

# News Analysis: Missouri legislature is Exhibit A for toxic masculinity

In the Missouri Legislature this year, one legislator talked about “consensual rape.” Another greeted women protesting lax gun laws by putting up on his door a silhouette with bullet holes. A lobbyist angry about his son’s expulsion from Washington University started a dark money fund to weaken protections against sexual predators on campus. The legislature ignored Roe v. Wade by banning abortion after 8 weeks even in cases of rape and incest.

Altogether this recent term of the Missouri Legislature was characterized by what critics describe as “toxic masculinity.”

The term, “toxic masculinity” used to be confined to gender studies,\* psychology classes and men’s self-help groups. Now this term denoting the toxicity of certain versions of maleness has entered the mainstream of policy-making, political discussion, news reporting and opinion journalism.

It’s no surprise this is happening now. If the term toxic masculinity is misogyny, male bullying and various degrees of verbal aggression, then it can be said that America installed a classic specimen exhibiting this noxious strain of male behavior in Donald J. Trump.

Trump’s victory raises alarming questions. Does his triumph in so many states indicate a backlash against feminism or a stamp of approval on displays of toxic masculinity? How has an accommodation with his toxic masculinity manifested itself in policy initiatives and in discourse on those policies at the level of the states?

With reference to the question of impact on policy initiatives and discourse on policy at the state level, perhaps there is no better subject for examination than the state of Missouri after a particularly contentious 2019 session of its legislature.



(Illustration by Steve Edwards)

### **Microscope On Missouri**

Missouri went for Trump in the 2016 election by an 18.5 point margin, almost twice that of Republican Mitt Romney in 2012. Although Republicans took a hit in many states in the November 2018 midterms, Missouri was not one of those states and remained as firmly in the Trump fold as it was in 2016.

Trump's party won every statewide office in Missouri in the 2018 midterms, except for that of State Auditor. Republicans also ousted the Democratic incumbent, U.S. Sen. Claire McCaskill, and won super majorities in both the Missouri House and Senate.

These super majorities wasted no time in early 2019 proposing legislation that clearly was anathema to many women's groups

in the state. Among these many legislative proposals were extreme measures to restrict abortion rights, to allow even easier access to firearms in the state, and to vastly curtail the Title IX protections for victims of sexual abuse on college campuses.

Right-wing legislators introduced at least 20 anti-choice restrictions on the issue of abortion in the session. State Rep. Jeff Pogue, R-Salem, introduced measures to completely ban abortion, to forbid pharmacies from dispensing emergency contraception, and to direct state courts on custody arrangements for in vitro embryos.

Conservative lawmakers also took aim at Title IX provisions that were designed to encourage women to come forward in university settings to report cases of sexual abuse or rape. Bill sponsors insisted there's lack of basic fairness and due process for the accused men in such cases. Organizations against domestic and sexual violence beg to differ and criticized anti-Title IX proposals by Missouri legislators.

The super majorities in both capitol chambers were on a mission to put more guns in the hands of the citizenry, as well as to expand the number of places where weapons might be allowed in the state. These lawmakers came under criticism from groups like March for Our Lives and Moms Demand Action.

### **"Guns Everywhere"**

Women's groups traveled to the state capitol to voice their concern over numerous gun bills introduced in the 2019 session. They fought to stop bills that would have allowed guns on college campuses, guns in day care centers, bars, and guns in sports arenas. They described these measures as the "guns everywhere" bills.

Moms Demand Action groups have been a particular thorn in the side of many super majority legislators. Becky Morgan of the first state chapter in Webster Groves made her first trip to

the statehouse in Jefferson City with four other members in 2014.

In 2018, six days after the mass shooting at a Parkland, Florida school, more than 350 members of Moms Demand Action made the trip. This year, more than 400 members went to the state capital to ask for gun sense from Missouri lawmakers.

When they showed up to lobby legislators not to pass more lax gun laws in 2018, they faced a hostile reception. Tires were slashed in a capitol parking lot. Rep Mike Kelley, R-Lamar, greeted the visitors with a human silhouette on his door full of bullet holes with a slogan that this is: "Missouri's Definition of Gun Control."

The reception for women opposing lax gun laws was similarly harsh in 2019. Some legislators, who did take the time to talk with them, dismissed their concerns because of their apparent lack of knowledge about "automatic weapons," "multi-round gun clips," "ammo magazines," and the gun culture generally.

However, attempts to push groups like Moms Demand Action aside were not so easy, with several hundred women assembled in the rotunda of the capitol building. And the women did not flinch in the face of bullying about their supposed lack of depth in their understanding of firearms.

Missouri legislators may have been anxious about the large number of women in their rotunda. The majority party legislators also may have been paranoid about successes women had in replacing men in other state legislatures in the 2018 midterm elections.

Gabby Giffords, who was seriously injured in a mass shooting while in the U.S. Congress in 2011, came to Missouri in late spring to talk about taking back state legislatures now under gun lobby control. She noted that her Giffords PAC spent \$7 million to win four key U.S. House districts from NRA-funded incumbents in 2018.

Giffords said her PAC is willing to fund gun sense candidates and to train them on how to stand up to bullying in 2020. She stressed that one of the ways “NRA bullies” intimidate is to try to trip up gun sense candidates on their knowledge about weapons. Giffords’ political action group will take candidates to gun ranges to teach them about weapons and to talk more effectively about the gun culture in Missouri and other states.

Missouri is a tough “gun nut” to crack, but Giffords came to the state to raise hopes. She cited polls that show decisive citizen majorities support requiring permits for conceal carry; support laws to ban assault weapons sales; support strict background checks on arms sales. She said gun lobby money is the only way to explain why legislators defy their citizens’ wishes.

### **Fighting Title IX**

After plenty of discussion, pro-gun legislation was shelved in 2019, as the attention of lawmakers in Jefferson City turned to abortion issues and passing one of the most draconian state laws against reproductive rights in America.

Abortion bills also took priority over measures designed to water down Title IX protections for women seeking justice after being sexually abused on college campuses. However, the moves to undercut Title IX protections in the legislature went completely off the rails when The Kansas City Star revealed that lobbyist Richard McIntosh was pushing for the changes after a Title IX investigation led to his own son’s expulsion from Washington University.

Both Republicans and Democrats in the legislature expressed doubt about the Title IX bills passing in the 2019 session after The Star’s reporting on McIntosh. Democrats said The Star’s revelations made the bills weakening protections for sex abuse victims even more suspect and disturbing.

McIntosh co-founded Kingdom Principles, a non-profit entity funding more than 20 other lobbyists to go after Title IX in Missouri. Although McIntosh said Kingdom Principles' mission was to research "due process" on college campuses, The Star reported that he began Kingdom Principles shortly after his son's expulsion.

<https://www.kansascity.com/news/politics-government/article228733614.html>

The national magazine Mother Jones picked up on the battle in Missouri's Legislature over Title IX saying the acrimony over the bills echoed a national conversation focused on the rights of men accused of sexual violence. It's a debate that's been growing in volume since President Donald Trump took office.

The April 2019 Mother Jones article said the national debate "reached a fever pitch during the confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. The new legislative effort in Missouri reflects the escalating fear, consistently pushed by Trump – himself accused of sexual misconduct by at least 20 women – that any man could be falsely accused of rape: 'It is a very scary time for young men in America,' the president has stated."

In his effort to get the Missouri legislators to weaken Title IX, McIntosh pitched a link to a blog on the men's rights website, a [voiceformen.com](http://voiceformen.com), in which the writer contends that "women, more than men, regret casual sex, and it is these unsatisfying sexual unions caused by regret – not rape – that is the real sex problem on campus."

In other words, the problem is not rape, but female regret over sex, and Title IX is ruining the lives of campus males by making campus women victims of imaginary rape. One Missouri legislator said the problem was women claiming to be victims after "consensual rape." GOP legislators said they will return to this "campus problem" for men in the 2020 session when things calm down over The Kansas City Star revelations.

Wendy Murphy, the director of the Women's and Children's Advocacy project at New England Law Boston, who has litigated Title IX cases for more than 20 years, told The Star that the proposed changes would weaken Title IX and further victimize women with a system that largely favors those accused of harassment, abuse, or assault.

"I see this system as designed to message females that, especially in the context of education, you're supposed to be raped and be quiet. Because there's no upside. There's no upside. It's all burdens, hurdles, punishment, stigma, suffering, that's what you get for reporting (the abuse)," Murphy said.

### **Criminalizing Abortion**

Women protesting in Jefferson City over "guns everywhere" bills helped stave off some bad legislation, but they will have to live on to fight another day for gun sense in the 2020 session. Women expressing alarm in Jefferson City over the bills to weaken Title IX protections saw some success as well, but they also will have to live on to fight hard in another session in 2020. The future is not all that promising.

On the issue of abortion in Missouri, women seeking to protect reproductive rights lost big time in the 2019 session. Missouri joined some of the most reactionary states in the country, from Alabama to North Dakota, to curtail access to abortion. The Missouri Senate voted 24-10, along party lines, to ban abortion at eight weeks. The House voted 110 to 44, also along party lines.

Gov. Mike Parson signed the bill that will make abortion doctors into criminals who could lose their licenses and go to prison for up to 15 years. The law bans abortions before many women even can know they are pregnant. It makes no exceptions for rape or incest.

The Missouri Legislature's extreme anti-abortion legislation

garnered ink from coast to coast with in-depth pieces in The New York Times and in Mother Jones magazine.

The New York Times quoted Rep. Ian Mackey, D-Richmond Heights, who was vehemently opposed to the 2019 session anti-abortion legislation. In a passionate address to his statehouse colleagues, Mackey said: "Women brought all of us into this world, and I sure hope they vote all of us out."

Mackey's minority party viewpoint was trumped by that of majority floor leader, Rep. Caleb Rowden, R-Columbia, who said the legislation "represents what we believe ... is unquestionably the position of the vast majority of the people of Missouri."

Rowden's confidence was echoed by his fellow Republicans, who said it was the type of legislation designed to withstand any kind of challenge. However, the bill immediately inspired the threat of challenges in both the courts and at the ballot box.

Of special note was the resolute challenge from Republican mega-donor David Humphries of Joplin. In 2016, Humphries support of Republicans was solid with he and his family contributing more than \$14 million to the GOP. Humphries termed the abortion bill passed by Republican lawmakers as "too extreme" with its lack of consideration for female victims of incest and rape.

Humphries put up \$1 million for a hastily put together Committee to Protect the Rights of Victims of Rape & Incest. He also sued Missouri Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft for his decision to block a proposed referendum to allow Missouri voters to have a say on the anti-abortion measure passed by state legislators. In a separate action, the ACLU also went after Ashcroft's decision to block a citizen referendum.

In June, Mother Jones magazine chose to focus on the multi-front attacks on reproductive freedom in Missouri by taking a look at the concerns of the last operating Planned Parenthood



clinic in the state. Clinic doctors conceded that 2019 has become a stressful time for patients and providers.

Dr. Colleen McNicholas, one of seven doctors at the final remaining clinic in Missouri, said she feared a shutdown of the St. Louis clinic. She said many Missouri women would then have to travel across state lines for reproductive health services, while others might choose "self-managed abortions."

In the June article, McNicholas described the satisfaction she has derived from her work and why it has to continue: "In those three minutes (of performing an abortion I am able) to give this person their life back and they get to be a 12-year-old again, or they get to go back to finish their college education, a feat that maybe nobody in their family has had yet. That's why I am able to do this sort of work, why I am able to continue to do it in a really challenging state, in a really challenging time."

### **Dailies did a credible job**

Missouri's major dailies have done a credible job covering the legislature's actions that have brought down the wrath of women. The Kansas City Star's reporting on the formation of Kingdom Principles to fight Title IX with its state legislation was a game changer. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch gave front-page treatment to GOP mega-donor David Humphries' plan to nullify the abortion bill passed by Republican legislators.

What the news media might do better is to show the increasing pattern of lawmaking that is so at odds with the interests of women. A template sanctioned and passed down from the Trump presidency's in-your-face misogyny and its clear hostility on so many women's issues.

Trump's presidency has emboldened legislatures in other states to attack Title IX protections and reproductive rights. His bombastic speeches at the annual NRA conventions have inspired

states like Missouri to seek to shred the last vestiges of restraints on guns. All of this has served to raise the ire and the voices of women's groups.

In fairness, not all women want more gun control, as the Second Amendment Wives groups will tell you. There also are women who are "purists" on abortion, who proudly oppose it even in cases of rape and incest. There are women who fear that Title IX protections for co-eds will leave their college sons vulnerable to errant charges of sex assault.

However, even these women, who reject the stance of vocal women's rights groups on these issues, must at least recoil at the lack of basic human decency when faced with Trump's misogynist history, language, behavior and actions, both past and present.

Even women firmly in Trump's corner on political issues have to be concerned by his discourse. Never mind his effect on state legislators expounding on sexual assault and "consensual rape." They have to be concerned about what impact he has on the behavior of their sons, and on the safety of their daughters, with his behavior and sexist pronouncements.

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