



From left, Becky Gould, Luz Torrero, Sierra Edmisten and Dolores Ramirez canvass a neighborhood in Crete, Neb., on Oct. 25.

IMPERFECT UNION

A boom of ballot initiatives is reshaping a state’s democracy

This is what the future of American democracy looked like for Sierra Edmisten one evening this fall: a block of modest, single-story homes; the lights from the Crete High School football stadium glowing in the mist; families gathering for dinner after a day in the meatpacking plants.

Edmisten was collecting signatures for a cause associated with liberals in a red part of one of the country’s reddest states. The ballot initiative she was seeking to put before voters would, if passed, require Nebraska employers to guarantee their workers at least five days of paid sick leave each year.

A push to enact a similar law had failed twice in the Nebraska legislature and repeatedly since 2016 in the U.S. Congress, despite polls suggesting widespread popularity. To Edmisten, those defeats reflected a sickness afflicting the country’s representative democracy.

Today, Congress is so divided and ideo-

Advocates bypass politicians to give voters a direct say

BY GREG JAFFE
IN CRETE, NEB.

logically polarized that it struggles to execute its most basic responsibilities. State legislatures suffer a different malady. They’re often so dominated by a single party that the majority can push through its agenda with little regard for what most voters might actually prefer.

In the two dozen states that allow citizen-sponsored referendums, Democrats and Republicans alike are turning to the ballot box to make law and in many cases overrule their elected officials — a process known as “direct democracy.” The initiatives, fueled by voter frustration and wealthy funders, have rolled across the country in waves in recent decades. Although the overall number of initiatives has declined in the past several years, the policies at stake have reshaped Americans’ everyday lives: Citizens have used ballot measures to raise the minimum wage, legalize marijuana, expand Medicaid, bring back the death penalty and require

SEE DEMOCRACY ON A12

Swaps of captives resume after brief protest by Hamas

7-HOUR DELAY HIGHLIGHTS DEAL’S FRAGILITY

Militants threaten to stop releases, citing Gaza aid

BY STEVE HENDRIX,
CLAIRE PARKER,
SUSANNAH GEORGE
AND LIZ SLY

JERUSALEM — Hamas released a second group of Israeli hostages late Saturday, capping a nerve-racking day of delays and complications that underscored the fragility of the deal for a pause in fighting in Gaza, the exchange of captives and the delivery of more aid to the beleaguered enclave.

The pause held for a second day, but a challenge by Hamas to Israel’s implementation of the agreement delayed the planned release of Israeli hostages by seven hours, as Qatari and Egyptian diplomats held emergency talks with both sides to salvage the deal.

Qatar’s Foreign Ministry said late Saturday that the dispute had been resolved and that the exchange would proceed. Qatar and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which is

facilitating the transfers, said 13 Israeli hostages had been freed and were on their way to the Rafah crossing in Egypt. Israel reciprocated by releasing 39 Palestinian prisoners, according to Israel’s prison service.

The release was the second of the four-day pause, during which Hamas is to free a total of 50 hostages kidnapped from Israel on Oct. 7 in exchange for 150 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons. On Friday, Hamas released 13 Israelis and Israel released 39 Palestinians.

Four Thai nationals also were released Saturday, according to Hamas and the Israel Defense Forces. Hamas freed 10 Thais and one Filipino on Friday, and credited the efforts of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Iran also claimed credit for their release.

Hamas on Saturday threatened to stop releasing hostages, alleging that Israel had not allowed

SEE HOSTAGES ON A15

Israel investigates systematic rape as a weapon of war

BY SHIRA RUBIN

Warning: The following report includes graphic descriptions of sexual violence.

TEL AVIV — The first indications of possible sexual violence came as early as Oct. 7, the day that thousands of Hamas and other fighters streamed into Israeli towns and began live-streaming bloodshed and torture.

Footage showed several women stripped of their clothing. One video showed a woman, her hands zip-tied behind her back, with blood on the crotch of her pants.

Later came testimony from witnesses and first responders. One witness described in graphic detail a gang rape at the Nova

rave site near Re’im. An Israeli reserve combat paramedic told The Post that he found the bodies of teenage girls with signs of sexual assault.

Combatants from Gaza overran 22 Israeli communities, killed at least 1,200 and took 240 hostage in the surprise attack. But their greater goal, sexual trauma specialists say, was to introduce terror against women — and children and other unarmed civilians — as a means of spreading fear.

“The torture of women was weaponized to destroy communities, to destroy a people, to destroy a nation,” said Cochav Elkayam Levy, the head of a nongovernmental commission

SEE RAPE ON A10

Freed Palestinians: In West Bank, a complex swirl of emotions. **A14**

Limited relief: Pause brings new perils as Gazans seek safety. **A16**

Dutch vote shows far right rising, transforming Europe

BY ANTHONY FAIOLA,
EMILY RAUHALA
AND LOVEDAY MORRIS

When Austria two decades ago became the first nation in Western Europe to lurch to the far right since World War II, the rest of the continent roared in outrage. Protesters haunted its politicians. Diplomats shunned



Geert Wilders

skipped a lunch with Austria’s then-defense minister, telling reporters: “I don’t eat with fascists.”

Fast forward to 2023, when historic political momentum has given the far right a seat at Europe’s table and a chance to reshape the region’s politics and policies.

The latest victory came in the socially liberal Netherlands, where hard-right icon Geert Wilders and his anti-European Union, anti-Muslim and anti-immigration Party for Freedom

landed a shocking first place finish this past week in parliamentary elections.

Wilders is expected to struggle, and ultimately may fail, to form a government — his party fell well short of a majority and faces weeks or months of complex negotiations. But the unexpectedly strong showing by the “Dutch Donald Trump,” who has long pledged to ban the Quran and halt acceptance of asylum seekers, amounted to a powerful warning to mainstream Europe. And it was duly welcomed by the region’s leading voices of the far right, including Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and French opposition leader Marine Le Pen.

“Everywhere in Europe we see the same right-wing wind blowing,” Tom Van Grieken, a Belgian hard-right populist, said in response to Wilders’s win. “The advance that has been underway for a while is clearly continuing in the Netherlands. We share our patriotism and want to put our people first again. Nothing can match that motivation.”

SEE EUROPE ON A18

In grief, mothers found a second act

After losing their children to gun violence, these moms turned their ‘pain into purpose’



Tiffani Evans stands in her son’s bedroom, which is still full of his mementos. Peyton “PJ” Evans, then 8, was shot and killed when men sprayed an apartment building with gunfire in 2021.

BY JASMINE HILTON

Tiffani Evans laced her fingers with the women clothed in all black.

With their heads bowed and their eyes closed, a voice reverberated through the room over the footsteps in the hall of the nearby theater and the nerves in their stomachs.

“Thank you for allowing us to tell our stories and keeping our sons’ names alive, God.”

“Mhmm, yes, God,” Evans responded.

“We thank you, God, when we felt like there was no way, God, when we felt like we wanted to kill ourselves after our sons left us, God,” Ja’Ka McKnight said in prayer, shaking her clasped hands, “you still gave us the energy and the strength to get up every day and push forward, Father God, in the name of Jesus, to rep our sons’ name, God, and to help other mothers out ... that are

SEE MOMS ON A6

El Paso victims: Mexicans shot in 2019 massacre still struggle. **A4**

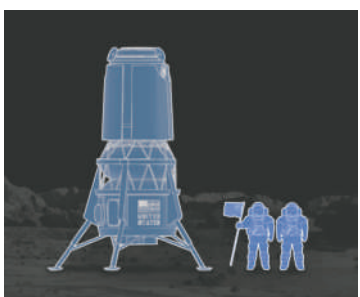
METRO
She tried to save her troubled brother. Then came a brutal assault.

SPORTS
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Six decades of movie touchstones that have shaped a generation.

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BUSINESS
NASA’s moon plans could transform the way we explore the cosmos.

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Unclaimed baggage can be a shopper’s paradise for bargain hunters.

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