



# DEMOCRATS SEE ABORTION WINS AS A SPRINGBOARD FOR 2024 AS GOP STRUGGLES TO FIND A WINNING MESSAGE - ASSOCIATED PRESS

Posted on November 9, 2023 by MICHELLE L. PRICE and CHRISTINE FERNANDO |

Associated Press



*Photo: Issue 1 supporters cheer as they watch election results come in, Tuesday, Nov. 7, 2023, in Columbus, Ohio*

Voters threw their support behind abortion rights in Ohio, Virginia and elsewhere as Democrats look to springboard off those wins by using the issue to drive turnout and shape next year's races for the White House, Congress and other elections.

Ohio offered the clearest snapshot on Tuesday of the issue's salience more than a year after the U.S. Supreme Court ended the nationwide right to abortion. Voters in the increasingly Republican-leaning state resoundingly approved an amendment to the state constitution to protect abortion access.

Democrats also harnessed the issue in Virginia, riding it to retake control of the Legislature, and in Kentucky, giving Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear a second term after he made abortion rights central to his campaign in the deeply Republican state.

Election night was an energizing moment for Democrats hoping abortion rights will pull voters to the polls in the 2024 presidential election. The campaigning and results for the amendment in Ohio, the only state with an abortion question on the ballot this year, is a precursor to similar ballot measures expected to be put to a vote in several states next year. That includes Arizona and Nevada, which play pivotal roles in the White House race.

Abortion also will sit at the center of a slate of state Supreme Court races in 2024.

For the anti-abortion movement, the latest post-Roe defeat came after its scattershot messaging struggled to win over voters in a state that has become a testing ground. The scope of the victory for abortion access in Ohio suggests that a significant number of Republicans voted in favor of the amendment, signaling deep divisions in the party over their next steps.

Elisabeth Smith, director of state policy and advocacy at the Center for Reproductive Rights, said the anti-abortion movement is "on their heels" after turning to misinformation and fearmongering in Ohio in a losing cause.

"It's become clear that the majority of Americans support abortion rights and want to see abortion remain legal and accessible, and the anti-abortion side knows that," Smith said.



According to AP VoteCast, a nationwide survey of more than 94,000 voters, 63% of voters in the 2022 midterm elections said abortion should be legal in most or all cases. About one-third of voters said it should be illegal in all or most cases.

Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of the anti-abortion group SBA Pro-Life America, said Ohio's results "serve as a warning sign for the GOP heading into 2024" and "proved this is not a formula for success."

"The true lesson from last night's loss is that Democrats are going to make abortion front-and-center throughout 2024 campaigns," Dannenfelser said in a statement. "The GOP consultant class needs to wake up. Candidates must put money and messaging toward countering the Democrats' attacks or they will lose every time."

Anti-abortion groups said the outcome was fueled by millions in campaign donations that abortion-rights supporters poured into the Ohio race, including large donations from out-of-state groups.

The American Civil Liberties Union, which advocates for abortion rights, spent more than \$9 million on races in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia this year, with over \$6 million of that going to Ohio, said the group's chief political and advocacy officer, Deirdre Schifeling.

The messaging problem for anti-abortion groups goes deeper than their loss in Ohio.

In Virginia, Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin tried to rally voters behind GOP legislative candidates by staking out what he and other Republicans felt was a middle-ground approach: a proposal to ban abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy with exceptions for rape, incest and situations where the mother's life was at risk.

Many GOP candidates in swing districts publicly supported the proposal.

It didn't seem to help. Democrats questioned whether Youngkin and Republicans would go further if they ended up controlling the governor's office and the Legislature.

The governor "thought he was going to give a playbook to Republicans, but he actually gave a playbook to Democrats on how to help voters connect the dots between candidates and their abortion policies," said Mini Timmaraju, president and CEO of Reproductive Freedom for All, formerly known as NARAL Pro-Choice America.

Democrats have made clear they plan to make the issue central in races for the presidency and down the ballot next year.

In a fresh sign of the administration trying to link its electoral prospects to the results, Vice President Kamala Harris made a rare appearance before reporters on the White House driveway Wednesday and said: "It was a good night and the president and I obviously have a lot of work to do to earn our reelection. But I'm confident we're going to win."

In the Republican presidential primary, South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who signed a six week ban in his state, have said they would support a national abortion ban at 15 weeks. Other candidates have been vaguer on their answers.

Former President Donald Trump, who nominated three Supreme Court justices who helped overturn Roe vs. Wade, has refused to say whether he would sign a national ban and he has warned the issue can be politically difficult to campaign on. Trump has said he could "live with" the procedure being banned by individual states or nationwide through federal action.

In the wake of the Ohio vote, Republican presidential candidate and biotech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy said on CNN that abortion opponents need to speak about the issue differently to gain more support. He has voiced support for states that enacted six-week bans,

but also said he would not back a federal abortion ban.



"Our pro-life movement, and I am part of it, needs to be better about the way we discuss this issue, actually talk about greater access to adoption, to child care — further — even go further to sexual responsibility for men," said Ramaswamy, who lives in Ohio.

Ohio Republican Sen. J.D. Vance echoed that, saying Republicans "need people to see us as the pro-life party, not just the anti-abortion party."

Ohio was the seventh state since Roe was overturned to support ballot measures protecting abortion rights or to reject measures aimed at limiting access.

In states where abortion could directly be on the ballot in 2024, abortion rights advocates said they closely watched the Ohio election. Ohio "provided an example" for Arizona for strategizing and building a statewide coalition of advocacy groups, said Chris Love, senior adviser to Planned Parenthood Advocates of Arizona.

In a preview of abortion's impact on races down the ballot, voters in Pennsylvania on Tuesday elected Democrat Dan McCaffery to an open state Supreme Court seat. McCaffery made defense of abortion rights central to his contest with Republican Carolyn Carluccio.

Several anti-abortion groups signaled that how they respond to the string of losses will be among the most crucial political discussions for Republicans heading into 2024. One thing seems certain: They plan to leverage their clout within the party to make sure the fight for abortion restrictions remains a priority for their candidates.

"We persevered for 50 years to overturn Roe v. Wade," Protect Women Ohio, which led the anti-abortion messaging in that state, said in a statement Tuesday night. "Ours is a movement that has always endured, and always will.

"Tomorrow," the group said, "the work starts again."

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Associated Press writer Seung Min Kim contributed to this report.

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