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— News From The States —

EVENING WRAP



By [Kate Queram](#)

You may, depending on where you live, be heading to the polls in a few short weeks. If not, well, consider this my attempt to get you in the election mood. It's not a state of mind, really — it's a way of life.



The Big Takeaway

More than two dozen states will hold elections next month, including 11 statewide contests that will determine governorships ([Mississippi](#), [Kentucky](#)), legislative majorities ([New Jersey](#), [Virginia](#)), and, [in Ohio](#), the future of abortion, which will be enshrined in the state constitution if voters approve a proposed amendment. As always, it's a complicated issue — particularly for religious voters, who find themselves weighing personal experience and science against scripture, doctrine and the teachings of their faith, [the Ohio Capital Journal reported](#).



Members of the Jewish community have objected to abortion bans, saying it infringes on their religious freedom.

(Photo by Morgan Trau via the Ohio Capital Journal)

The struggle is most pronounced for members of the Catholic Church, a staunchly anti-abortion institution that has [framed the referendum](#) as a “clear threat to human life.” That doctrine helped shape the political beliefs of voters like Jennifer Perry, who backed Republican candidates largely because her church said the party “supported pro-life values.” But after pursuing a career in medicine, struggling with infertility and losing a much-wanted pregnancy in the second trimester, that messaging became difficult to abide.

“My view of what defines pro-life and what defines pro-choice has become just so much broader, and it’s not a black and white issue at all,” said Perry. “We weren’t given both sides of the coin. We weren’t given both perspectives.”

Nuance is crucial, particularly with reproductive health care, where doctors often treat miscarriages with procedures and medications more commonly associated with abortion. Even people who desperately want children may need those treatments, which would become instantly inaccessible in Ohio if the proposed amendment fails.

“To think that a mother ... would have to go through that out-of-state, not with her family and friends or her chosen doctor, that’s just excruciating to me,” Perry said.



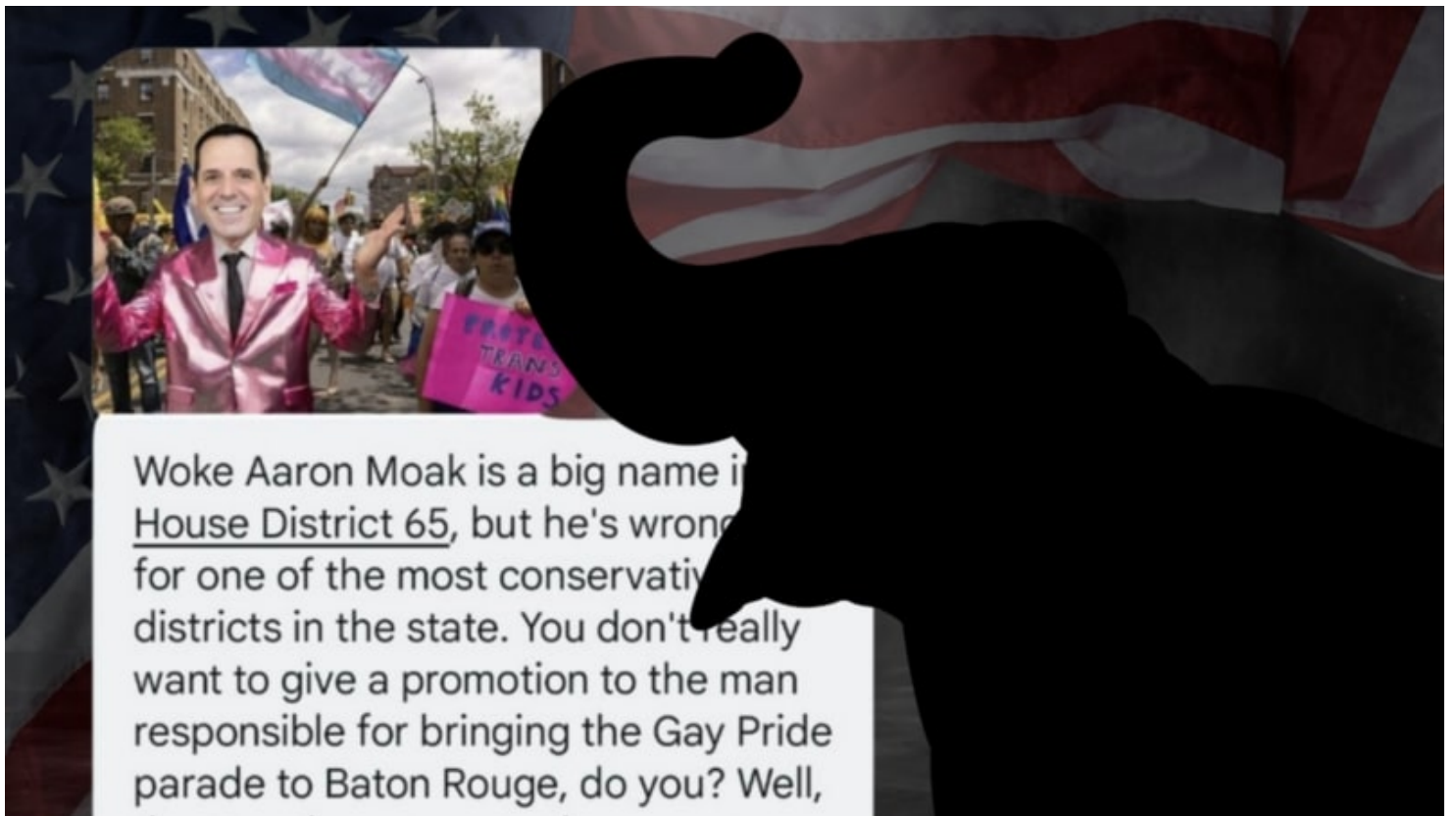
And yet!

(Photo by Graham Stokes for the Ohio Capital Journal)

Leaders from other religions view the issue as a matter of freedom rather than faith. Rev. Timothy Ahrens, senior minister of the First Congregational Church of the United Church of Christ in Columbus, filmed [a 30-second ad](#) in support of the proposed amendment, which he said would ensure that the government cannot intrude on what should be a “private family decision.”

Ultimately, voters have to make their own decisions, even if their faith leaders make it clear how they’d prefer a congregation to vote. For medical professionals like Perry and Alexandra Belcher, it’s not a particularly difficult choice, because the science — and the reality — of reproductive care don’t support the doctrine.

“The reasoning is not because it’s in the best interest, or because there is evidence-based medicine. The reasoning is this magical belief that this group of cells is a person who has rights,” said Belcher, a pharmacist and practicing Catholic who once needed emergency care for a life-threatening ectopic pregnancy. “I think that when it comes down to it, if I’m ever faced with the pearly gates, the God that I believe in will understand.”



Woke Aaron Moak is a big name in House District 65, but he's wrong for one of the most conservative districts in the state. You don't really want to give a promotion to the man responsible for bringing the Gay Pride parade to Baton Rouge, do you? Well,

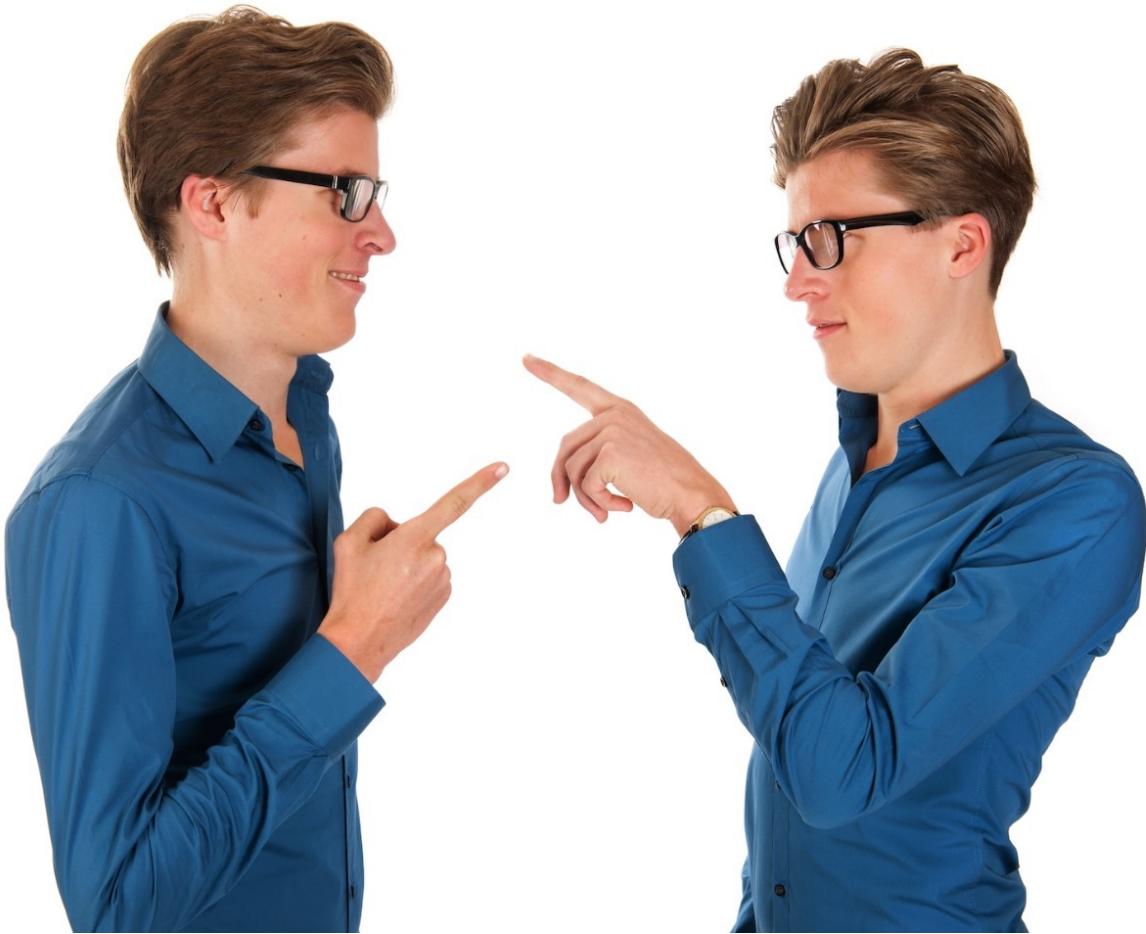
*No one understands this.
(Illustration by the Louisiana Illuminator)*

In Louisiana, Republicans are distancing themselves from a mass text message maligning a gay GOP candidate as “the wrong choice for one of the most conservative districts in the state,” [the Louisiana Illuminator reported](#). The text, sent midway through Election Day on Oct. 14, urged voters to reject “Woke Aaron Moak,” a Baton Rouge Metro Council member and state House candidate who is “responsible for bringing the Gay Pride parade to Baton Rouge.”

The message was accompanied by an image of Moak in a pink jacket leading what appears to be a transgender pride parade. Which is interesting, because Moak has never been part of *any* kind of parade — not even the pride parade he allegedly brought to Baton Rouge, which, it turns out, does not have a pride parade. A little Google sleuthing revealed that the photo was taken at a parade in South Carolina, then doctored to include a separate image of Moak.

The text, which likely did not influence the outcome [of the race](#), claimed to be funded by the [Louisiana Freedom Caucus PAC](#), which is, apparently, a wholly separate entity from the state’s far-right Freedom Caucus.

“The freedom caucus PAC is different from the legislative freedom caucus,” state Rep. Alan Seabaugh, one of the legislative caucus’ founding members, said via text message. “It is very confusing and has caused a number of problems.”



The same, but different.

(Photo by Ivonne Wierink/Adobe Stock)

The PAC, Seabaugh said, is loosely affiliated with the *congressional* Freedom Caucus, but not with any individual House members. There are no legislators on the organization’s board, and its members make “independent decisions without legislative input,” according to state Rep. Blake Miguez, chair of the Louisiana House Republican Caucus.

Everything else about the PAC, and how it functions, is pretty murky. For starters, it’s unclear who funds the group, which has not submitted finance reports to the state. (That’s not necessarily nefarious — depending on the amount of money it’s raising, the PAC may not be required to disclose that information until next month.) But according to [paperwork filed with the Louisiana Ethics Board](#), the Freedom Caucus PAC is chaired by a guy named Scott McKay, who runs a right-wing political commentary website called The Hayride. Reached by phone Friday, McKay refused to confirm his involvement or comment on the PAC’s activities.

“Is this an interview? I’m not doing interviews with the Illuminator,” McKay said before hanging up the phone.

The paperwork also lists two people as board members: Barry Huggins, a former member of the West Baton Rouge Parish Council, and Peter Egan, a Republican candidate in a runoff contest for a state House seat. Huggins couldn't be reached for comment, while Egan said he'd never been a member of the PAC's board. He did receive an endorsement from some Freedom Caucus group, he added, but had no idea if it was the legislative caucus or the PAC.

"I haven't given or received money from the Freedom Caucus (PAC)," he said. "I have no knowledge of anything related to that."

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Also Trending

Computer problems, call center wait times and administrative mistakes have hampered Medicaid determination in Maryland, leaving nearly 2 million residents unsure if they still qualify for insurance coverage. The process, required after the expiration of pandemic-era provisions that expanded Medicaid eligibility, will likely be slowed further after federal officials instructed states [to pause disenrollments](#) for "procedural reasons," a blanket term that led to thousands of recipients losing benefits despite continuing to qualify for coverage, [per Maryland Matters](#).



Definitely not automatic.

(Photo by Danielle J. Brown/Maryland Matters)

Around 581,600 households were due for reevaluation from March through September, according to state data. More than 90,000 people maintained their coverage in September, while 12,870 were determined ineligible. That data does not include “procedural” disenrollments, which makes sense — those are paused — but also makes it difficult for health officials and legislative leaders to gauge the efficacy of outreach campaigns that aim to help people retain their benefits.

Amid the confusion, call center wait times have steadily increased, jumping from 95 seconds in June to 10.5 minutes in September. Unsurprisingly, more people are hanging up before they get help. In March, 6.2% of calls were abandoned before they were answered; in September, 1 in 4 callers gave up before receiving assistance.

Those numbers stem partly from a large increase in calls, according to Chase Cook, acting director of communications for the state Health Department. In August, call centers fielded 135,000 calls, compared to 106,000 in July. The state has since launched a chat feature and implemented password-less verification to help reduce call volume, he said.

“Because of these actions, Maryland has begun to see improvement in call center metrics in September and October,” he said. From Oct. 1 through Oct. 19, “wait times are now down to about 4 minutes, 9 seconds,” he added.

We'll be with you soon: [Arizona GOP lawmakers, again, convene a COVID hearing chock full of misinformation](#) ... [Arkansas legislators approve federal aid for struggling rural hospitals](#) ... [Connecticut expanded abortion access, but what does that mean?](#) ... [Ibogaine long shot for FDA approval, heart expert warns](#) [Kentucky opioid commission](#) ... [Study: Maine has some of highest at-home care and nursing home costs in nation](#) ... [Mental health techs protest working conditions, safety at Nebraska psychiatric hospital](#) ... [Crisis in children's mental health takes a heavy toll in rural southeastern North Carolina](#) ... [Texas cities and counties are destroying expired Narcan. Some say it could still be used to save lives.](#) ... [For children exposed to alcohol before birth in Washington, services are in short supply](#)



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One Last Thing

Dwayne “the Rock” Johnson [is requesting changes](#) to his own wax statue, which has drawn massive criticism for its light skin tone. Johnson, who is Samoan and Black Nova Scotian, said his team would reach out to the Grevin Museum in Paris “so we can work at ‘updating’ my wax figure here with some important details and improvements — starting with my skin color.” On its website, [the museum noted](#) that the sculptor referenced “photos and videos to create a statue as close to reality as possible, without the presence of the international star.”

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