operation in a small building that's still located near the tribal office, but it was quickly shut down by authorities because the group lacked federal recognition.

Federal recognition could finally open the door to gaming operations, but the MOWA would be in competition with Alabama's only federally recognized tribe, the Poarch Band of Creek Indians, which already operates casinos. One way or the other, Byrd said, recognition could improve life for descendants of a group of people who refused to leave their homes nearly 200 years ago.

"One of our cemeteries dates back to 1800," Byrd said. "We tell everybody we are the stayers."

# Affirmative Action Under... —CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

versity in Chapel Hill is a curious place to make that case.

The first Black students didn't arrive until 1951, and then only under court order. Into the 1980s, students reported they were subjected to racial slurs and astonishing displays of insensitivity, including being asked to do laundry by a White classmate, according to an account by historian David Cecelski that is included in court documents.

Even now, U.S. District Judge Loretta Biggs noted in her 2021 decision upholding the university's program, underrepresented minorities win admission to UNC at lower rates than do White and Asian American applicants and "minority students at the University still report being confronted with racial epithets, as well as feeling isolated, ostracized, stereotyped and viewed as tokens in a number of University spaces."

Defending its program, North Carolina wrote in its main brief to the Supreme Court that the school "continues to have much work to do."

On a recent, brilliant fall day in Chapel Hill, students talked about what they see as the benefits and drawbacks of affirmative action in college admissions.

Christina Huang, an 18-year-old freshman from West Milford, N.J., who is co-director of UNC for Affirmative Action, said diversity on campus enriches the learning environment for all students, even outside the classroom.

"I think there's a negative connotation of affirmative action and this idea that it's a quota and it's hurting Asian-Americans," said Huang, a first-generation college student who is studying political science. "But culture plays such a big role, especially on UNC's

campus, because you walk around and there's culture everywhere. There's people dressed up in traditional clothes, fashion shows, people dancing to their different types of music, even the foods we eat—it's so meaningful. You'd lose so much if we were not to make sure we have that diversity."

Students now picnic under the billowing trees in McCorkle Place where the Confederate statue Silent Sam stood for more than 100 years until protesters toppled it in 2018.

Joy Jiang, a 19-year-old sophomore from Harrisburg and co-director of the affirmative action group, said recent racial tensions on campus that she described as a backlash after the statue came down, have scared away some students of color from vocalizing their support for affirmative action.

Jacob James, 20, of Robersonville, recognized the value of diversity. "Diversity on college campuses is good, but it shouldn't come at the expense of fairness," said James, the chairman of UNC College Republicans. Affirmative action, he said, "unfairly disadvantages some individuals over other individuals based on race."

James' comment meshes with the main point made by Blum's group, that the Constitution forbids any consideration of race. Students for Fair Admission said it draws support from the seminal case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 decision that paved the way for the desegregation of the nation's public schools.

The group told the justices that Brown rejected many of the arguments UNC is making. "It argues that racial classifications make everyone better off. It warns that universities cannot discard race quite yet. And it contends that the

legality of its practices should be decided by North Carolinians, not this Court. The segregationists agreed," according to the group's final Supreme Court brief.

Students for Fair Representation also makes repeated use of the June decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*'s constitutional protection for abortion to bolster its arguments that the court should jettison its affirmative action precedents.

The abortion decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* strongly suggests the court would be willing to impose an "all-out ban" on considering race in college admissions, said Paulette Granberry Russell, president of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education. "The implications extend well beyond UNC and Harvard. It may very well result in a different outcome than what we have seen in the Bakke case, the Grutter case in 2003, the Fisher cases," Granberry Russell said, citing the court's earlier college admissions cases.

Blum, who has worked for years to rid college admissions of racial considerations, also was behind the ultimately losing lawsuit on behalf of Abigail Fisher, a White woman who claimed discrimination explained her rejection by the University of Texas.

That case was decided only six years ago, but the makeup of the court has changed significantly since then, with the addition of the three Trump appointees and Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, the court's first Black woman.

Jackson is sitting out the Harvard case because she was on an advisory board until recently. But she is taking part in the North Carolina case, which strongly suggests the court would use that case

if it ends up making a major pronouncement on affirmative action.

Every U.S. college and university the justices attended, save one, is urging the court to preserve race-conscious admissions.

Four justices attended law school at Harvard, and two were undergraduates there. Yale, Princeton, Columbia, Notre Dame and Holy Cross also have joined briefs in defense of Harvard's and UNC's admissions plans.

Only Justice Amy Barrett's undergraduate alma mater, Rhodes College, in Memphis, Tenn., is not involved in the cases.

Nine states already prohibit any consideration of race in admissions to public colleges and universities: Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Oklahoma and Washington.

In California, the same electorate that gave President Joe Biden a 5-million-vote margin over Trump in 2020 handily rejected a proposal to revive affirmative action.

Public opinion on the topic varies depending on how the question is asked. A Gallup Poll from 2021 found 62 percent of Americans in favor of affirmative action programs for racial minorities. But in a Pew Research Center survey in March, 74 percent of Americans, including majorities of Black and Latino respondents, said race and ethnicity should not factor into college admissions.

A decision in the affirmative action cases is not expected before late spring.

*Sherman reported from Washington. AP Education Writer Collin Binkley in Washington contributed to this report.*

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# Business & Finance

## Small Businesses Brace For Cautious Holiday Shoppers

NEW YORK (AP) — Small businesses are stocking the shelves early this holiday season and waiting to see how many gifts inflation-weary shoppers feel like giving.

Holiday shopping was relatively strong during the past two years as shoppers flocked online to spend, aided by pandemic stimulus dollars. Sales in November and December have been averaging roughly 20% of annual retail sales, according to National Retail Federation, making the holiday season critical for many retailers.

This year, small businesses are bracing for a more muted season, as some Americans spend more cautiously. AlixPartners, the global consulting firm, forecasts that holiday sales will rise between 4% to 7%, far below last year's growth of 16%. With inflation running above 8%, retailers would see a decrease in real sales.

To prepare, owners say they're ordering inventory earlier to avoid the supply-chain snags that frustrated them the past two holiday seasons and to draw in early birds. They're stepping up discounts as much as they can in the face of their own higher costs. And owners also hope more people will shop in stores and holiday markets after doing more of their shopping online during the pandemic.

Max Rhodes, CEO of Faire, an online marketplace used by small businesses to sell their wares wholesale as well as buy goods for retail shops, said he's seeing earlier ordering from merchants who for two years had trouble getting enough holiday inventory stocked in time for Christmas. Stores faced shortages of everything from holiday décor to gift items as COVID-19 lockdowns forced factories to shut, costs rose and fewer shipping containers and trucks were available — all causing delivery snarls.

A study for the Council of Supply Chain Management Professionals by global consulting firm Kearney found U.S. business logistics costs surged 22.4% in 2021 to \$1.85 trillion.



"There's a bit of a hangover from that, a bit of fear," Rhodes said. While it's too early for sales data, the term "Christmas" was the most searched for term on the site in mid-September. That's two weeks earlier than last year, and eight weeks earlier than 2020, Rhodes said.

"The one thing we're certain of is it's not going to be predictable ... We really don't know what to expect and our retailers feel the same way," Rhodes said.

Mat Pond operates The Epicurean Trader in San Francisco, including four brick-and-mortar stores, an online shop and a corporate gift basket business. In past years, he started building inventory in November, but this year he's already stocking up on items such as gourmet food, chocolate, wine and giftware. He's seeing corporations order holiday gift baskets earlier as well.

"Everyone's planning ahead," Pond said. "I think everybody's learning from the past two years."

While the pandemic's economic impact has subsided somewhat,

consumers are now being tag-teamed by high inflation and rising interest rates. Overall, spending has held up, although some Americans have been forced to pull back on discretionary items. Any decline can be meaningful because consumer spending makes up 70% of economic activity.

Hannah Nash, an online jeweler, expects sales of her earrings, bracelets and other jewelry to slow after two years of strong growth. The main culprit: inflation.

"There is less money going around to the average person and we expect their living expenses to impact how much they can spend on holiday shopping," Nash said.

Nash also expects more people to shop in stores during these holidays. She started her business, based in Indianapolis, during the pandemic, when online shopping boomed. The percentage of total retail sales done online jumped from 11.5% in 2019 to 17.7% in 2020, then rose again to 18.8% last year, according to the Mastercard SpendingPulse,

which tracks all kinds of payments, including those by cash and debit card.

Nash is stepping up discounts and offering bundles to attract

shoppers: Her plans include a 15% discount for new customers this year, up from 10%, starting in November. And she'll offer bundles of products that are about 20% cheaper than buying items separately.

Major retailers such as Amazon and Walmart are also offering holiday deals to cash-strapped Americans earlier this year. Amazon held a two-day discount event on Oct. 11-12 where the average order was \$46.68, \$13 less than what shoppers spent during the company's Prime Day sales event in July, according to the data group Numerator.

Some business owners are hoping to take advantage of any shift to shopping in holiday markets and in stores.

Kimberly Behzadi operates Read It & Eat Box in Buffalo, N.Y., which sells themed boxes with food and a book in each box. She started the business in 2020, during the pandemic. She has an online shop but is hoping the return of holiday markets to full capacity will boost sales. She depends a lot on the holidays — 40% of her annual revenue comes between October and December.

She's planning on being at six markets this year, with two more applications pending.

"Last year, holiday markets were still limited by the necessary safety protocols for Covid-19," she said. "This year, gratefully, we are able to attend and sell at more holiday markets locally, so my expectation is to double my holiday revenue this year."

Behzadi also plans on being more promotional.

"With inflation rates high this year I expect consumers to be looking for deals, so I have adapted my holiday strategy to include more bundles and deals," she said. She's offering a \$60 box that's bundled with a blind-date book worth \$25 for Black Friday, for example.

Mariana Leung-Weinstein sells alcohol infused jam and marshmallows and other farm-inspired gifts at about 25 stores, a business that she started in 2019. She's focusing on stocking up in stores in case online sales slow.

"I expect people will enjoy seeing and touching things in person this time around, which puts more of my focus in getting my products in physical stores in time for the holidays," she said.

## Amazon 3Q Revenue Disappoints

By Haleluya Hadero

AP Business Writer

NEW YORK, N.Y. (AP)—Amazon returned to profitability over the summer after two consecutive quarters of losses, but its stock fell sharply in after-hours trading due to weaker-than-expected revenue and disappointing projections for the current quarter.

The company on Thursday reported revenue for the three months that ended Sept. 30 of \$127.1 billion, boosted by Amazon's Prime Day, a major sales event for dues-paying Prime members that was pushed back to July this year from June the year before. That helped fuel Amazon's revenue growth of 15 percent over last year, an im-

provement from the prior two quarters when revenue grew by only 7 percent—the slowest in nearly two decades.

Still, those numbers came in short of forecasts by analysts surveyed by FactSet, who were expecting third-quarter revenue of \$127.4 billion.

Amazon said it expects revenue for the fourth quarter to be between \$140 billion and \$148 billion, growth of between 2 percent and 8 percent compared with the same time last year. The company said the guidance anticipates an unfavorable impact from fluctuations in foreign exchange rates. Analysts were expecting \$155.1 billion in revenue.

"People's budgets are tight, inflation is still high, and energy costs are additional layer on top of that," Amazon's Chief Financial Officer Brian Olsavsky said during a media call. "We are preparing for what could be a slower growth period."

Shares in Amazon.com Inc. fell 13 percent in after-hours trading.

Overall, retailers have been feeling skittish about the holiday shopping season and are offering more deals to clear out their inventories and lure in budget-conscious consumers dealing with high inflation.

Amazon, along with other retailers, kicked off its holiday shopping season earlier this month, offering major discounts for its Prime members for the second time this year. But the Seattle-based company's weak forecast for the fourth quarter indicates that it expects things to get tougher, said Neil Saunders, managing director at GlobalData Retail.

"In our view, this negative sentiment overshadows the cur-

rent trading figures," Saunders said.

The e-commerce behemoth said it made a third-quarter profit of \$2.9 billion, or 28 cents per share. Those numbers still represent a 9 percent decline from the same period a year ago. And it was aided by a pre-tax gain of \$1.1 billion from Amazon's investment in the electric vehicle start-up Rivian Automotive. Amazon's operating income, which measures revenue after subtracting costs, fell by nearly half.

The retail giant's results mimic those of other companies last week as the economy becomes tougher to navigate with high inflation and rising interest rates.

On Tuesday, Alphabet, the parent company of Google and YouTube, missed revenue expectations as advertisers pulled back their spending over fears about a potential recession. Microsoft posted a drop in profits amid weak computer sales.

And Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, reported a decline in revenue for a second consecutive quarter amid its own ad slump and concerns over whether the company is spending too much money on its idea of a metaverse. Both YouTube and Meta are also facing more competition from TikTok.

Diverting from the trend, Amazon says its own advertising business grew by 25 percent in the third quarter. Its AWS cloud business, another profitable unit, pulled in \$20.5 billion, a 27 percent jump from a year ago. But its growth has also slowed.

Aided by Prime Day, revenue from online sales grew 7 percent. But Amazon's retail business, which was growing robustly during the early days of the pandemic, has slowed considerably since then, causing the company to sublet, cancel or delay warehouses it had planned to open in different parts of the country.

The company is also cutting costs by axing some of its projects, such as Amazon Care and the online store fabric.com, and has implemented a hiring freeze on the corporate side of its retail business.

"Like most companies, we're going to be very careful in our hiring," Olsavsky said.

## Facebook Parent's Revenue, Profit Decline

By Barbara Ortutay

AP Technology Writer

Facebook parent Meta last Wednesday reported that its revenue declined for a second consecutive quarter, hurt by falling advertising sales as it faces competition from TikTok's wildly popular video app.

The quarter's weak results raised fresh questions about whether Meta's plans to spend \$10 billion a year on the metaverse—a concept that doesn't quite exist yet and possibly never will—is prudent while its main source of revenue is faltering.

The quarterly results from Meta Platforms Inc. sent its stock tumbling 19 percent in after-hours trading to \$105.20. The stock closed last Wednesday down 61 percent for the year.

Meta's disappointing results fol-

lowed weak earnings reports from Google parent Alphabet Inc. and Microsoft this week. The Menlo Park, Calif., company earned \$4.4 billion, or \$1.64 per share, in the three month period that ended Sept. 30. That's down 52 percent from, \$9.19 billion, or \$3.22 per share, in the same period a year earlier.

Analysts were expecting a profit of \$1.90 per share, on average, according to FactSet.

Revenue fell 4 percent to \$27.71 billion from \$29.01 billion, slightly higher than the \$27.4 billion that analysts had predicted.

Some of the company's investors are concerned Meta is spending too much money and confusing people with its focus on the metaverse, a virtual, mixed and augmented reality concept that few people understand—while it also grapples with a weakening advertising business.

"Meta has drifted into the land of excess—too many people, too many ideas, too little urgency," wrote Brad Gerstner, the CEO of Meta shareholder Altimeter Capital, earlier this week in a letter to Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg. "This lack of focus and fitness is obscured when growth is easy but deadly when growth slows and technology changes."

In addition to an accelerating revenue decline, Meta also forecast weaker-than-expected sales for the current quarter, further raising worries that the revenue slump is more of a trend than an aberration.

"While we face near-term challenges on revenue, the fundamentals are there for a return to stronger revenue growth," Zuckerberg said in a statement. "We're approaching 2023 with a focus on prioritization and efficiency..."

environment and emerge an even stronger company."

Meta said it expects staffing levels to stay roughly the same as in the current quarter—a departure from previous years' double-digit workforce growth. The company had about 87,000 employees as of Sept. 30, an increase of 28 percent year-over-year.

"To return to stronger growth, Meta needs to turn its business around," said Insider Intelligence analyst Debra Aho Williamson. "As Facebook Inc., it was a revolutionary company that changed the way people communicate and the way marketers interact with consumers. Today it's no longer that innovative groundbreaker."

She added that "Meta would benefit from less priority on the metaverse and more on fixing its core business."

## Lucrative Hurricane Ian Cleanup Leads To A Bigger Storm

By Mike Schneider

Associated Press

It has been a month since Hurricane Ian wiped out parts of southwest Florida. Now multimillion-dollar cleanup contracts are generating new tempests in the Category 4 storm's wake.

Contractors who remove de-

bris and perform post-storm repairs are fighting over local government contracts that could be worth tens of millions in tax dollars. The skirmishes offer a preview of likely fights over local, state and federal funds that will be distributed over the next several months to help southwest Florida get back on its feet.

A case in point is the recent contentious expansion of a land-based storm debris removal contract that had been put out to bid well before the hurricane. Coincidentally, the contract was awarded to Crowder-Gulf Joint Venture just days after Ian made landfall at the county's Cayo Costa State Park on Sept. 28.

In response to the wide hurricane damage, county officials expanded the contract's scope on Oct. 2 to include waterways and private property.

Disposing quickly of downed trees, blown-off roof shingles and shredded drywall is one of the most challenging but important parts of hurricane recovery. County officials want to get the job done speedily since local governments get direct payment from the Federal Emergency Management Agency for the cost of debris picked up within 60 days of a storm. Officials estimate Lee County has 1.8 million cubic yards of storm debris.

"We are bumping up against some very important timelines," Lee County Commissioner Ray Sandelli said at a recent meeting. But Bart Smith, an attorney for one of the contractors that lost the bid to Crowder-Gulf Joint Venture, told Lee County commissioners that not putting the extra work contained in the contract's expansion out to bid put them at risk of a "clawback," which is when FEMA takes back previously awarded money.

"Decisions are always made after storms, and these are emergencies, but you have to understand that hindsight is 20-20 and FEMA,

when they do all these reimbursements years later and review it and audit it and then tell you you have to give the money back, there are ramifications," Smith said.

Daniella Sanabria, an attorney for another rival contractor, also warned commissioners about a possible clawback, saying the expansion of the debris-removal contract to cover waterways and private properties was anti-competitive.

### Classifieds



#### ADVERTISEMENT FOR BIDS

The North Carolina Department of Public Safety has the following contract in Granville County out for bid: C-11446 Fire Suppression Storage Tank. The bid opening is scheduled for: Tuesday, 11/29/2022. To obtain the Notice to Bidders, any Pre-Bid Requirements, and any Addenda visit: <https://www.ips.state.nc.us/ips/AGENCY/PDF/15085900>.



HOMEOWNERS IN FORT MYERS, FLA. SIFT THROUGH DEBRIS



# Opinion



## In Deciding the Midterm Elections, Black Voters Again Hold the Power

By Stacy M. Brown

NNPA Newswire Senior National Correspondent

In-depth new research examining the priorities and concerns of Black voters over the age of 50 offers optimism and concern for Democrats and Republicans alike as America heads to the polls on Nov. 8.

Individuals aged 50 and over, which includes millions of Black men and women, comprise the largest voting bloc in America and are considered the nation's most potent voters.

In detailed research conducted shortly before the elections, AARP-sponsored data revealed how older Black voters plan to cast their ballots, their significant concerns, and their likely influence.

"Black voters 50-plus are going to be decisive in key elections across the country. That's going to be especially true in the importance of determining control of the Senate," said Matt Hogan, a partner at Impact Research.

"Data does show Republicans are doing a lot better with Black voters 50-plus than they have historically," Hogan reported from the extensive research.

"I think both parties have a real opportunity to boost their margins by protecting Social Security and Medicare and lowering the cost of prescription drugs."

Hogan counted as part of the AARP and NNPA Pollster Roundtable that included a particular focus on Black women, a critical cohort often overlooked by political candidates.

"Black women say they are less secure than they expected," said Margie Omero, a principal at GBAO Strategies, who participated in the poll.

"While women over 50 are motivated to vote by dislike of a candidate, Black women are motivated by civic participation to make their voice heard or because it's their duty to vote," Omero noted.

Omero further noted that many Black women over 50 are changing to respond to higher living costs. And similar to other women in the same age bracket, Black women believe that lowering the cost of food, reducing the cost of prescriptions, and protecting Social Security from cuts will help them the most.

In a "She's the Difference" poll of likely voters, eight in 10 said they support a Democrat on a generic congressional ballot.

Most Black women 50 and older said they are still making up their minds about how they will vote in November.

"This cohort is strongly motivated to vote, and making their voices heard is the biggest motivating factor," Omero added.

The poll outlined that the most important issues determining their vote in November are division in the country, voting rights, and racism.

The poll revealed that two-thirds of Black women 50 and older said the U.S. economy is working well for them, a significantly higher percentage than women in that age bracket overall.

At the same time, a plurality said they feel less financially secure than expected at this stage.

In a survey taken in targeted election districts, Black voters 50-plus in the most competitive House districts for this November's election currently back a generic Democrat by a 65 percent-16 percent margin over a generic Republican with a substantial 19 percent undecided.

While 49 points is a significant lead, it represents underperformance by Democrats among Black voters 50-plus compared to recent elections.

Black women 50-plus are more supportive of the generic Democrat at 69 percent-13 percent, with men preferring the Democrat at 60 percent-20 percent.

Liberals (37 percent of Black voters 50+) back the Democrat by 87 points, while conservatives (21 percent of voters) favor the Republican by 15.

While very few moderates (35 percent of voters) say they would vote for the Republican, 33 percent are currently undecided. Pollsters found little differences by education, with Republicans doing somewhat better among voters prioritizing economic issues for their vote in November.

In Florida, former Gov. Charlie Crist leads Gov. Ron DeSantis by a 78 percent-18 percent margin among Black voters 50 and over.

Crist wins women and men significantly but is up more with Black women 50 and older.

About one-quarter of Black voters 50 and over call themselves conservatives, and with this group, DeSantis has a narrow 5-point lead.

Crist dominates DeSantis among Black voters who are self-described liberals and moderates. Crist's lead is 22 points bigger among Black voters with college degrees than those without them.

Congresswoman Val Demings is ahead of Senator Marco Rubio by 79 percent-17 percent with Black voters 50 and over.

Like Crist, Demings' lead is larger with Black women than men.

Demings is the choice of nearly every Black voter 50-plus who is a liberal and has a big lead with moderates, while the two candidates are competitive among conservatives.

Just as in the governor's race, Demings does a net 22 points better with Black voters 50-plus who are college graduates.

In Georgia, Stacey Abrams leads Gov. Brian Kemp 74 percent-21 percent among Black voters 50-plus, an enormous advantage, but this 53-point margin is a significant drop-off from 2018, when she won Black voters 45-plus by 91-points over Kemp (95 percent-4 percent), according to the AP VoteCast exit poll.

The pollsters didn't find much of a gender gap among Black voters 50 and over in the governor's race, and Abrams has substantial advantages among liberals (35 percent of Black voters 50+) and moderates (31 percent).

However, Kemp has a 9-point lead among the 27 percent of Black voters 50-plus who call themselves conservatives.

Sen. Raphael Warnock has a more significant lead among Black voters 50-plus, ahead of Herschel Walker by an 80 percent-17 percent margin, but is still underperforming typical Democratic performance with these voters.

Warnock's lead is 10 points more significant among Black women 50-plus than Black men. The pollsters found that Warnock leads Walker with each ideological group, but the race is

tight among conservatives.

Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer leads Tudor Dixon by a 79 percent-16 percent margin among Black voters 50 and over, where polls found a gender gap, with Black women 50-plus giving the governor an even bigger lead.

Whitmer holds considerable advantages among liberals and moderates, while Dixon narrowly leads Whitmer among the 18 percent of Black voters 50-plus who call themselves conservatives.

Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers (D) holds a 78 percent-18 percent lead over Tim Michels (R) among Black voters 50 and over.

However, it still stands underperforming compared to recent Democratic candidate performance among Black voters 50-plus in Wisconsin.

Evers is up by 64 points among Black men 50+ and 57-points among Black women 50-plus.

The governor wins nearly every self-identified liberal and 81 percent of moderates, but among the 1-in-5 Wisconsin Black voters 50-plus who identify as conservative, Michels is up 58 percent-39 percent.

Pollsters found the Senate race to be like the contest for governor at the topline level.

Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes (D) leads Sen. Ron Johnson (R) by a 78 percent-19 percent margin.

Barnes' lead is a bit larger over Johnson's among Black men 50-plus than Black women 50 and over.

Barnes has a slightly smaller lead among Black moderates 50-plus than Evers, but he keeps the race against Johnson closer among Black conservatives 50-plus.

Meanwhile, in Pennsylvania, polling shows Josh Shapiro with a substantial 85 percent-9 percent lead over Doug Mastriano among Black voters 50-plus in the race for governor.

That's an improvement from his 78 percent-17 percent advantage in June.

Shapiro leads among both Black women and men 50-plus, with an immense advantage among women.

He wins more than 90 percent of self-described liberals and moderates and 62 percent of conservatives, with considerable improvement among both moderates and conservatives since June.

Like the governor's race, John Fetterman has expanded his lead over Mehmet Oz among Black voters 50 and over.

His edge now stands at 84 percent-8 percent vs. 76 percent-16 percent four months ago.

Black women 50-plus favor Fetterman by an 80-point margin, while men back him by 68-points.

Fetterman remains up by huge margins among liberals and moderates while doubling Oz's vote total among the 21 percent of Black voters 50-plus in Pennsylvania who call themselves politically conservative.

"One of the things that will be interesting to see after the election is just what was the final movement," said Tony Fabrizio, partner at Fabrizio Ward.

"If we continue to see a drift toward Republicans, that's good news for the Republican Party," Fabrizio stated.

"One of the things we've seen is that Republicans are status quo with White voters, but their growth is particularly with Black voters and other voters of color."



## American Values Or Christian Beliefs

By Bob Topper

PeaceVoice

Sixty-two percent of Republicans believe that America should be declared a Christian country, even though they also understand such a declaration would be unconstitutional. Christian nationalists do not believe in the separation of church and state.

The National Conservative Manifesto, published by the Edmund Burke Foundation and signed by Mark Meadows, Ken Cuccinelli, Jim DeMint, and other Republican leaders is concerning. It declares, "No nation can long endure without humility and gratitude before God and fear of his judgment that are found in authentic religious tradition...."

It is remarkable that a United States citizens wrote this, for America, their nation, is a Constitutionally secular government, and through its 250 years it has not only "long endured," it has thrived, to become in many ways the most successful nation in history.

The notion of America as a Christian nation is ironic. Core American values—freedom, equality, and democracy—are not shared by Christianity as practiced by some.

America nominally guarantees freedom of belief, but Christianity frequently denies that freedom. Christians are required to believe revelation such as "...those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction..." Second Thessalonians 1:8-9. In short, if you do not "obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus," you are free to suffer forever.

Dissenting with church dogma invites the label of heretic, subject to excommunication, which is, of course, the province of a church, but in our America the key distinction is that it has no civic function.

In America, religious liberty, the right to hold and celebrate personal beliefs, is unrestricted. Churches, mosques, and synagogues all exist in our country. But what happens when conservatives get their wish and the U.S. is a Christian nation? Do we return to "No Jews allowed" policies in some social organizations? Will we see signage at community centers, "No Muslims allowed"? After all, that is the sort of thing that was widespread when Americans would often say, We are a Christian nation.

Following decades of dedicated nonviolent struggle, entire groups of people who gained civil and human rights in our democracy and secular civil society are likely to lose those rights if the wall separating church and state fall as Christian nationalists want them to. Gay, lesbian, trans—they can expect harsh biased treatment and legal exclusions when we are once again a Christian nation. Loving same-sex families can easily foresee sudden annulment of their married status and all that it involves. Doctors can return to the days of refusing medical care to some they decide are not deserving based on an identity that does not comport with their idea of a Christian nation.

Religious liberty cannot be a right to religious prejudice. If we become a Christian nation the stratification sought by Christian nationalists will recreate a much less egalitarian form of democracy, one that's taken 246 years of dedicated struggle to improve.

The Conservative Manifesto confirms this elitism. Hardly a testament to equality, it states, "Where a Christian majority exists, pub-

lic life should be rooted in Christianity and its moral vision, which should be honored by the state and other institutions, both public and private. At the same time, Jews and other religious minorities are to be protected..." Really? Even the U.S. Supreme Court, very recently, acknowledged that Jews were discriminated against by places like Harvard University when we were a Christian nation.

Christians are the first-class citizens who set the rules. This one-sided thinking has already played out in Mississippi with the Dobbs decision where the Supreme Court Christian majority's view on abortion has been forced upon everyone. The religious beliefs of minorities simply do not matter. Jews, for example, believe that personhood begins at birth. Prior to birth, the mother's physical and mental health are given priority... but not in Mississippi or other states that recently enacted strict bans on abortion.

Moreover, Christianity does not abide gender equality. Consider this biblical passage, "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (1 Timothy 2:12). Wives are not equal to but subservient to their husbands. And women have yet to reach parity in the modern ministry. Even today male head clergy outnumber female by wide margins. In evangelical churches the ratio is 97 percent male to 3 percent female. Catholicism bars women from the priesthood.

Christianity's record on racial equality is also troublesome. The Bible advises slaves to be faithful to their masters. And during the Civil War, passages from the Bible were offered as proof of White superiority and justification for slavery. Racial bias persists. On January 6, Christian nationalists and White supremacists marched together carrying the holy cross and waving the confederate flag.

Concerning democracy, Christians have, from the first Pope, accepted authoritarian rule as the legitimate form of governance. While the college of cardinals now elect popes, all other positions of authority within the Catholic church are filled by decree. Evangelicals are similarly undemocratic. The unashamed Christian participation in the January 6 effort to upend democracy and overturn the election is not so surprising.

Simply put: we are a democracy, not a theocracy, and the suppression of science is a keystone feature of a theocracy, robbing citizens of logical thought and choice. Our climate emergency is just one such example.

Theocracies not only discourage thinking and impede progress, but they can also be very unjust. Look at modern theocratic countries. In general, their citizens have a low standard of living and are without basic human rights. Women are treated shamefully, denied education, and repressed. Masha Amini, a young Iranian woman was recently beaten and murdered by the morality police for not wearing a hijab. Think that could that ever happen here? Unlikely, but the Texas law rewarding citizens who bring lawsuits against women and doctors for abortions is undoubtedly a form of morality policing.

The Spanish Inquisition was finally abolished in 1834, 60 years after the American Revolution. So, the founders knew firsthand that Christianity could spawn great injustice, and they understood that a theocratic government would never provide the freedoms they envisioned for America. That is why they created a secular nation and authored a secular constitution that guarantees freedom, equality, and democracy. These founding principles are what has made America a great nation. Patriotic Americans understand that and will reject the Conservative Manifesto, and other misguided efforts by the religious right to undermine America's foundation.

Forcing Christianity on non-believers will not reverse the steep decline in Christian church membership. A better strategy might be to follow Christ's essential teaching—love thy neighbor. Live and let live.

Bob Topper, syndicated by PeaceVoice, is a retired engineer.



## Musk, Twitter and Friedman's Social Responsibility Observation

By Thomas L. Knapp

William Lloyd Garrison Center

As the October 28 deadline to complete his acquisition of Twitter approached, Elon Musk used the platform to send an open letter to its advertisers.

Why did Musk buy Twitter? "I didn't do it to make more money," he writes. "I did it to try to help humanity, whom I love."

That might seem an odd approach toward the people who use Twitter to make more money, and of course there's always the question of whether to believe him. But he sets out a vision that those advertisers should find attractive.

He reassures them that he doesn't plan to turn the platform into "a free-for-all hellscape, where anything can be said with no consequences!"

Rather, he wants a platform that's "warm and welcoming to all, where you can choose your desired experience according to your preferences." He wants to deliver ads that are highly relevant ("actually content!") rather than irrelevant ("spam") to those preferences... so that it "strengthens your brand and grows your enterprise."

He wants to serve the advertisers by serving the users. That sounds like a pretty smart business plan.

People using social media to create "silos" in which they're only (or at least mostly) exposed to ideas they agree with isn't something that's going away.

Twitter's approach of driving people away to other platforms (by banning, "shadow-banning," etc.) over their political views, wasn't a smart business plan.

It intentionally took money out of Twitter's pockets by driving advertisers to those other platforms as well—even though Twitter's follow/block tools were up to the job of letting users "silo" themselves instead of leaving, so that advertisers could find and court them right there.

Perhaps Musk really isn't buying Twitter "to make more money." But he still seems to be following the late economist Milton Friedman's dictum:

"There is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud."

The rule of the social media game is: Sell users to advertisers.

Sending users away when it's possible to keep them there and expose them to relevant ads (but not irrelevant ones) fails the users, the advertisers... and the platform's owner(s). To the extent Musk serves the first two, he also serves the last—himself.

Thomas L. Knapp (Twitter: @thomaslknapp) is director and senior news analyst at the William Lloyd Garrison Center for Libertarian Advocacy Journalism (thegarrisoncenter.org). He lives and works in north central Florida.