

After bomb threats today, officials had to evacuate two elementary schools in Springfield, Ohio, and move the students to a different location. They had to close a middle school altogether. This is the second day bomb threats have closed schools and public buildings after MAGA Republicans have spread the lie that Haitian immigrants there have been eating white people's pets. Haitian immigrants, who were welcomed to Springfield by officials eager to revitalize the city and who are there legally, say they are afraid.

Hunter Walker and Josh Kovensky of *Talking Points Memo* today explained where the lie had come from and how it had spread. More than two months ago, they wrote, Ohio senator J.D. Vance, who is Trump's vice presidential running mate, began to speak about Springfield at a Senate Banking Committee hearing, trying to tie rising housing prices to immigrants. The next day, at the National Conservatism conference, Vance accused "illegals" of overwhelming the city.

On August 10, about a dozen neo-Nazis of the "Blood Tribe" organization showed up in Springfield, where one of their leaders said the city had been taken over by "degenerate third worlders" and blamed the Jews for the influx of migrants. The neo-Nazis stayed and, on August 27, showed up at a meeting of the city council, where their leader threatened council members. On September 1, another white supremacist group, Patriot Front, held its own "protest to the mass influx of unassimilable Haitian migrants" in the city. Right-wing social media posters pushed the story, usually with "witnesses" to events in the city coming from elsewhere.

In late August, posting in a private Facebook group, a resident said they had heard that Haitian immigrants had butchered a neighbor's cat for food. Vance reposted that rumor to attack Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris, on whom he is trying to hang undocumented immigration although it was Trump who convinced Republicans to kill a strong bipartisan border bill this spring. Springfield police and the city manager told news outlets there was no truth to the rumors.

Nonetheless, on September 10, Vance told his people to “keep the cat memes flowing,” even though—or perhaps because—the rumors were putting people in his own state in danger.

Trump repeated the lie at the presidential debate that night, claiming, “In Springfield, they’re eating the dogs, the people that came in, they’re eating the cats. They’re eating, they’re eating the pets of the people that live there.” Today, President Joe Biden demanded Trump stop his attacks on Haitian-Americans, but Trump doubled down, promising to deport the Haitian immigrants in Springfield if he is elected, although they are here legally.

The widespread ridicule of Trump’s statement has obscured that this attack on Ohio’s immigrants is part of an attempt to regain control of the Senate. Convincing Ohio voters that the immigrants in their midst are subhuman could help Republicans defeat popular Democratic incumbent senator Sherrod Brown, who has held his seat since 2007. Brown and Montana’s Jon Tester, both Democrats in states that supported Trump in 2020, are key to controlling the Senate.

Two Republican super PACs, one of which is linked to Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), have booked more than \$82 million of ad space in Ohio between Labor Day and the election and are focusing on immigration.

Taking control of the Senate would enable Republicans not only to block all popular Democratic legislation, as they did with gun reform after the 2012 Sandy Hook massacre, but to continue to establish control of America’s judicial system. So long as their judges are in place to make law from the bench, what the majority of Americans want doesn’t matter.

In 1986, when it was clear that most Americans did not support the policies put in place by the Reagan Republicans, the Reagan appointees at the Justice Department broke tradition to ensure that candidates for judgeships shared their partisanship. Their goal, said the president’s attorney general, Ed Meese, was to “institutionalize the Reagan revolution so it can’t be set aside no matter what happens in future presidential elections.”

That principle held going forward. Federal judgeships depend on Senate confirmation, and when McConnell became Senate minority leader in 2007, he worked to make sure Democrats could not put their own appointees onto the bench. He held up so many of President Barack Obama's nominees for federal judgeships that in 2013 Senate majority leader Harry Reid (D-NV) prohibited filibusters on certain judicial nominees.

McConnell also made it clear that he would do everything he could to make sure that Democrats could not pass laws, weaponizing the filibuster so that nothing could become law without 60 votes in the Senate.

McConnell became Senate majority leader in 2015 when voters gave Republicans control of the Senate, and when Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia died in February 2016, McConnell refused even to hold hearings for President Obama's nominee for the Supreme Court, Merrick Garland. McConnell's justification for this unprecedented obstruction was that Obama's March nomination was too close to an election, but the underlying reason for the 2016 delay was at least in part his recognition that hopes of pushing the Supreme Court to the right, especially on the issue of abortion, were likely to get evangelical voters to the polls.

Trump won in 2016, and Republicans got control of the Senate. In 2017, when Democrats tried to filibuster Trump's nomination of Neil Gorsuch to fill Scalia's long-empty seat, then-majority leader McConnell killed the filibuster for Supreme Court nominees. The end of the filibuster for Supreme Court nominees meant that McConnell could push through Trump's nominees Brett Kavanaugh, with just 50 votes, and Amy Coney Barrett, with just 52 (in late October 2020, with voting for the next president already underway).

Throughout his tenure as Senate majority leader, McConnell made judicial confirmations a top priority, churning through nominations even when the coronavirus pandemic shut everything else down. Right-wing plaintiffs are now seeking out those judges, like Matthew Kacsmaryk of Texas, to decide in their favor. Kacsmaryk challenged the FDA's approval of the drug mifepristone, which can be used in abortions, thus threatening to ban it nationwide.

Meanwhile, at the Supreme Court, Trump appointees are joining with right-wing justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito to overturn precedents established long ago, including the right to abortion.

Controlling the country through the courts was the plan behind stacking the courts with Republican nominees and weaponizing the filibuster to stop Democrats from passing legislation. In March 2024, in *Slate*, legal analyst Mark Joseph Stern noted that McConnell “realized you don’t need to win elections to enact Republican policy. You don’t need to change hearts and minds. You don’t need to push ballot initiatives or win over the views of the people. All you have to do is stack the courts. You only need 51 votes in the Senate to stack the courts with far-right partisan activists...[a]nd they will enact Republican policies under the guise of judicial review, policies that could never pass through the democratic process. And those policies will be bulletproof, because they will be called ‘law.’”

When he took office, President Joe Biden went to work putting his own mark on the federal judiciary. Almost two thirds of his appointees are women, and 62% are people of color. He appointed the first Black female justice, Ketanji Brown Jackson, to the Supreme Court. But now, Republicans are hoping to retake the Senate to make sure that those appointments will stop, along with any more legislation. Their right-wing appointees to the courts will take the business of lawmaking out of the hands of American majorities.

Republican leaders are throwing everything they’ve got at the Senate races in Montana and Ohio, where they hope they can pick up the seat they need to take control of the Senate.

Attacks on immigrants in Ohio might move that needle.

In 1890, Republicans faced a similar problem. They had lost the popular vote in 1888, although they installed Republican president Benjamin Harrison in office through the Electoral College, and knew the Democrats would soon far outnumber their own voters. So they set out to guarantee that they could never lose the Senate, which should enable them to kill popular Democratic legislation.

But they misjudged the electorate, and in the 1890 midterm election, voters gave control of the House to the Democrats by a margin of two to one, and control of the Senate came down to a single seat, that of a senator from South Dakota. In those days, state legislatures chose their state's senators, and shortly after it became clear that control of the Senate was going to depend on that South Dakota seat, U.S. Army troops went to South Dakota to rally voters by putting down an "Indian uprising" in which no people had died and no property had been damaged.

Fueled on false stories of "savages" who were attacking white settlers, the inexperienced soldiers were the ones who pulled the triggers to kill more than 250 Lakotas on December 29, but the Wounded Knee Massacre started in Washington, D.C.