

Then they fight you: How the ‘No Kings’ protests are winning America

A massive turnout of seven million and a panicked White House showed Saturday why the “No Kings” protests matter — a lot.

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Demonstrators gather for a "No Kings" rally in Philadelphia on Saturday.
Joe Lamberti / For The Inquirer

Outlined against a blue, gray October sky on a perfect fall morning, Carol Otis, in her Obama-Biden T-shirt, joined more than 1,000 people Saturday who lined both sides of the busy Eagle Road thoroughfare in [Havertown](#) to yell, wave signs, and provoke an endless cacophony of car horns against an authoritarian [Donald Trump](#) regime.

“I could probably name 7,000 reasons why,” the 77-year-old recent retiree from [Drexel Hill](#) told me, “because every day there are 18 things that happen that are just what Trump says — and then there’s the GOP [talking about this ‘hate rally.’](#)”

So Otis didn’t make a sign and chose instead — like many in this protest in the heart of suburban [Delaware County](#) — to wave an American flag, “because people who carry the flag do not hate America, and as you can see, there are a lot of flags.”

She laughed, then added sarcastically, parrying one of the more absurd GOP talking points: “We’re all paid protesters! George” — [Soros, the liberal billionaire](#) — “where are you? I don’t see you. I’m waiting for my handout.”



Carol Otis, 77, a retiree from Drexel Hill, at the "No Kings" protest Saturday in Havertown. Will Bunch

There is [a famous quote](#) about mass protest movements — with murky origins (misattributed frequently to Gandhi) — that says, “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.” [Saturday’s massive “No Kings” protest](#) that filled Main Streets and public squares from New York and Washington, D.C., to smaller burgs like Havertown showed that the effort to halt and reverse dictatorship in mid-2020s America has already prompted a half-laughing, half-fighting response from an [increasingly unpopular](#) White House and its allies.

Ignored at first, the “No Kings” protest movement is rapidly accelerating toward the then-you-win phase. Indeed, the over-the-top alarmism from [Republicans](#) like [House Speaker Mike Johnson](#), who called it a “hate America rally,” or [Texas Gov. Greg Abbott](#) — who called up his state’s National Guard in Austin to pump up a ridiculous narrative about rock-throwing radicals instead of the peaceful, joyous events in 2,700 different locales — proved that “No Kings” struck a raw nerve.

The day was not only nonviolent but also historic. [The estimated nearly seven million](#) who showed up across America marked [the second-largest one-day protest in U.S. history](#), surpassed only by a very different type of event: the [first Earth Day in 1970](#). That was roughly 40% larger than the first “No Kings” event in June, and in talking to protesters Saturday, it seemed the turnout was only boosted by the right-wing rhetoric that anti-Trump protesters must be some kind of domestic terrorists.

“Knowing that they’re feeling threatened makes me know this is what needs to happen,” Gary Fishbein — 65, from [Bala Cynwyd](#), with his American flag T-shirt and Eagles cap — told me. His words were nearly drowned out by the steady honking of supportive cars passing the undulating sea of signs that were as funny as “Does This Ass Make My Country Look Small” or as simple as “Dogs Against Fascism” (held by the canine’s companion) or just “Freedom to Speak.”

The official White House reaction, as related to one reporter, was [“Who cares?”](#) But guess what? They clearly cared — a lot. You could see that in the week leading up to the demonstration, with the increasingly insane rhetoric and [warnings about “antifa”](#) — a tiny, unorganized sliver of young rock-throwing radicals who were nowhere in sight

Saturday — that aimed to neutralize the reality that millions of everyday Americans are sick of seeing [a masked secret police](#) snatch people off the streets.

In a maneuver North Korean dictator [Kim Jong Un](#) must have surely applauded, Trump's Pentagon [fired some artillery shells](#) over a closed I-5 in the heart of Southern California's anti-Trump rally as the protests were taking place — ostensibly to mark the 250th anniversary of the armed forces, but also as a reminder of the regime's military might as Trump [weighs invoking the Insurrection Act](#).



Ben Liptock, a 38-year-old Philadelphia public school teacher who lives in Havertown, attended the "No Kings" protest there Saturday with his 9-year-old son, Bobby. Will Bunch

Just a short time after the “Who cares?” comment, Trump himself posted a shocking — to the extent that anything can be truly shocking anymore — [AI-created video to Truth Social](#) that showed him piloting a jet fighter wearing a king's crown (!!) and “bombing” a large U.S. urban protest march with brown, liquid, *um*, excrement.

I guess that was supposed to be the fascist version of four-dimensional chess, that our 47th and possibly last president could mock, ridicule, and dismiss “No Kings” by confirming everything the largest protest in 56 years was all about: that our government is hijacked by a monarch who defecates on his own subjects. The reality is that Trump's late-night video reeked more of panic and fear than its crude subject matter.

The biggest American protest doesn't happen in a vacuum. The reason seven million people are in the streets is that Trump long ago squandered any chance for a honeymoon after his narrow reelection in 2024. His approval rating is [just 40% in the latest Gallup poll \(even lower in some other surveys\)](#). And like the protester Otis said, there are about 7,000 reasons — including [higher prices](#) in the supermarket, a looming [doubling of health insurance premiums](#) for millions of Americans, and a 20-day-and-counting shutdown of the federal government with [no end in sight](#).

But it was Trump's mass deportation crusade, and [the brutal tactics](#) by those masked and unbadged goons for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and other federal agencies — grabbing migrants (and, in at least 170 documented cases, [U.S. citizens](#)) off the street and lobbing tear gas at anyone who protests — that was cited again and again by the marchers when I asked them why they are in the streets.

Ben Liptock — 38, who lives in Havertown and teaches in a [North Philadelphia](#) public school, and came with his 9-year-old son, Bobby — explained that we need to “continue to show people that you’re not alone in today’s America — it’s scary to protest.” But he said he felt they had to be there for his many immigrant students — some who’ve gone home to find their dads deported — who can’t safely demonstrate themselves.



Emilio Ovalle, a 19-year-old West Chester University student, attended the "No Kings" protest Saturday in Havertown. Will Bunch

“If I looked a little different, I wouldn’t be able to show my face and protest power,” Liptock said. “There are people in the shadows right now, and they’re terrified.” It arguably cut both ways that the suburban crowd in Havertown was overwhelmingly white, with most [older](#) than the median U.S. age of 38. Others echoed Liptock that this breed of protester can use its privilege to speak for those who can’t, and any true mass movement needs the white metro middle class to succeed. But the lack of Black and brown faces, or members of Gen Z ([who’ve powered uprisings](#) in parts of Asia and Africa), remains a significant problem for “No Kings.”

Someone like Emilio Ovalle — a lanky 19-year-old student from [West Chester University](#) waving a sign with a Mark Twain quotation — stood out in the crowd on Saturday. The son of an immigrant from Guatemala, Ovalle also cited the deportations as his No. 1 issue, and while he said many of his friends oppose Trump, he also understands their reluctance to protest.

“Part of it has to be the Democrats — they’re [not good at getting the young vote](#),” he said. “The right is very good at appealing to a lot of the insecurities, especially in younger men.”

This would seem to be the next mission for “No Kings” going forward: to build a bigger network with groups such as Gen Z teens and 20-somethings or African Americans. Those groups also have major issues with the Trump presidency, but feel them in different ways and express them in different venues than the ones like Facebook or MSNBC that are popular with the first wave of protesters.

That said, it's impossible to ignore what the "No Kings" movement has accomplished in a matter of months. By raising their voices, protesters have encouraged Democrats in Washington to at least [slightly stiffen their backbones](#), as shown by the current budget battle. They are winning new converts from the disaffected middle by exposing the depths of Trump's unpopularity.

And they are reassuring their friends and neighbors to keep the faith in a dark moment — that there are far more Americans who want democracy than dictatorship. "It makes you feel good that you are not alone, that a lot of people feel the same way," Michael Tempone, a 73-year-old from [Upper Darby](#), waving American flags with his wife, Stephanie, told me.

There were thousands of American flags across the nation Saturday, and no reported violence, and close to no arrests — zero in [New York City](#) (where the New York Police Department is not known for its restraint) or [San Diego](#) or fearmongered [Austin](#). That is driving the Trump regime bat-guano crazy, because it has not crushed the resistance, and it knows its days are numbered. As I walked back to my car, I heard one protester chuckle to his partner, "This is the best 'hate America' rally that I've ever been to."