

[washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com)

Newsom forms new group to fight 'rising authoritarianism' in red states

By Maeve Reston March 30, 2023 at 4:06 p.m. EDT

7-8 minutes

California Gov. Gavin Newsom is launching a new political organization that will take the Democrat to red states across the country as he pushes back against restrictive [abortion](#) laws, loosened gun regulations, curriculum

restrictions and other initiatives
Republican elected officials are
spearheading.

Newsom, who is widely viewed as a potential future Democratic White House contender, plans to travel to “states where freedom is most under attack,” he [says in a video](#), to meet with like-minded activists, students, candidates and elected officials who he said are often fighting a lonely battle in places Democrats don’t typically visit. He is setting out on his first trip this weekend to Arkansas, Mississippi and Alabama to meet with local activists with his wife, Jennifer Siebel Newsom, and his children in tow.

Newsom is also framing the effort as a new bulwark against attempts to erode LGBTQ protections and an unrelenting drive within some sectors of the GOP to reshape academic curriculum and ban certain books in schools. He is seeding the group, which will be called the Campaign for Democracy, and organized as a nonprofit, with \$10 million from his campaign war chest, and he plans to use the fund to help aligned ideological groups and candidates.

The California governor's push stems from his frustration that GOP leaders such as Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and Texas Gov. Greg Abbott —

amplified by conservative media outlets — are dominating the national conversation with their moves on education, abortion, guns and immigration while Democrats have failed to offer a compelling alternative narrative.

That imbalance, he argues, has placed the “entire rights agenda” of the past half-century at risk. During the 2022 midterms, Newsom took initial steps in striking back, [erecting billboards](#), for example, in seven red states that have limited or banned abortion, encouraging out-of-state women to come to California for their reproductive care.

Newsom said in an interview Thursday that he has been “ringing this bell of alarm around issues of rights regressions,” but felt growing anxiety during the midterms that “the momentum on the other side is only continuing; it’s getting stronger; it’s becoming much larger and more scaled.”

“I don’t want to sit back passively. I want to get out there,” he added. “I want to get in the dirt here and really push back and let folks know that we have their backs. There’s these folks — they’re fighting alone out there and they probably feel abandoned; they don’t feel enough support.”

“We have been on the receiving end — on the defensive — over and over on their agenda and their culture wars. And this is my strategy to push back and put them on the defense,” Newsom said.

Newsom insists that he is not thinking about running for president and he has looped in White House and Democratic officials during the planning stages for his new group. He said the work would complement President Biden’s expected reelection bid. The Democratic National Committee has [enlisted](#) Newsom as part of a “national advisory board” of younger leaders who will travel and speak on the

president's behalf.

He said he was hesitant about launching the group, because he didn't want it to be perceived as a launchpad for a future White House run. But after the recent [deadly mass killing at a school](#) in Nashville — in a state that has no [red-flag laws](#) that allow law enforcement officials to take weapons away from those who threaten violence — he said he couldn't wait any longer. “We told all our friends in the White House this, too. I said after this week, after these three young girls were killed — I've got 9-year-olds — I can't take it. I'm done. I'm going.”

Democratic National Committee

Chairman Jaime Harrison said in a statement that the Biden-Harris administration “working with Democrats across the country, have a strong story to tell, and I’m glad to see Governor Newsom making the case about what we’ve accomplished, what our values are, and the clear contrast with MAGA Republicans.”

California GOP Chairwoman Jessica Millan Patterson said “the last thing red states need is a lecture from Gavin Newsom on how to govern” as she pointed to the state’s high [gas prices](#), its homelessness crisis and the academic struggles many students have faced after an extended period of

remote schooling during the pandemic.

“If only Newsom cared half as much about fixing problems in his own state as he does berating better-run red states,” Millan Patterson said in a statement.

The group’s mission is to serve as a state-by-state organizing campaign that Newsom said is aimed at confronting what he views as “rising authoritarianism.” It would invest in Democrats from the “top of the ticket down to even the most local races.”

But it will also undoubtedly help Newsom raise his national profile and expand his already sizable list of [small-dollar donors](#), which he expanded

during a Republican-led recall against him in 2021.

“This is about fundamental freedoms and liberties that are under assault,” he said. “I want to broaden the narrative, broaden the focus, highlight some of the successes, and I want to fundraise for these folks.”

Newsom is meeting in Alabama with [Bryan Stevenson](#), a lawyer who is the founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, to discuss Stevenson’s work fighting inequities in Alabama’s criminal justice system and how that kind of work can be replicated in other parts of the country.

In Arkansas, Newsom will be meeting

with high school students as well as former Democratic gubernatorial candidate Chris Jones, a close friend whom he supported during his race against now-Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders (R) last year.

The Democratic governor will be inviting a fresh confrontation with Sanders, who served as White House press secretary to former president Donald Trump. Sanders — along with DeSantis, Abbott and Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) — appears in the video that Newsom's new group is releasing asking voters to join their fight.

Sanders recently delivered the

Republican response to Biden's State of the Union address, arguing that she was focused on preventing Democrats from "brainwashing our children with a left-wing political agenda." She and Newsom subsequently sparred over crime statistics and public safety in their respective states.

In Mississippi, Newsom is meeting with Jackson Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba, who is fighting back against the Republican-led legislature's attempt to exert greater control over the city's water system and law enforcement system. Lumumba has described the legislature's moves as an attack by a predominantly White

legislature on a majority Black city.