

# THE KANSAS CITY STAR

## Missourians are not stupid. We're watching as politicians try to dismantle democracy

BY JONAH ZACKS *SPECIAL TO THE STAR*

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Missouri high school student Jonah Zacks created the website [MOtaryconnections.org](http://MOtaryconnections.org) to help mail-in voters find notaries.

Missouri has always been a state of greats: great rivers, great plains, and historically, great politicians. The achievements of national political figures from Missouri have elevated them to the highest offices, earned their names a place on courthouses and college campuses and shaped the national ethos because, as the most famous among them said, "The buck stops here."

Beyond that, Missouri leaders have created systems and institutions that can serve as a model for the nation. Our consumer financial protection system is used to hold corporations accountable and sometimes even save lives. Our Sunshine Law has helped everyday Missourians and journalists keep their government accountable. Our citizen ballot initiative process has allowed us to implement groundbreaking policies that truly do exemplify the will of the governed.

Unfortunately, Missouri has also been home to embarrassing political and governmental failures. Most alarming, a number of our elected officials have recently concluded that allowing everyone to vote is an existential threat to their careers. The result has been a yearslong effort to wear down the democratic and civic institutions that make Missouri strong.

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However, up to this point, one of the only systems of government that the legislature couldn't manipulate was the citizen ballot initiative process. This allows Missouri voters to bypass the General Assembly and governor entirely, should the need arise. Most states have a similar process, but Missouri's is uniquely necessary.

Missourians have used this process to raise the minimum wage, protect unions and most recently, expand Medicaid.

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The response from the legislature was to hamstring the citizen ballot initiative process through [a recent bill](#) making it harder to get a measure on the ballot that just passed the Missouri House. It also would raise the share of votes needed for an initiative to pass in an effort to see that nothing ever does. This would make it nearly impossible for Missourians to hold their leaders and their government accountable: an inherently undemocratic reality.

Groups have already started working to stop the measure, but the legislature has a backup plan. They recently passed another bill similar in spirit to one in Georgia. It has a number of provisions, some as dangerous as dramatically expanding the ability of the secretary of state to audit voter rolls and remove names, making these people no longer registered to vote. Another provision in the bill mandates that anyone “soliciting more than 10 voter registration applications” register themselves with the state, which would make voter registration drives exponentially more difficult. Tony Messenger, a renowned columnist for The St. Louis Post-Dispatch likened the Missouri and Georgia bills to “taking a blowtorch to democracy.”

A third bill in the legislature would block funding for Medicaid expansion. After Missouri voters passed a constitutional amendment — using the citizen ballot initiative — that required the state to expand Medicaid, the General Assembly decided to defund the program instead. In doing so, lawmakers threw away massive amounts of federal money that was supposed to go to the people working hardest in our society for the least reward.

Members of the Show-Me State’s legislature have just shown us precisely what they think of democracy.

The rampant voter suppression in Missouri puts us in a bad situation, but not an insurmountable one. Missouri’s strength has never come from politicians and pundits. It has come from people.

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Safeguarding our civil rights and civil liberties will take work — but it’s the kind of inexorable, ever-present, determined work that we have always been good at. It’s the Missouri thing to do. In the end, the greatest threats that Missouri faces don’t come from any legislative factions or corrupt politicians. The greatest threat to Missouri is apathy, and so far, we have never lost to that.

The fact is that many of the legislators and statewide officials who have been working to circumvent the will of the voters are doing things that their constituents don't want them to. Their only protection is our ignorance. So, get to know these people. All the bills they sponsor and their voting records are on [house.mo.gov](http://house.mo.gov). Then, get in touch with them. Most of these districts are small enough that the representatives actually answer all their emails.

If your legislators are doing something right, let them know you appreciate their work. If your legislators are doing something wrong, tell them you're paying attention. Show them what makes Missouri strong. Show them that it's the Missouri thing to do.

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