

# Telling 'yes' votes from 'no' votes in Hartford

"Let's get the facts straight."

That subject line on an Aug. 21 email caught my attention. The email was from Rachel Khanna,



**Alma Rutgers**

COMMENTARY

state representative for Connecticut's 149<sup>th</sup> assembly district that includes parts of Greenwich and Stamford.

Khanna, a Democrat, was referencing a recent flier distributed by her Republican challenger, Tina Courpas.

"I am disappointed by the dishonesty from my opponent, and her attempt to advance her campaign by lying about my accomplishments," Khanna replied when I contacted her.

"The use of the word 'lies' is not campaign hyperbole or political rhetoric," her email statement said. "When I vote yes on a bill and my opponent claims that I voted no — that's a lie."

Khanna offered three examples of "yes" votes that Courpas turned into "no" votes: "Yes" to strengthen protections against domestic violence; to improve reporting of juvenile criminal records in a firearms background check database; to improve election integrity by requiring video cameras at absentee ballot drop boxes and making it a crime to harass election workers.

Courpas refutes Khanna's assertions.

"I did not misrepresent my opponent's positions," Courpas said in her email response to my request for comment. "My opponent took these positions. Her accusations of me were based on the distinction of Amendment versus Bill, Committee vote versus House floor vote, and several explanatory words in a handout I provided at several campaign events."

That handout — the flier that prompted Khanna's reaction — is more than "several explanatory words." It describes Khanna's positions on the three issues in question — domestic violence protections, improved reporting in a firearms background check database, and election integrity — with wording that turns Khanna's positive votes into



Tyler Sizemore/Hearst Connecticut Media

**State Rep. Rachel Khanna, D-Greenwich/Stamford, speaks during the Stamford Chamber of Commerce 23rd Annual Legislative Breakfast at Deloitte in Stamford on Jan. 26, 2023.**

negatives.

The descriptions have Khanna voting "against victims of domestic violence, by voting against murder convictions for abusers who murder," voting in favor of "preventing the police from fingerprinting violent criminals," and for "maintaining current law that absentee application signatures and ballot signatures do not have to match or be the same name for the vote to be counted."

This transformation of Khanna's "yes" votes is about peripheral issues. Khanna, for instance, opposed a last-minute amendment to the domestic violence protections bill that would have imposed a mandatory life prison sentence without parole on the abused as well as the abuser for the murder of a family member.

The Courpas flier also transformed Khanna's "yes" vote on a bill to improve reporting in a firearms background check database into a vote against allowing police to fingerprint violent criminals.

And her "yes" vote on a bill to improve election integrity was transformed into opposition to signature matching on absentee ballots.

Despite the wording in her flier, Courpas told me in an email that in all cases she was only referring to amendments and not commenting on the substance of the bills themselves, nor referring to Khanna's votes on the main bills. Although the flier doesn't say this, Courpas insists she was only pointing out how she would have voted differently from Khanna on certain amendments.

The flier contains sets

of boxes that put other Khanna votes in a negative light. These boxes are organized in four broad categories: fiscal discipline, local control, public safety, election integrity.

Khanna's votes appear in those boxes in a way that implies her positions lack fiscal discipline, oppose local zoning control, are weak on public safety, and undermine election integrity.

This characterization is deceptive.

For instance, one of Khanna's votes — depicted as violating fiscal guardrails — made American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds that were "use or lose" available to many Greenwich and Stamford not-for-profit organizations.

Portrayal of Khanna as voting to undermine local zoning control belies her consistent opposition to such legislation. The transit-oriented housing bill she supported is compatible with local control, as is a bill to address the shortage of childcare providers that she supported.

And underlying the characterization of Khanna as weak on public safety and election integrity are fear-driven MAGA tropes.

Courpas, claiming bipartisanship, accuses Khanna of voting with Democrats 98% of the time.

To get the facts straight?

Yes, to voting with Democrats, says Khanna. And yes, to Republicans also voting with Democrats, she says, proud of a two-year legislative record in which 98% of the more than 400 bills were passed with bipartisan support.

*Alma Rutgers served in Greenwich town government for 30 years.*