

## Split Governance Transcript.mp3

**Ron Hansen** Hi Gaggle listeners. A quick note about today's episode. It was recorded prior to the shooting at Michigan State University.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** It's been 14 years since Arizona last had a Democratic governor. At that time, just like today, Arizona's legislature was ruled by the state GOP. The Democratic wins at the top of the ticket in November are nothing new in Arizona anymore. Since 2018, Democrats have won three U.S. Senate races and voters helped make Joe Biden president in the 2020 election.

**Ron Hansen** Last year's midterms also showed Republican voters weren't thrilled with their Republican nominees in the state's biggest races. Democrats won the gubernatorial race and secretary of state as well. While down ballot, Republicans often won as expected. As Governor Katie Hobbs settles into the business of governing. She's battling a Republican controlled legislature she hopes will turn Democratic next year. Today, we're talking to reporters in two states where Democratic governors have been hard to find and two different paths for their legislatures.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** Welcome to The Gaggle Politics podcast by the Arizona Republic in easy central dot com. I'm Mary Jo Pitzl. I cover state politics for the paper.

**Ron Hansen** And I'm Ron Hansen, national politics reporter. Each week we speak with reporters, experts and politicians about the issues that make a difference for you.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** Today we are speaking with two reporters in states that are undergoing similar split governance like Arizona. And we're starting first with Paul Egan, Lansing Bureau Chief at the Detroit Free Press in Michigan. Paul, welcome to The Gaggle.

**Paul Egan** Thanks for having me on, Mary Jo.

**Ron Hansen** Well, Paul and I worked together in Detroit a long time ago, sir. It's been a while, but thank you for taking time with us.

**Paul Egan** Great to see you. Ron and I still follow your work.

**Ron Hansen** Thank you, sir. Likewise. I want to set the table for our listeners who don't closely follow Michigan politics. Most people know Michigan is politically competitive. It's usually a blue state in presidential politics. But state government has been a different story for most of the past few decades. When Gretchen Whitmer won the governor's race in 2018, she snapped a stretch where Michigan had had a Republican governor for 20 of the past 28 years. And by my count, Republicans had unified control of the governor's office, the House and the Senate in 14 of the past 30 years. This year, Democrats hit that trifecta for the first time in nearly 40 years. They control the House for the first time since 2010, and they control the Senate for the first time since 1983. So, Paul, help us understand how Michigan state politics has reached the point we find ourselves in now.

**Paul Egan** Well, Ron, what really happened in in 2022 is that like in much of the country, it was expected to be a very good year for the Republicans because it was a midterm election. Democratic president, Democrat in control of Congress. But what we got was a really almost unprecedented election in terms of Democrats doing well, As you said, for the first time in 40 years. They now control the governor's office and both chambers of the

legislature. And part of it was, I think there were two key things that were redistricting. This was the first election with a citizen controlled redistricting commission. They took it away from partizan control and Republicans had pretty much controlled redistricting for at least the last two censuses. And, you know, the districts were gerrymandered in favor of the Republican Party. So that made a big difference. And the other thing that I think was really a big factor is that the Trump character, if we can call it that for sure, a factor, the MAGA factor, basically the Republican Party has really come into control of activists in Michigan that have strong, strong support among the grassroots but have more trouble appealing to independents. And so you had candidates for governor, secretary of state and attorney general that really outperformed what Republicans would normally do in an election. And so I think those factors came together to create a situation today.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** So, Paul, how much did Governor Whitmer help her party in the legislative races? I mean, was she an influencing factor in addition to the others that you've mentioned?

**Paul Egan** I would say yes. And probably that's the third factor that was very significant in 2022 that I should have mentioned, was Governor Whitmer becoming a strong leader both nationally and in the state on the abortion rights issue? You know, after the Supreme Court ruling, Michigan was going to go back to a 1936 law that basically criminalized almost all abortions, really, except to save the life of the mother. And Governor Whitmer had taken some very strong actions to ask the Supreme Court in Michigan to declare that law unconstitutional under the state and had really taken a number of other actions, sort of promising that she would. Find ways to continue choice for women who needed reproductive health care, even under the Supreme Court ruling. And that, you know, even though I think it's a fact, was tempered down a little bit by Election Day from the time of the original U.S. Supreme Court ruling, that was certainly another factor where we had a number of Republican and independent women that were concerned about having a very extreme abortion law in place in Michigan.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** Did Whitmer specifically did she campaign to get a Democratic legislature here in Arizona? Our newly elected Democratic governor is already saying that, you know, her one of her goals for next year is to flip the legislature blue. Did Whitmer run any kind of campaign to do that?

**Paul Egan** Certainly, especially in terms of the state Senate. I think, you know, people thought that with the new districts that the Democrats had a reasonable chance of potentially flipping the Senate. But the House race, I mean, certainly she said she wanted a Democratic legislature, but I think it came as a surprise even to the governor, that it turned out that the Democrats flipped both the House and the Senate. It really you know, it was a whole bunch more for Democrats, but it really wasn't something that they were expecting. And, of course, you know, I should qualify that by saying the margins are as narrow as they could possibly be. And the Democrats have a 2218 majority in the Senate and a 5654 majority in the state House. So basically they need every vote or else they need to get some Republican votes to pass pretty much anything.

**Ron Hansen** You know, Paul, you've described some phenomena that sounds very familiar to a lot of Arizonans. I suspect I want to unpack this a bit. I want to start with the MAGA style Republicans that you mentioned earlier. Of course, in Arizona, we had Carrie Lake, who has cut quite a national profile for herself as well. We also had a Senate candidate in Blake Masters and a secretary of state candidate from the Republicans in Mark Finchem, who really underperformed with Republican voters. When you look at some

of the Republican areas in Arizona, it's just very plain those candidates were just a bridge too far in the eyes of Republican voters. When I see some of the accounts of what has happened in the Grand Rapids area and in such in Michigan, it just seems like Republicans left a lot of money on the table. Is it just bad candidates or is there a broader interest in Democratic policies or at least those running for office for Democrats? How much of this is Republicans and how much of it is the story of Democrats?

**Paul Egan** It's really been a kind of a change in control in the state party that's come from the grassroots level. You know, the most active people in the party have tended to be, at least in the last several years, have tended to be the most MAGA and most extreme. You know, we had an attorney general candidate who won the the Republican nomination, Matt Parnell, an attorney who came to prominence by basically having an election conspiracy theory from, you know, a small rural county. And in northern Michigan on election night in 2020 had posted some accidentally incorrect early election results as a result of a mistake made by the Republican court there. And and this became, you know, a huge conspiracy about election machines being, you know, programmed to favor the Democrats. President Trump got very involved in this Antrim County conspiracy. It was repeatedly debunked, rejected by the courts. But you know, this was the candidate for attorney general and he was, among other things, was vowing that if he was successful, he would prosecute the current attorney general for disagreeing with him on the on whether there was fraud affecting the outcome of the election. So so that you then saw it also in fundraising. The Michigan Republican Party, longtime major donors, corporate people, major business people have really shied away from supporting candidates like the personal and the party in general as it's become controlled more by these very extreme activists, really.

**Ron Hansen** I want to switch to the comments you made about abortion and how that also may have factored in a bit in voter mood and perhaps in turnout as well. When I think of Michigan, of course, I think of the strong presence of Catholic voters for whom. Abortion is, of course, an especially important subject of intense interest. We had in Arizona another law, sort of like what you've referred to in Michigan from the 1930. Ours actually went back to the Civil War era that would have criminalized virtually all abortions. The question of abortion and how much that factored into any specific races or activating any particular segment of voters. Do you think that that was much of a factor? Were there any clear cases where it really jumped out at you?

**Paul Egan** Yes, Ron, it was very significant statewide. You know, I mentioned the impact of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling and how its impact had lessened somewhat by Election Day. But the other thing that was happening in Michigan, as we also had a constitutional amendment on the ballot in 2022 to enshrine abortion rights in the state constitution. So that was also a factor. And it's really interesting that you mention the Catholic Church, because the Catholic Church, you know, from the pulpit, priests were saying encouraging their flock to come out and and vote against this proposal. And Catholics did turn out in large numbers. But what some pollsters have identified as having happened there through exit polls is that you had a larger Catholic turnout and some of them voted against this proposal. Some of them voted for it. But because Catholic voters tend to skew Democratic, at least in Michigan, is that many of those Catholics who came out who perhaps normally wouldn't have voted but came out to vote on the abortion proposal, actually ended up voting Democratic as well.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** And Paul, when you look at the campaign in 2022, how did Governor Whitmer interact with the Republicans who led the legislature? I mean, did she take them on or was she working with them to try to find common ground to get a couple of wins that

would help her and arguably help them? What was her approach to them is, especially as the election neared?

**Paul Egan** Yes, it was a very interesting situation because for her first term, she was a Democratic governor with Republicans in control of both chambers of the legislature. They were very critical of the way she addressed the pandemic early in 2020. Governor Whitmer took a very aggressive approach in terms of initially closing schools, many businesses, even restrictions on travel, that sort of thing. And so there was a lot of friction, a lot of criticism. The Republican legislature actually went to court and had declared one of the emergency measures that she used unconstitutional. But what she then saw was, after all, the federal stimulus money was released and Michigan had huge amounts, billions of dollars of COVID money to spend. Governor Whitmer and the Republican legislature were able to come together and find ways to spend that money. And you know what it really involved was Republicans getting some of the expenditures that they wanted, the governor getting some of her priorities. And they were they were able to come together to spend billions of dollars of COVID relief as you got towards the election itself. The legislative leaders who were term limited were not running again, sort of were less prominent. And where you saw all the heavy criticism coming from candidates, you know, and including the one who eventually became the nominee for governor. But they echoed that sort. So they really focused the campaign largely on the past, how the governor had it handled the pandemic early on. And one of the areas where they may have fell short among many voters was not having a campaign or an agenda that focused a little more on on the future and what they would do if elected.

**Ron Hansen** Paul, I want to ask you one other question here. This is sort of looking into the crystal ball, perhaps for Arizona or at least looking at one version of the future that Democrats would like to see in Michigan. Democrats have gotten what they wanted, which is the majorities, but it's a very thin majority, as you alluded to earlier. What is the relationship like now? What are the dynamics in play now? Is the governor has at least nominally, the support she needs to be able to move ahead with her agenda. Is she able to get points on the board? Is there anything that clearly looks like Democrats will be able to point to as a notable success that will help them stand apart the next. Election cycle or is the Democratic majority fracturing?

**Paul Egan** It's maybe a little too early to say, Ron. They have had some early success. There was a supplemental budget that that included, you know, some money to save a paper mill up in the northern upper Peninsula of Michigan, which is really a Republican area. But, you know, right now and this came up last week and it will come up again in the Senate, the governor is trying to get through some tax measures that give targeted relief to seniors and to the working poor. She wants to increase the state earned income tax credit. And the votes on this are extremely close. It just got through the House last week with one Democrat voting against the proposal and one Republican voting for it. And and, you know, so that was a case where when she lost that one Democratic vote, if she hadn't also got a Republican vote, it never would have got through. And it's a real question mark whether it's going to get through the Senate. So in some ways, the governor finds herself, although it's certainly a preferable situation, what she experienced in her first term, it's a it's a similar situation and that she still has to court some Republicans and she really can't you know, she really has to be careful. And it's interesting because she's talking about gun control measures. She's talking about repealing right to work. These are going to be ones that will really test. That's when majority when when they come to the legislature, as she has promised they will.

**Ron Hansen** Well, thank you, sir, for taking the time to go through all this with us. Paul, if people want to follow your reporting, where can they find you online or on social media?

**Paul Egan** Well, our stories are every day at Freep dot com. That's after EP Tor.com and I'm still on Twitter hoping it gets through its little difficulties. It's happening right now, but you can find me at Paul Egan for that's P-A-U-L E-G-A-N and numeral four. Thanks again for having me on.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** Our pleasure.

**Ron Hansen** Now let's turn to our second guest. Andrew Bahl is the senior statehouse reporter for the Topeka Capital Journal in Kansas. He joined their team in 2020, having previously covered state government in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Andrew, thanks for coming on The Gaggle.

**Andrew Bahl** Yeah, thanks for having me. Always good to hear about how things are going down in the Southwest.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** Let's give our listeners some background on Kansas. This traditionally red state has a Democratic governor who narrowly won a second term last year when Governor Laura Kelly first won in 2018. Republicans had held the governor's office for 20 of the past 28 years. Kelly defeated the controversial Kris Kobach, who ran after Governor Sam Brownback left office with sky high disapproval ratings. And then in August of last year, the state's voters rejected a proposed state constitutional amendment to ban abortion. To many, this was a surprise that so many Kansans wanted to preserve abortion rights. The Kansas legislature remains dominated by Republicans. When Laura Kelly first won in 2018, the GOP controlled the House 85 to 40. That's still the margin today. In the Senate, Republicans held 29 of 40 seats when Kelly first won. Today, they have one less seat, 28. So, Andrew, Democrats can point to some victories, but is this only when Republicans overreach?

**Andrew Bahl** Yeah, it's been an interesting couple of election cycles for Democrats because there definitely have been some victories and the governor's reelection has been one of those. But, you know, they have struggled to make a ton of substantive gains statewide, with one notable exception. And they are your listeners when they hear Kansas might think of windswept plains and wheat fields. And we have a lot of that in the western part of the state. But we also have very densely populated suburbs in the Kansas City metro area, principally in Johnson County, which is the most populous county in the state. And that has seen some very decisive turns in the wake of the election of President Donald Trump in 2016, away from kind of a traditional country club Republican stronghold. In many parts, it's becoming increasingly Democratic, and that has kind of withstood the test of time. Some people thought that, you know, once Trump left office in the midterm election, maybe some of those voters would come home. We certainly saw on the end the abortion amendment that you mentioned that did not occur and it did not occur. Governor Kelly carried Johnson County handedly in her reelection, and in fact, it was basically decisive in deciding her victory. So definitely Republicans have held on to power, but they really have lost what was a traditional stronghold for them. And that has really kind of changed the state's political dynamics permanently.

**Ron Hansen** I was just going to ask, does that feel like a permanent shift? And if so, why? Is it something about ism? Is it something about the changing demographics of Kansas residents? What do you think is the impetus behind all that?

**Andrew Bahl** Yeah, so I think a bit of both. It certainly comes from the Republican Party in Kansas looking very different today than it did ten or 20 years ago. We're talking two days after in Kansas, Republicans elected an election conspiracy theorist as their next party chair. They very much have purged maybe isn't the right word, but have disassociated themselves from what historically has been a very vibrant, moderate wing of the party in Kansas. There are almost no moderates left in the Kansas House. There are a couple still hanging on in the Kansas Senate, but they have very limited power. So that has definitely pushed some of those voters who maybe were sympathetic to the more moderates area of the party, how the Republican Party maybe looked 20 or 30 years ago. They're increasingly becoming Democrats.

**Ron Hansen** Has this sort of driven Republicans who have more moderate sensibilities, perhaps to become independents or maybe even switched parties altogether? Has this had that purifying effect where the only Republicans left are the ones who are in that very lockstep mindset?

**Andrew Bahl** Yeah, and I think we definitely have seen that. I imagine a similar trend has taken place in Arizona as well. I know it has. And in other states I've worked in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, where, you know, those suburban voters, they for instance, on the issue of abortion, they turned out in droves to oppose the constitutional amendment. Even those who are registered as unaffiliated or as Republican. You know, they they by and large, were not happy that this was on the ballot. And it is maybe a risk. On to Trumpism, but also just the increasingly extreme, what they view as extreme policies that conservatives are pushing. You know, putting that amendment on the ballot, but also the kinds of policies we're seeing in the state legislature as well.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** Well, speaking of the legislature, how has redistricting played into these developments in Kansas? You know, the Republicans did get their preferred map through after the 2020 election, which is apparently kept the Republicans in control of the legislature for now. But why couldn't Governor Kelly get a map more to her liking?

**Andrew Bahl** Yeah, it gets kind of an interesting dynamic that I think exists more in Kansas maybe than in Arizona at the moment, which is Republicans still have that supermajority. So while the governor can veto things, she vetoed the first round of the congressional redistricting plan. They can override that veto. And I think focusing on redistricting specifically at the legislative level, I think Democrats realizing that they were in a pretty weak position in terms of negotiating, kind of went along with the map that was proposed because it locked in the status quo. You know, it kind of cut what we have here a protected most of the incumbents, both Republican and Democrat, meaning that there are fewer swing districts and fewer districts where they can compete and to kind of ratchet down that supermajority and maybe even eliminate it altogether. But we kind of have that also at the same time as the dynamics in the Kansas City suburbs I was talking about. So it's possible that despite the Republicans best efforts, they would say they weren't trying to do this. But aside from, you know, maybe an effort to preserve that supermajority, things are just seen changing so quickly in that really densely populated part of the state that it is going to be hard for them to maintain that supermajority even with those new maps going forward. That's definitely something we're going to be watching in two years when the entire legislature is on the ballot here in Kansas. There are a couple of seats already that Democrats are making noise about challenging, even though they basically were were locked in with the same lines they had four years ago.

**Ron Hansen** Andrew, after what happened in August, did the governor try to turn the November elections into a broader referendum against the Republican brand or the Republican idea of where the state should be heading on policy matters? Was there any effort to sort of make this about more than just the names on the ballot?

**Andrew Bahl** Not really. In that kind of, I think, points to what a lot of folks here in this state would say is Governor Kelly is kind of a unicorn. She has a very set brand of issues that she campaigned for reelection on education funding. You know, we had big budget issues in the wake of Governor Brownback leading to those sky high disapproval ratings that Mary Jo mentioned, and that led to cuts to education funding. The governor has made a big part of her platform saying, hey, I brought that funding back. Economic development. Kansas has gotten a couple of really big economic development deals, for better or worse. She's saying, you know, creating jobs that didn't happen under the Republicans four plus years ago and a few other issues that she really zeroed in on and just kept repeating over and over on the campaign trail and really did not touch abortion, tried to touch the issue of transgender athletes and girls in women's sports very briefly. And it kind of blew up in her face and she never tried it again. You know, if asked, she would say, you know, of course I support abortion rights. I think my my record is very clear on that. But we've quickly kind of pivot the conversation to safer ground. So it was very much about, I think, the brand or the unique set of issues that the governor brings to the table is kind of where she wanted the conversation versus talking more broadly about Republicans. Because for Democrats in Kansas, frequently, you know, you have to basically go to great lengths to avoid reminding people that you are a Democrat. And that was certainly the approach that she took.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** Okay. Well, Kansas hasn't elected a Democrat to the U.S. Senate since 1932, making this the state with the longest stretch in the nation. Looking at voter registration figures, it looks like the share of Democrats has gone up since 2018, but so has the share of Republicans. And the Republicans still hold an 18 percentage point advantage over Democrats overall. So it doesn't look like a sea change in people signing up as Democrats. So what's driving this support for a Democratic governor?

**Andrew Bahl** It's an interesting question, and I think a couple of things going on. You still have people maybe who kind of are it's still Republicans. They're still registered as such. Or unaffiliated by Bear, as we were talking about earlier, are they may be increasingly alienated with the direction that the Republican Party is going. And so despite kind of clinging on to that registration status, they are distancing themselves further and further with a lot of the candidates with an R next to their name on the ballot. Again, Kansas has a proud tradition going back to Nancy Kassebaum in the U.S. Senate of moderate Republican elected officials, and there aren't as many of those on the ballot as there used to be. So I think there's some of that going on as well. And also, we're seeing parts of the state that were traditionally Democratic. So Southeast Kansas used to be overwhelmingly Democrat, which is kind of strange to me when I moved to Kansas. It's very conservative, very consistently Republican. But if you go back and look at Kathleen Sebelius running for governor, the last Democrat to be in the governor's office, she won it basically in a clean sweep. So, you know, we're seeing kind of some of those trends take hold that are tilting blue in one part of the state and moving away from the Democrats and another.

**Ron Hansen** Give us a sense of what the day to day operations of the legislature look like when they're in session. How has Governor Kelly, for example, interacted with this Republican legislature? Is it hostile? Does she walk around with a big veto stamp at her side at all times? And and really, does it even matter with supermajorities?

**Andrew Bahl** It's a good question. And I think we might see a bit different dynamic this session than we did last year. But in general, she's tried to walk a line, I think understanding that we have supermajority control Republicans, she doesn't hesitate to throw down the gantlet, but also running for reelection, she really kind of prided herself on being middle of the road. She literally at one point went to the middle of a road in a rural area near Topeka and told an ad walking down the broken yellow line. So, you know, she has tried to find ways to find that common ground with Republicans. My first session here in 2021, she came up with a deal with Republicans on school funding when it seemed like maybe we were headed for impasse. She points to other kind of legislative wins legalizing sports betting, which we did last year. Yeah, I met a bunch of stakeholders. A bunch of different people had to come to the table and kind of, yeah, work things out. So she would point to those things. But there also have been some really hostile moments, particularly thinking back to the COVID 19 pandemic when governors across the country were under fire for some of the decisions they were making. We saw that in a big way in Kansas with first, which she chose to shut down when and then kind of the the response you've been going through. When we were rolling out vaccines, there was a lot of criticism of the governor's administration. So we've seen both. And depending on who you talk to, you will find people with vastly different opinions of her negotiating ability and ability to get things done. But this session, we're going to kind of see a bit of a new dynamic, which is not a ton change in terms of the raw numbers in the in the House, in the legislature here. But the Republican supermajority that is there got more conservative. So their ability to override a veto actually got stronger even though they lost a seat compared with two years ago, which will be interesting because historically the governor has not liked having her veto over it. She will veto things if she has to. But she also has looked at things where there was a clear supermajority and decided to sign it, even though it kind of frustrated her basis orders. But basically she said, you know, this is going to become law one way or the other and we're just going to kind of eat it. So it's a.

**Paul Egan** New.

**Andrew Bahl** Little bit of a new world order for the for the next few months here. And it'll be interesting to see how things go, because they're definitely going to send a lot of things that she will be thinking twice about.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** Well, we'll be watching then. We're going to have to stop here, Andrew. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today.

**Andrew Bahl** Sure. Well, I hope this has been helpful.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** It has. And if people want to follow your work, where can they find you on social media?

**Andrew Bahl** Sure. On Twitter, I'm at Andrew Bahl, B-A-H-L. Or if you're really invested in how things are going in Kansas, you can find all our written work at [CJOnline.com](http://CJOnline.com).

**Ron Hansen** That is it for today Gaggle listeners. Do you have questions about Arizona's political landscape? Send them our way. You can leave us a voicemail at 602-444-0804 or email us at [thegaggle@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:thegaggle@arizonarepublic.com). That's one word all spelled out. And since we're a podcast, we'd love to hear your questions. Your message just might make it into one of our future episodes.



**Mary Jo Pitzl** Be sure and read and review our show and share it with a friend. You can find me on Twitter at Mary J. Pitzl That's P-I-T-Z-L.

**Ron Hansen** And I'm at Ronald J. Hansen That's on S-E-N.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** Today's episode was edited and produced by Kaely Monahan with additional help from Amanda Luberto.

**Ron Hansen** Thanks for listening to The Gaggle. A podcast from the Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. We'll see you next week.