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# OPINION

## The Far-Right Political Playbook

The threat to our health, schools, and democracy

By BEN JEALOUS

The New York Times recently reported that the public health system in the United States may be less prepared for the next pandemic than it was for the current one. Given everything we have been through, and everything we have learned, how can that be?

The answer is disturbing. Our public health system is being put at risk by the same right-wing disinformation tactics that are undermining our educational and election systems.

Right-wing media outlets and social media spread false information and conspiracy theories. Conservative activists and politicians opposed public health measures as a form of “tyranny.” Angry people have harassed and threatened public health officials, and politicians have passed more than 100 laws restricting their authority to take action to protect the public.

Those new laws, combined with chronic underfunding and staff burnout, are making us all more vulnerable to health threats in the future. So is the fact that extremism is being embraced by public officials, not just agitated activists. The Times reported that one county sheriff in Washington state threatened to arrest any government official enforcing health restrictions that he thought were unconstitutional. New laws will make it harder for schools and hospitals to enforce vaccine requirements that have been in place for years.

We are seeing this destructive political dynamic play out in our schools and elections as well.



The opposition raging against public officials trying to protect our health care is the same opposition raging against teaching about systemic racism in our schools and feeding the “Big Lie” about a stolen 2020 election. It’s all coming from the same playbook.

All across the country, school board meetings have turned into angry mob scenes. Parents’ frustration over school closings and mask requirements has boiled over in some places, and it is being inflamed and exploited for political purposes. To make matters worse, right-wing media and political groups have manufactured a panic about the supposed threat of “critical race theory” being taught in schools.

Critical race theory is an academic framework for understanding how systemic racism affects people’s lives. But right-wing activists, with a big boost from Fox News and Donald Trump, are getting parents riled up with claims that honestly teaching about the racism in our history and institutions is part of a Marxist plot to impose tyranny by making students hate America.

It sounds ridiculous, and it is. But the rising tide of threats against educators and school board members is no joke. Neither

is a widespread campaign by right-wing activists to take over school boards and impose a whitewashed “patriotic education” on students. They are passing laws that will make it impossible to teach about racism in schools—even in some state colleges.

This is part of an ugly backlash against the Black Lives Matter movement and a reaction to the increasing diversity of our schools and communities.

Speaking of ugly backlash, the assault on voting rights continues. Trump supporters couldn’t handle the fact that he lost. They could not accept that their hero was defeated in part by increased turnout among Black voters in key states. Or that Black voters in Georgia and their allies took control of the Senate away from Republicans.

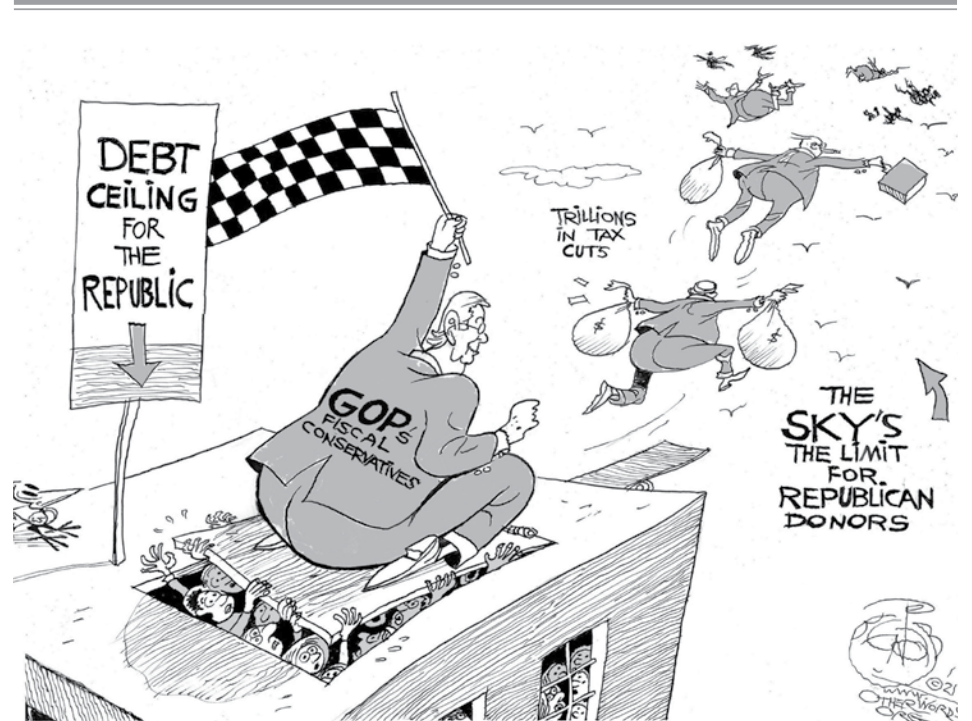
So, we see the same right-wing playbook in action. Spread lies and conspiracy theories to convince conservative and right-wing voters that their country and their freedom are being “stolen” from them. Launch attacks on the officials who oversee our elections. Undermine confidence in elections with fake “audits” and tell more lies about the outcome of those “audits.” Use the lies and anger to justify

new laws that make it harder for people to vote. Some Republican state legislators have given themselves the power to ignore voters altogether and declare their own winner if they don’t like the results.

We are seeing the fruits of social media outlets pushing people deeper into conspiracy theories and further from reality. We are witnessing the destruction of trust and community by powerful right-wing media figures who profit from inflaming fear and division.

These are all threats to our future as a peaceful, multiethnic, multiracial democratic society. And there’s no easy solution to overcoming these threats. There’s a lot of hard work to do. Exposing lies and telling the truth. Lifting up voices with moral authority to break through the deceptions. Organizing people of good will to get involved. And insisting that our friends and allies in positions of cultural, economic, and political power have the courage and commitment to defend our families, schools, communities, and democracy.

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