



# THE FAILED RED WAVE



**VOTE**

*Lessons from  
the GOP's  
2022 Letdown*



AMERICAN  
PRINCIPLES PROJECT

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# THE **FAILED** RED WAVE

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# FORWARD

BY BLAKE MASTERS

**2**022 was a brutal election cycle for Republicans. The Biden administration welcomed millions of illegal aliens to America, sent gas and grocery prices through the roof, and stumbled through a series of foreign policy disasters. We expected a “Red Wave” of Republican victories. We were wrong.

Instead, the midterm elections were a story of incumbent lock-in. In statewide races, every single incumbent won, with just one exception (the Nevada governorship flipped from Democrat to Republican). Thank goodness Republicans won back the House, but even there, performance fell short of expectations.

As Arizona’s Republican nominee for U.S. Senate, I had a front-row seat. We had huge crowds at rallies. We had tightening poll numbers that showed victory within reach. We had the momentum. And then the results hit like a sack of bricks.

Every election is unique and its result influenced by many variables. It is hard to accurately weigh and factor each one. (Take Maricopa County’s failure to ensure its voting machines in proper working order on Election Day, for instance. That certainly did not help Republicans in Arizona!) But we can make some generalizations, and we must, so that we can recalibrate and win going forward.

There are a few reasons I believe Republicans failed to perform as expected.

For one, we got outspent (and therefore defined) by our opponents. More than \$1 billion was spent on the 2022 Senate elections.

Republicans felt they had a very good chance of winning back the Senate majority. Yet Democrats outraised and outspent every single GOP candidate — usually by a wide margin. I raised about \$14 million in my race. Mark Kelly raised over \$89 million.

Now, Republicans have the right ideas and popular policies. So I think we can win if we get outspent 2 to 1, or maybe even 3 to 1. But when an incumbent is able to outspend a challenger by 6 or 7 to 1, it becomes impossible. In my case, Kelly campaigned as a moderate (he actually pretended to be tough on the border!) and spent tens of millions of dollars introducing me to the electorate — falsely! — as someone radical and untrustworthy. Having spent all available money to win my primary, I was near defenseless in August and September in the face of this bombardment. Part of that is on me, of course: I needed to raise a lot more to be competitive, and I will in any future race. But part of it is on the Republican Party and its affiliated super PACs and donor networks. We know the left has an advantage here. Are we going to step up to the plate and fight back? Or will we continue to allow the Democrats to dominate the airwaves and define our candidates?

Second, Republicans must lean into early voting. This was a huge miss in 2022. Because many Republicans felt the 2020 election was not fair, our electorate gravitated towards in-person Election Day voting. Although voting in person is every citizen’s right, we also need to understand that the game has changed. In

states where early voting is allowed, we must dominate it. In Arizona, about 60 percent of Republican-leaning voters who received early ballots turned them in. Forty percent did not! And yet there was no multimillion-dollar effort to go reach those 40 percent and persuade them to return their ballot. Had we gotten that number closer to 75 percent returned, then Republicans would have won every state-wide race in Arizona. By investing in early-ballot-gathering infrastructure, and aggressively pursuing every legal means of encouraging early voting, we can eliminate a significant Democrat advantage.

Finally, Republicans must hone their message on the issues that actually win elections. We care about families and the middle class — and our policies help them! The Democrats' policies empower big government and woke corporations to further hollow out our country and make it harder for everyday Americans to raise a family. The contrast could not be starker. So we must make that contrast clear to voters, and then go get their votes!

If all voters hear is that "Republicans are trying to strip your rights away!" thanks to Democrats' uncontested dominance on the airwaves and on the ground, well, we're going to be in trouble. But if voters hear both sides (in this case, for example, how Democrats want taxpayer-funded abortion on demand all the way to the moment of birth, a truly ghastly policy), and if we show up at their door to remind them what's at stake — and by the way could you please return your ballot today? — well, then we are going to win.

**“ Republicans must hone their message on the issues that actually win elections.**

I'm thrilled that my friends at APP are on the case. They are champions of the American family, doing crucial work at a time when too many politicians left and right have abandoned this critical constituency. With partners like APP, and with lessons learned from 2022, I am incredibly optimistic about not just 2024, but also the future of our great country. America must always be the best place in the world to raise a family. That's under threat now, but if we get smart and work hard, we will succeed, and our people will thrive.



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# INTRODUCTION

## WHAT WENT WRONG IN 2022

**T**here is one thing on which virtually every political analyst can agree regarding the results of the 2022 midterm elections: Republicans underperformed. Badly.

Historically speaking, most indicators heading into November suggested the GOP would approach, if not surpass, the biggest election waves ever. Joe Biden's approval ratings were 12.5 points underwater on Election Day,<sup>1</sup> helping spur Republicans to a lead of 2.5 points on generic ballot tests.<sup>2</sup> In polling, voters expressed grave concerns about the state of the economy and disapproved of Biden's handling of the issue. It was easy to see why — inflation from the time Biden took office to Election Day had been 14 percent,<sup>3</sup> while the average price of gas had just recently topped \$5 per gallon.

Republican leadership felt confident that the significant issues facing the country under Democrat rule, along with the past trend of midterm elections benefiting the party out of power, would lead the GOP to a landslide victory.

However, the landslide never materialized. While Republicans won the popular vote in the House<sup>4</sup> — improving on their 2020 margin by 6 points — they gained only 9 seats. Meanwhile, the party lost a seat in the Senate, giving Democrats an outright majority in the chamber. Although there were some silver linings to be found in resounding victories in Florida and flipped seats in New York, these were the exception rather than the norm.

Looking at the results as a whole, two trends become apparent:

1. Republicans did much better in uncompetitive races. GOP candidates improved on their 2020 margins in seats they already held. They also improved in open races for governor and in open House seats. And they improved over 2020 in races that had a Democrat incumbent but that weren't particularly close.
2. Meanwhile, Republicans did worse than 2020, on the whole, in the most important types of races: open Senate seats, and toss-up races with incumbent Democrat governors or incumbent Democrat senators. Even in close House races with Democrat incumbents, Republicans barely improved at all.<sup>5</sup>

Explaining these results has become a kind of Rorschach test for political pundits. Those who were predisposed to do so have seen the outcome as a rebuke of "low-quality," Trumpian candidates. Social liberals in the Republican Party have, as they always do, tried to use the election as proof that the party should abandon culture-war fights.<sup>6</sup> Others have found in the midterms evidence that the GOP should deemphasize trying to persuade swing voters and instead focus on increasing turnout among their base.<sup>7</sup>

Some of these suggestions have some merit. It certainly wouldn't hurt for Republicans,

for example, to improve ballot-collection operations, and it is always a good idea to avoid candidates with major personal baggage. Furthermore, Republicans really were hurt by their handling of abortion, although the prescription ought to be the exact opposite of what the social liberals are suggesting (more on that to follow). But, in our opinion, none of these proposed reasons adequately explain why so many GOP candidates failed to perform as well as expected.

Poor Republican turnout, for example, was definitely not the problem. Relative to past elections, turnout among GOP voters was excellent in 2022. Trump voters seem to have outnumbered Biden voters in at least Arizona, Georgia, and Nevada.<sup>8</sup> In exit polling, Republican and Republican-leaning voters outnumbered Democrats in nearly every competitive race. To take one example, in Arizona's voting, registered Republicans outnumbered registered Democrats by a 41-33 percent margin — a nearly 200,000-vote advantage. In Maricopa County, registered Republicans even outnumbered registered Democrats in the early vote. If GOP candidates need more than an 8-point turnout advantage in order to win Arizona, it seems safe to say there are some serious problems beyond the turnout itself.

In terms of traditionally Democrat voting blocs, the story is similar.<sup>9</sup> Black voter turnout was way down — in Georgia, the share of the electorate that was black was the lowest it has been since 2006<sup>10</sup> — as was turnout among young voters and Hispanic Democrats.<sup>11</sup> Turnout in big cities was likewise poor. Philadelphia accounted for a smaller percentage of Pennsylvania's votes than it has in decades. Turnout in Detroit likewise decreased, while turnout increased in the rest of Michigan. Turnout in Wisconsin, relative to 2018, stayed constant,

but it dropped significantly in Milwaukee.<sup>12</sup> It's difficult to square this low urban turnout with the theory that Democrats won primarily because of urban machine politics or ballot harvesting.

The electorate as a whole was significantly older, whiter, and more Republican than in 2020. In many places, the Republican turnout advantage was similar to what it was in 2014.<sup>13</sup> In terms of demographics, the electorate as a whole was comparable to that of Virginia in 2021.<sup>14</sup> Yet Republicans in important races did much worse than their counterparts in any of those cycles.

If poor turnout didn't doom Republicans in 2022, that leaves one remaining culprit: GOP candidates failed at persuading voters.<sup>15</sup> And here, the numbers bear this out. In just about every major, toss-up race, Democrats peeled off a significant number of registered Republicans,<sup>16</sup> and they generally won independents by around 20 points.

Although voters in plenty of states were more than willing to vote for *some* Republicans, many defected to Democrats in the most important races. For example, Republicans won the popular vote in House races in Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, and Pennsylvania, even when you account conservatively for races in which a Republican candidate ran uncontested.<sup>17</sup> Even some statewide Republican candidates down-ballot fared better than those atop the ticket. About 33,000 Arizonans who voted Republican for state treasurer or county attorney were persuaded to vote for Katie Hobbs. A further 6,000 left the governor's race blank or wrote someone in. In Georgia, every statewide GOP candidate won by 5-10 points, except for Herschel Walker.

In the end, the final New York Times/Siena polls were fairly accurate (they showed John

**“A strong focus on cultural issues and a populist economic platform are what the GOP needs to persuade independents, soft Democrats, and even single women and suburbanites to vote Republican.**

Fetterman leading by 5 points, Mark Kelly by 6, Raphael Warnock by 3, and Catherine Cortez Masto even with Adam Laxalt). A majority of respondents in each of these polls said that they preferred Republican control of the Senate, even though the specific Republican candidate led in none of them. All of this strongly suggests that Democrats won by persuading GOP-friendly voters to vote against the specific candidates.

However, while some in the party have blamed these uneven results on poor “candidate quality” (or, in other words, being too much like Donald Trump), such a simplistic expla-

nation doesn’t hold up to even surface-level scrutiny.<sup>18</sup> Yes, Trump-aligned candidates like Lake and Walker may have underperformed Trump’s own 2020 results. But neither did as poorly in that regard as Joe O’Dea, a candidate who ran explicitly in opposition to Trump. Candidates as disparate as Jim Inhofe, Rand Paul, and Mehmet Oz all fell short of Trump’s 2020 performance, while Ron DeSantis, running on a platform recognizably similar to Trump’s, more than quadrupled Trump’s 2020 margins.

To adequately explain the 2022 election outcome as a whole, it will not suffice to simply write off the losing candidates as being poor quality (which is usually just an excuse for pundits to attack the candidates with whom they disagreed). We don’t deny that certain scandals from certain candidates really did make a big difference in some specific races. But these isolated examples are not convincing for explaining a national, across-the-board underperformance in close races with heavy involvement from both national parties.

The far more compelling explanation, as we see it, comes down to this: **the national Republican message in the midterm elections was a complete failure in every marquee race in which it was tested.** Voters disagreed with what they saw as the Republican Party’s priorities and policies, and they agreed with what they perceived as the Democrats’. Moreover, Republican candidates in the most important races ran fewer ads, and those ads were generally worse.

The focus by many in the GOP establishment on the supposed flaws of individual candidates is ultimately an attempt to pass the buck and ignore the obvious fact that the midterm messaging priorities of the consulting class were woefully insufficient. As we will show in



the following report, the Republican economic message — which featured most prominently in campaigns — largely failed to resonate with the electorate, while the party's message on crime, though it succeeded in a few cases, was for the most part effectively countered by Democrats. Meanwhile, the Republican refusal to respond to Democrats' abortion attacks, as well as the de-emphasis on the so-called "culture-war" issues which were so critical in 2021, proved to be the decisive factors leading to the GOP's disappointing night.

Certain members of the Republican Party elite have long been convinced that the path to national victory is through milquetoast appeals to fiscal responsibility and a truce on the "cul-

ture-war" issues they despise. They tried it in 2012, and it failed. Ten years later, they tried it again, and it failed once more.

In the meantime, we've seen examples of how to actually win. Pick up Trump's economic message, and fight hard on the culture. This strategy won Republicans the White House in 2016. It won Virginia (and very nearly New Jersey) in 2021. And it is behind the incredible success of Ron DeSantis in transforming Florida into a reliably red state.

**A strong focus on cultural issues, combined with a populist economic platform, are what the GOP needs to persuade independents, soft Democrats, and yes, even single women and suburbanites, to vote Republican.**



# BAD ECONOMIC MESSAGING

In July, the NRCC declared, in no uncertain terms, that an anti-spending platform would ultimately lead the party to victory. “Prices are extremely high because of Democrats’ extremely reckless spending,” they said in July. “That’s the policy voters care about most and what November will be decided on.”<sup>19</sup>

Even in the wake of *Dobbs*, as evidence of potential election problems began to mount, they refused to change course. According to Rep. Tom Emmer, leader of the NRCC, there was no reason to fear following the GOP’s defeat in the August special election for New York’s 19th congressional district: “The general election is going to be about kitchen table issues, and every private and public poll shows Republicans hold a commanding lead on the economic issues most important to voters.”<sup>20</sup>

So sticking to their initial plan, Republicans went ahead and made the economy the primary focus of their midterm ads. According to the Wesleyan Media Project, 45.1 percent of pro-Republican ads in federal races were about the budget, 40.5 percent were on the economy in general, 39.3 percent mentioned taxes, and 37.7 percent mentioned inflation.<sup>21</sup> Other than crime, no issue was even remotely as prominent in Republican advertising. In most of these ads, the attack was simple: Biden’s spending (or his energy policy) had caused inflation, and the Democrat candidate was allied with Biden.

On paper, perhaps, it was a defensible strategy. Polls heading into the election

showed that voters cared a lot about the economy, and they disapproved in the abstract of Joe Biden’s handling of the issue. However, by the conclusion of Election Night, one thing had become clear: Republicans’ economic focus had failed.

The major exit polls differ, which makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions from these numbers. Nevertheless, evidence from both polls strongly suggests Democrats in many close races won because they were able to make significant inroads among voters who ranked the economy as “not so good,” (as opposed to “poor”), often winning this 35 to 45 percent of the electorate by 25 to 45 points, while cleaning up among the 20 percent of the public who thought the economy was good-to-excellent. In other words, Democrats in close races managed to make an effective pitch even to voters who disapproved of Biden’s economy.

Some gubernatorial candidates did this simply by promising to cut taxes and balance their state’s budget. Laura Kelly, for example, ran on eliminating Kansas’ grocery tax and creating a budget surplus.<sup>22</sup> Gretchen Whitmer in Michigan touted her record of balancing the budget,<sup>23</sup> while other pro-Whitmer ads alleged Tudor Dixon was planning a middle-class tax hike to pay for handouts to billionaires.<sup>24</sup>

These sorts of ads muddled the waters, especially when (like Whitmer) the Democrat had a huge spending advantage. But the waters were already fairly muddy to begin with. Repub-

licans vowed to lower costs, but so did Democrats. What would Republicans do specifically? What spending did Republicans actually want to cut? It was all more than a little unclear, and the lack of clarity was intentional. In December 2021, for example, Axios reported on how Mitch McConnell was actively working to ensure the party had no specific agenda heading into the election: “Every midterm cycle, there are Republican donors and operatives who argue the party should release a positive, pro-active governing outline around which candidates can rally. McConnell adamantly rejects this idea, preferring to skewer Democrats for their perceived failures.”<sup>25</sup>

As a result, Republicans’ advantage on inflation was much more limited than many pundits had expected. Voters could see Republican arguments about lowering the cost of gas, but they were less convinced of the GOP’s plan to stop inflation in general — a predicament made even worse by the fact that gas prices had fallen significantly from their summer highs. Nationally, House Republicans won the 26 percent of voters who thought gas or utility prices were the most important factor of inflation by a margin of 61 to 36 percent. The 25 percent of the country who were more concerned about the prices of healthcare, prescription drugs, housing, childcare, or something else voted as a group for Democrats, 64 to 33 percent. Among the bulk of the electorate — the 47 percent who were most concerned about the cost of food and groceries — Republicans were closer to even, winning these voters by a mere 12 points. In toss-up races, that margin was usually even worse for GOP candidates. Laxalt won this group by 7 points, and Blake Masters won them by 4. O’Dea and Oz both *lost* this group by 4 points.<sup>26</sup>

In certain close races, Democrats also cut their losses on energy policy by simply expressing opposition to Biden and *promoting* increased domestic oil production, using their spending advantage to highlight this position. In one ad shown more than 3.5 million times, Mark Kelly vocally bucked Biden on oil: “People are struggling. For most Arizonans, the only cheap thing left is talk. So I’m fighting to expand oil production, lower gas costs. And I’m going after drug companies for price-gouging because Arizonans deserve results.”<sup>27</sup>

Part of the reason voters were skeptical of Republicans’ ability to lower non-energy prices is that voters no longer intuitively connect big spending or a large deficit with inflation. They weren’t really certain that high inflation was Biden’s fault, or the fault of Democrats’ big spending bills. According to a post-election poll from Heritage Action, “54% of independents did not agree that President Biden and Democrats’ government spending have been the main causes of high inflation.”<sup>28</sup> In many states, voters *overall* — not just independents — were split about evenly over whether Biden’s policies were to blame.<sup>29</sup>

When it came to popular opinion on specific bills, the numbers were even worse for Republicans. In August, a poll from The Economist and YouGov asked whether voters supported or opposed “the \$369 billion climate and energy bill, which includes cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, gives government the ability to negotiate lower drug prices, and requires a minimum 15% tax on large corporations.” Respondents supported it 51 to 31 percent. When asked whether they thought this bill would increase inflation, only 36 percent of voters said yes, while 35 percent said it would either decrease inflation or would have



no effect.<sup>30</sup> Other polls showed similar results — while 33 percent of independents thought the Inflation Reduction Act would increase inflation, 38 percent thought it would either make no difference or would decrease it. The rest were unsure.<sup>31</sup>

Specific elements of these bills were also wildly popular. Letting Medicare negotiate drug prices was one of the most popular policy proposals in the country.<sup>32</sup> The best attack on Biden’s spending bills that Republicans could come up with — as reflected by their advertising — was the increase in IRS funding, which polled at least 6 points underwater. But, without voters feeling confident that Biden’s spending was the main driver of inflation, IRS funding alone was not enough to generate significant backlash to Biden’s major legislative accomplishments.

As left-wing data analyst David Shor has pointed out, Biden’s specific policies were extremely well-designed and difficult to attack:

All told, the policy backlash to the things that Joe Biden did was much smaller

than under previous presidents. I think that reflects the fact that Biden really picked a policy agenda that was very economically focused, and that didn’t necessarily play into people’s fears of big government. The Affordable Care Act really did substantially change how roughly 20 percent of the American economy worked. And there were lots of people who were really worried about how changes to health-insurance laws would affect them personally. I think Biden’s policies were kind of consciously designed to avoid triggering loss aversion.

Another difference was that, unlike Obamacare, the final reconciliation bill was kind of a phantom package; it didn’t really exist until moments before it passed. So it was hard for Republicans to attack any specific policy, because they didn’t actually know what was going to be in the bill and what

wasn't. And I do think it really probably does matter that the things that ended up being in the reconciliation bill were all pretty easy to administer, and also dealt with issue areas where people trust Democrats.<sup>33</sup>

Republicans hoping that voters would care as much about the deficit as they did during the Obama era were sorely mistaken. In January 2022, only 45 percent of Americans (and only 63 percent of Republicans) thought reducing the deficit should be a "top priority" for the president and Congress. During the Obama era, those numbers peaked at 72 percent and 82 percent, respectively.<sup>34</sup>

When asked by Data for Progress to rank their top three priorities, 46 percent of independents included inflation and 34 percent included jobs and the economy, but only 17 percent included "government spending and the budget deficit."<sup>35</sup> When the responses were more open-ended, the results were even worse. When voters in a New York Times/Siena poll were asked to volunteer what they thought the most important problem facing the country was, only *one* out of 1,641 respondents mentioned the debt, the deficit, or federal spending.

This was a huge problem for Republicans, given that the main thrust of the GOP's economic ads was that Democrats were in favor of big spending. In one typical ad from the NRCC, shown nearly a million times on Google, it was the only message: "Brick by brick, [Tom] O'Halleran built our economic mess. He voted lockstep with Pelosi — wasteful spending, higher taxes, more debt. Tom O'Halleran: 100 percent with Biden, 100 percent with Pelosi, zero percent with you."<sup>36</sup> Another ad, shown over a million times, stated: "Kim Schrier's spending spree wasted trillions while sending prices sky-high."<sup>37</sup> Similar talking points show up over and over

again in most of the top Republican advertisements in high-profile races.

Meanwhile, Democrats did extensive message testing and discovered an effective counter to the Republican message: Trumponomics.

In April, Data for Progress tested a number of inflation messages, ripping their questions from actual statements various elected politicians were giving at the time.<sup>38</sup> The single best message Republicans were giving, in terms of votes moved, was in fact McConnell's vague finger-pointing at Democrats: "The worst inflation in 40 years is fleecing American consumers from the gas pump to the grocery store. Democrats' policies have prices rising faster than wages." However, this message was less effective at moving swing voters than the most effective message Democrats were using at the time, one which could have been ripped from Trump's 2016 campaign: "Democrats believe that we need to bring back manufacturing jobs in the United States to drive down prices. Our supply chains need to be housed here at home, rather than outsourced abroad."

Of course, there is no reason why Republicans could not have been running on this kind of economic messaging as well. But, with most GOP candidates focused exclusively on cutting the deficit, Democrats filled the void and took Trumponomics for themselves. And they did so successfully.

Out of 135 Democrat messages tested by Data for Progress, two of the top five most effective at persuading swing voters were promises to bring back American manufacturing.<sup>39</sup> Democrat campaigns took note of this finding. Two of Fetterman's top ads, shown more than 3.5 million times according to Google Ad Transparency, offer an economic message that sounds downright Trumpy.<sup>40</sup> As one of the ads states:



**“This should be a serious wake up call for Republicans — their preferred messaging simply doesn't work.**

“The truth is our economy is a mess because of Washington, D.C. But we can fix our economy. We must make more stuff in America, and cut taxes for working families.” The ads then go on to promise to fight corruption (e.g. Congress “play[ing] in the stock market”) and vow to “take on anyone who gets in the way.”

Tim Ryan likewise pledged to “take on China, fix our supply chains by making things in America, and [...] pass a real tax cut for workers.”<sup>41</sup> Mark Kelly ran ads touting his support for domestic microchip manufacturing in similar terms: “The technologies that power what we use every day should be made here at home. That’s why I passed a law expanding microchip manufacturing in Arizona. It’ll lower costs and keep us competitive, so that families can finally get ahead.”<sup>42</sup> Other candidates, such as Catherine Cortez Masto, Maggie Hassan, Frank Mrvan, Sharice Davids, and Chris Deluzio (to name a few), all ran similar campaigns: promoting domestic manufacturing, opposing outsourcing to China, and touting policies requiring the government to buy things made in America.<sup>43</sup>

Democrats also used many of their ads to reframe inflation around healthcare costs,<sup>44</sup> where they had a trust advantage among independent voters. In federal races, healthcare and prescription drugs were the two most frequent topics in pro-Democrat ads after abortion, appearing in 29.6 percent and 20.2 percent of their ads respectively.<sup>45</sup> Letting Medicare negotiate prescription drug prices is one of the most popular policy proposals in the country, and Democrats highlighted it repeatedly in their advertising.

Meanwhile, Democrats drew a contrast by attacking Republicans as seeking to cut Social Security and Medicare, an enormously unpopular proposition. As one Hassan ad went: “Standing up to anyone to lower our costs: That’s Maggie Hassan. New laws to lower prescription drug prices and cap insulin, because Hassan has the guts to take on Big Pharma and put our families first. But Don Bolduc? He said ‘hell no’ to supporting the new law that lowers our drug prices. The same Don Bolduc who has plans to eliminate Social Security and decimate Medicare. Bolduc’s dangerous ideas will cost our families thousands and take us backwards.”<sup>46</sup> According to Data for Progress, Social Security was the top performing issue area for Democrats, and Social Security messages comprised half of the forty best performing messages they tested.<sup>47</sup>

Medicare and Social Security each specifically made it into about 12 percent of Democrat ads in federal races,<sup>48</sup> and Democrat polling firms are urging their party to double down on these issues in future elections. How Republicans handle these issues over the next two years will determine whether or not this move will be effective.

Ultimately, the GOP contrast was that Democrats would spend big, while Republicans would cut spending and lower gas prices.

Meanwhile, the Democrats promised to cut healthcare costs, reshore American manufacturing, and cut taxes on working families — all while alleging Republicans would cut spending by going after Social Security and Medicare. Even in a bad environment for them, the Democrat message proved to be especially strong.

Voters didn't hate Biden's bills and didn't overwhelmingly connect the large price tag to rising costs. Meanwhile, Republicans let Democrats co-opt Trump's economic message and depict the GOP as opposing some of the most popular programs in the country.

We are not saying that economic issues didn't help Republicans at all. If the economy hadn't been so bad, Democrats might very well have held the House as well. We aren't saying that balancing budgets or cutting taxes for working families aren't popular ideas — they are. Nor are we saying that the deficit isn't a major problem.

But Republicans should not delude themselves that their scanty win in the House is somehow proof positive that the traditional Republican economic message resonated with the American people. This is ludicrous. In a time of economic turmoil, as the party out of power, the Republicans went all in on their economic message and barely moved the needle in House races while losing a seat in the Senate. This should be a serious wake up call for Republicans — their preferred messaging simply doesn't work.

If Republicans want to do better, they are going to have to assuage voters' fears about Social Security and Medicare, and they are going to have to reclaim Trump's economic agenda. We saw in 2016 that even Republican voters, when forced to choose, prefer Trumponomics to deficit hawkery. The GOP should stop trying to bring the latter offer to the general electorate.



# BAD CRIME MESSAGING

**T**he second most significant Republican midterm message was attacking Democrats over rising crime rates. Public safety was the theme of 34 percent of pro-Republican ads in federal races.<sup>49</sup> Again, the message for GOP candidates was simple: crime rates are rising, and it's the fault of soft-on-crime Democrats.

This was undoubtedly relevant in some races. In Wisconsin, for example, Mandela Barnes could not outrun his previous, undeniable endorsements of the defund-the-police movement.<sup>50</sup> And in New York, Lee Zeldin and down-ballot Republicans were able to capitalize on especially high regional concerns about rising crime and tie state Democrat politicians to their disastrous bail reform laws. Fifteen percent of New York voters chose rising crime rates as the single most important issue facing the country, and nearly a third of voters said it was the single most important factor influencing their vote.<sup>51</sup> Zeldin won these by a large margin. The effect of the crime issue in New York was so strong that it even seemed to spill over into Pennsylvania — Fetterman did significantly worse in parts of Pennsylvania that are in New York-based media markets.

But outside of New York and other isolated races, crime was much less salient as an issue. Only 20 percent of independents ranked crime as a top-three national priority — fewer than ranked government corruption, immigration,

Social Security and Medicare, or climate change and the environment.<sup>52</sup> Nationally, only 8 percent of voters ranked crime as the top issue. In important swing states, this number ranged from 6 to 9 percent. And while Republicans won these voters by a 19-point margin nationally, candidates in big races did worse. Lake (+13), Masters (+12), and Oz (+12) all did worse than that 19-point margin, as did Walker (+3), Doug Mastriano (+3), and Ted Budd (even). In Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer won these voters by 17 points. In the CNN exit poll, Oz *lost* voters who cared most about crime by 2 points.

Republicans largely struggled to punish Democrats on crime for similar reasons to why their economic attacks failed. First of all, voters did not overwhelmingly agree that rising crime rates were the Democrats' fault. Barely over half of voters thought rising crime had anything to do with Biden and the Democrats — in exit polling, only 51 percent said Biden had made the US less safe in terms of crime.<sup>53</sup>

Secondly, Democrats in close races simply ran great, poll-tested ads echoing Republican talking points. Public safety was a theme of 18.8 percent of pro-Democrat campaign and party advertisements,<sup>54</sup> and though Republicans ran more crime ads in the final days of the campaign than Democrats did, of all top Republican messaging topics, according to AdImpact, "crime was where Democrats responded the most."<sup>55</sup>

After 2020, Democrats learned that "defund the police" was a losing message with voters.



So savvy candidates decided to embrace the opposite — a smart move, considering the best of the 135 messages tested by Data for Progress was, in essence, “I will fund the police.” Democrats in important races portrayed themselves in ads as the law-and-order candidates: Josh Shapiro was supported by the cops. Jared Polis was liked by sheriffs. Gretchen Whitmer wanted a “safer Michigan.” Fetterman worked “side-by-side with police,” did “whatever it took to fund our police” as mayor, and stopped gun deaths — “public safety is why I ran for office.”<sup>56</sup>

Some even went on the offense, in more or less plausible ways. One ad from Everytown for Gun Safety attacked Tudor Dixon by saying her budget plan could cut up to \$500 million in funding for Michigan police.<sup>57</sup>

An ad from Tim Ryan stated:

“I love serving my community as sheriff. So when J.D. Vance calls law enforcement corrupt, it makes me angry. That makes my job harder. So does J.D.’s plan to eliminate an agency that combats violent drug traffickers. Tim Ryan knows defunding the police is ridiculous. He’s brought back \$467 million to put good cops on the street. I trust Tim Ryan to keep our communities safe.”<sup>58</sup>

And one from Marcy Kaptur claimed:

“I love America, and I want to see us come together in what I call the Big Middle. It’s wrong for extremists like J. R. Majewski to threaten violence, or

**“ Democrats in close races simply ran great, poll-tested ads echoing Republican talking points.**

to join an angry mob that assaults our police. But the far left is wrong, too. We should always stand for the national anthem, and defunding the police is ridiculous. I’m honored to support law enforcement. I’m Marcy Kaptur and I approve this message because when America comes together in the Big Middle, we are at our very best.”<sup>59</sup>

When the Republicans’ specific opponent had publicly espoused something very unpopular — like bail reform in New York, for example, or defunding the police in Wisconsin — crime was effective as a campaign focus. If not, however, it was a middling issue at best. Outside of these cases, few voters blamed Democrats for rising crime, few ranked it as a top issue, and even when they did, Republicans often won those voters by only bare margins.



# BAD ABORTION MESSAGING

In most midterms, voters respond to the major policy changes the ruling party has implemented over the previous two years. The voters' response is typically somewhat negative, and, as a result, the election swings toward whichever party has been out of power.

In 2022, however, the underlying circumstance was different. Arguably, the single biggest national policy change in the previous two years was a conservative one: the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, which returned decision-making over abortion policy to the people and their elected representatives.

Democrats took advantage of this change in basic midterm dynamics almost immediately, putting abortion front and center in their campaign messaging. Meanwhile, most Republicans, for various reasons, deliberately chose not to respond. This was a massive mistake. It was almost immediately apparent that the *Dobbs* decision was having an enormous effect on the election — turnout in Democrat primaries spiked, Democrats started winning special elections, and the generic ballot shifted away from the GOP. And yet party elites continued to urge candidates to remain silent.

It was clear that Republicans needed to have some sort of answer to the question of what they planned to do about abortion. Rallying around specific legislation would have been the ideal response. But GOP leadership opposed the idea, choosing instead to insist that they wouldn't do anything. Some claimed, incorrect-

ly,<sup>60</sup> that the Court had relegated the matter exclusively to the states.<sup>61</sup> Others suggested regulating abortion would be beyond Congress' constitutional authority — an assertion blatantly contradicted by the fact that nearly every single congressional Republican had previously co-sponsored legislation restricting abortion nationally after 20 weeks.<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, Republicans sought to avoid the issue on the campaign trail, while Democrats went on an all-out offensive. According to AdImpact, Republican ads on abortion had outnumbered Democrat ads right up until the *Dobbs* decision was leaked.<sup>63</sup> Almost immediately afterward, the number of Democrat abortion ads skyrocketed while the number of Republican ads dropped to near zero. In the final days of the election, AdImpact was counting nearly 140,000 ad airings from Democrats on abortion, with fewer than 10,000 abortion ads from Republican candidates.<sup>64</sup> Ultimately, Democrats spent nearly half a billion dollars on abortion advertising — more than any other issue area.<sup>65</sup> According to Wesleyan Media Project, abortion appeared in more than a third of Democratic ads in federal races this cycle (AdImpact puts this number at 44 percent),<sup>66</sup> compared to only 2 percent of Republican ads.<sup>67</sup>

Republicans' ad deficit in certain swing states was even more abysmal. In Pennsylvania, abortion was mentioned in *zero percent* of pro-Republican Senate race ads, while it was featured in about a quarter of pro-Democrat

ads. In Arizona, nearly 30 percent of Democrat Senate race ads mentioned abortion, compared to less than 10 percent of pro-Republican ads (and there were not very many pro-Republican ads to begin with).

Despite Republican strategists' apparent hopes, however, voters did not simply forget about abortion policy. Exit polls showed they cared a lot — for example, CNN's exit poll showed that 27 percent of voters said that abortion was the most important issue to their vote, compared to 31 percent for inflation. Only 11 percent of voters said crime.

It is clear from the results that actually passing pro-life legislation was not harmful electorally. Ron DeSantis enacted a 15-week abortion ban and won Florida by almost 20 points. Marco Rubio signed on to similar federal legislation and also won his race easily. Brian Kemp signed a heartbeat bill in Georgia and defeated a well-funded Democrat in a state previously carried by Joe Biden. Greg Abbott banned abortion at six weeks in Texas and won by 12.

The reason why these Republicans, and others like them, were not hurt by their abortion positions is not rocket science. In just about every poll on the issue, a gestational limit (at almost any stage) is a more popular policy than the one virtually every Democrat is on record supporting: legalized abortion up until birth. In general, around 72 percent of voters (including 60 percent of Democrats) think their state should ban abortion after 15 weeks or earlier.<sup>68</sup> About half of voters would only allow abortion up to 6 weeks, or only in cases of rape and incest.<sup>69</sup> A generic Republican supporting a 15-week ban outperforms a Democrat supporting abortion until birth in swing states by about 20 points.<sup>70</sup> Even in relatively blue Virginia, a 15-week ban with exceptions is supported by

61 percent of likely voters (including 55 percent of Democrats).<sup>71</sup>

While only about 15 percent of the country supports the Democrats' abortion-until-birth policy, the median voter is more than comfortable with restrictions. According to the most recent polling, 59% of voters support Congress passing legislation that would prohibit abortions at 15 weeks of pregnancy, with exceptions, while allowing states to pass even more protective laws. Only 31% oppose such a bill.<sup>72</sup>

In September 2022, Lindsey Graham offered precisely this bill, introducing legislation to ban abortion nationally at 15 weeks with exceptions.<sup>73</sup> But rather than lining up in support, as the polling would recommend, many in the Republican establishment panicked instead. Numerous GOP senators publicly undermined the bill,<sup>74</sup> while only nine signed on as co-sponsors. Meanwhile, a handful of prominent pro-lifers sneered at the bill for not going far enough, putting its potential Republican supporters in a difficult position.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, the GOP opportunity to rally around a popular position on abortion was squandered. Instead, this infighting allowed Democrats to set the contrast, which they eagerly did. In the universal narrative proclaimed by Democrat ads, their party supported reproductive freedom (at least until viability), while Republicans wanted to jail rape victims and let women with ectopic pregnancies die. Democrat candidates portrayed themselves as moderates on the issue, while making their GOP opponents out as the extremists.

Perusing the Democrats' top abortion attack ads on Google, nearly every single one of them focuses on abortion in the case of rape or incest, or to save the life of the mother.<sup>76</sup> For example, Democrat ads in Arizona claimed Blake Masters "would ban abortion without



exceptions” and that he had “a simple agenda for the Senate: ‘Absolutely no abortions.’ [...] No exceptions, no matter the circumstances.”<sup>77</sup> Herschel Walker, alleged a Georgia ad, “wants a complete ban on abortions. No exceptions for survivors of rape or incest. No exceptions to save a woman’s life.”<sup>78</sup> Similar messages can be found in races nationwide: “Did you know Tim Michels wants to criminalize abortion, even for pregnant rape victims?”<sup>79</sup> Tudor Dixon “would ban abortion with no exceptions for rape and incest” and “said no exceptions for the health of the mother.”<sup>80</sup> All of these attacks were aired on Google millions of times. The attacks on Michels and Dixon were shown more than 20 million times.

GOP candidates who staked out a position of sending the abortion issue to the states fared no better. Democrats had only to slightly reframe their ads: Adam Laxalt would “let states outlaw [abortion], even for victims of rape and incest.”<sup>81</sup> Mehmet Oz “supports letting politi-

cians totally ban abortion, with no exceptions for rape, incest, or to save a woman’s life.”<sup>82</sup> Don Bolduc “applauded letting states end abortion without exceptions.”<sup>83</sup> On and on it went.

In the aftermath of this relentless assault, some analysts have argued Republican candidates lost because *they* made abortion central to their campaigns, and that the only rational Republican response is to avoid pursuing any restrictions on abortion.<sup>84</sup> However, this obviously distorts the dynamics of these races. In voters’ minds, Dixon wasn’t for any old abortion restriction — and certainly wasn’t running on a 15-week ban. In the absence of effective GOP counter-messaging, voters only heard the Democrats’ version of the story: that Dixon wanted to ban abortion in cases of rape, incest, or danger to the life of the mother. And voters *did* hear this message, over and over and over again.

When, as in Michigan, the Democrat is able to run nearly ten times more ads than their GOP opponent in September and October (and has a

recording of their opponent opposing all these abortion ban exceptions), this message will be especially hard to combat. If there is any lesson to be taken from this race, it is that Republican policy proposals in close states will have to deal with these hard cases more tactfully. The Democrats' reason for focusing on these exceptions is obvious: banning abortion in these cases is extremely unpopular.

But the Democrats' own proposals have their weaknesses as well. Very few American voters favor allowing abortion in the ninth month of pregnancy, other than elected Democrat politicians. Supporting some sort of gestational limit provides Republicans with their strongest ground, as even Democrat strategists have been willing to admit:

Soon after the decision in June, Democratic Party committees invested in detailed polling, hoping to drill down on what exact messaging worked best. There was a clear conclusion: The most potent messaging for Democrats was to keep the conversation broad by casting Republicans as supporting a national ban on abortion, and avoid a discussion over the details about gestational week limits.

"Debating weeks is not where we want to be," said Celinda Lake, the longtime Democratic pollster who conducted some of the surveys. "People are terrible at math and terrible at biology."<sup>85</sup>

On the midterm campaign trail, Democrats spoke of their own view in generalities, hoping to avoid a stance on any specific point

in the pregnancy. They declared that they "supported *Roe*." In extremely rare circumstances, they said they could potentially back some restrictions "after viability" (though with an exception for "health" written so broadly that it would essentially permit any abortion for any reason).<sup>86</sup>

But although the Democrat messaging in this cycle was certainly effective, most ways of phrasing their party's position are lackluster at best. Even the aforementioned Data for Progress study found that, on average, the Democrats' abortion messages that they tested failed to significantly improve their vote share among swing voters.<sup>87</sup> While the specific results of the study weren't released, polling elsewhere suggests the reason why: Democrats only win the issue when they have the liberty to contrast a vague ("we support reproductive autonomy") or false (viability) standard of theirs with a Republican standard that bans every single abortion, including in the most difficult cases. Almost any other Republican standard, contrasted with Democrats' support of late-term abortion, wins or draws.

For Republicans looking to rebound in future elections, the way forward on abortion is clear: Faux-federalism isn't going to work. Silence isn't going to work. Becoming pro-choice isn't going to work. The only viable strategy is to draw a contrast between Democrat extremism and GOP incrementalism at the national level. Republicans must coalesce around a specific national policy, one like Lindsey Graham's 15-week ban with exceptions. Otherwise, they will leave the door open once again for Democrats to define the contrast on the least favorable terms.





# BAD CULTURE-WAR MESSAGING

**W**hat is perhaps most mystifying about Republicans' midterm strategy is that GOP candidates largely ignored the playbook which had led the party to shocking success just a year earlier.

In 2021, despite Joe Biden's decreasing popularity, the electoral hill still looked steep for Republicans. The cycle's most high-profile elections were in states Biden had carried by double digits, and the electorates were expected to disproportionately feature high-turnout, suburbanite voters — a demographic which had been trending away from the party. According to the conventional wisdom, such fundamentals should have been too much for Republicans to overcome.

Yet, by the end of Election Night 2021, Republican Glenn Youngkin had won the Virginia governorship by 2 points in a state Biden had carried by 10 a year earlier. Moreover, Democrat incumbent Phil Murphy just squeaked by in New Jersey by 3 points, a year after Biden had won the state by 16. Similar shifts occurred down-ballot in both states as well.

While the drivers of these results were numerous and complex, there was ultimately one cause which stood out among the rest: a national focus leading into Election Day on culture-war issues, and particularly school policies and curricula relating to race, sexual orientation, and gender identity. National and local news coverage in the period leading up to the election focused heavily on parents' protests of

school boards in Virginia, and the Biden administration's labeling of those parents as domestic terrorists. In the closing weeks, much of the campaign's rhetoric centered on these issues.

Of course, it is also impossible to ignore one particular event which changed the dynamics of the race in Virginia: Terry McAuliffe's surprisingly candid admission in a debate that he didn't think parents "should be telling schools what they should teach." Youngkin immediately featured McAuliffe's slip-up in campaign ads and subsequently surged to his first lead in the polls. This was no accident — surveys at the time also showed education and CRT began to rank highly among voters' top concern, and Youngkin was winning parents of K-12 students by more than a 17-point margin, translating to a **4.6-point benefit statewide**.<sup>88</sup>

The education/culture-war issue proved to be a huge winner among other groups as well. For example, a Democrat operative in Virginia undertook a focus group of suburban women who had voted Democrat in 2017 and 2020 but had voted for Youngkin in 2021.<sup>89</sup> These women strongly disagreed with McAuliffe's statements, strongly disapproved of critical race theory, and believed that America was fundamentally a good country. Likely as a result, they nearly unanimously preferred Youngkin on the issue of education. And notably, while a significant majority of these women stated they preferred Democrat policies, a majority of them also said they felt closer to the GOP on cultural values.

According to Fox News exit polling, 25 percent of voters said the debate over critical race theory was the single most important factor in the race.<sup>90</sup> Youngkin won those voters by a whopping 43-point margin, which roughly translates to a 355,000-vote advantage. Moreover, a different exit poll found only 13 percent of voters agreed with McAuliffe’s position that parents should have little or no say in what schools teach.<sup>91</sup> Among the 52 percent of voters who said parents should have “a lot” of say, Youngkin won by 55 points.

These issues were relevant in New Jersey, too.<sup>92</sup> Schools ranked as the third-highest priority among New Jersey voters, higher than the pandemic and crime, and much of that backlash had to do with gender issues.<sup>93</sup> Democrats in the state had just passed laws mandating the teaching of left-wing sexual dogmas, which Jack Ciattarelli went out of his way to attack on

the campaign trail, making news at one event for saying, “You won’t have to deal with it when I’m governor because we’re not teaching gender ID and sexual orientation to kindergartners. We’re not teaching sodomy in sixth grade. And we’re going to roll back the LGBTQ curriculum. It goes too far.”<sup>94</sup> Despite confusion from the press (“Did anyone tell Jack Ciattarelli the primary ended on June 8?” asked Politico),<sup>95</sup> Ciattarelli’s message proved to be effective.

Despite the elite consensus in favor of transgenderism, voters in battleground states generally agree with the conservative position on gender ideology. In May 2022, American Principles Project polled voters in battleground states on culture-war issues.<sup>96</sup> We found that voters across all demographics, including some of the most difficult demographics for Republicans in recent years, aligned with cultural conservatives by large margins.

	Overall	Independents	Suburban Voters	Suburban Women
Banning biological men in women’s sports	Support +23	Support +37	Support +18	Support +8
Banning gender transition drugs and surgeries for minors	Support +22	Support +37	Support +24	Support +20
Banning teaching of sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through 3rd grade	Support +26	Support +27	Support +16	Support +8
Requiring schools to notify parents of a child’s gender identification	Support +29	Support +28	Support +26	Support +18
Requiring age verification for pornography sites	Support +62	Support +57	Support +62	Support +68

Source: American Principles Project poll, May 2022

Additionally, we found that these numbers either remained strong or *improved* when we pitted the conservative position against the most formidable Democrat message. For example, when we contrasted the conservative message opposing gender transitions for children against the left-wing argument that denying children medical transition will lead them to commit suicide, even suburban women agreed with the conservative view by a nearly 30-point margin. Much recent polling from media outlets and other groups have also found opposition to allowing minors to transition, despite framing the question in left-wing terms.<sup>97</sup>

Beyond polling, American Principles Project has also been able to prove the effectiveness of these issues in elections through our own campaigns. Following our 2022 midterm effort, which involved millions of dollars in advertising in a handful of key toss-up races, we commissioned a randomized controlled trial, which compared Republican vote share among the swing voters who saw our messages attacking Democrats' support for transgenderism with Republican vote share among similar voters who did not see our ads.

The trial found that our messages moved voters anywhere from 2.9 to 7.2 points towards the Republican candidate. Surprisingly, this effect was extremely high among *unmarried women*, who moved 9 points towards Republicans after seeing our ads. Ultimately, our campaign netted Republican candidates about 130,000 votes across Arizona, Nevada, and Wisconsin. Our findings suggest that, on a larger scale, transgender issues have the potential to dramatically change the game for GOP candidates in state and national elections.

Testing messages with randomized controlled trials is extremely useful — it allows us to cut through the popular narratives and actu-

ally see the effects of advertising directly. While conventional wisdom, even among Republicans, holds that these sorts of culture-war issues appeal only to the conservative base, our results show that these types of messages are incredibly persuasive to swing voters as well. In retrospect, it shouldn't be surprising that the same issues that set ablaze Loudoun County, Virginia — an extremely wealthy, highly educated exurb of Washington, D.C. — prove to be popular among suburban swing voters everywhere, in addition to the more stereotypical parts of the Republican base.

But if any doubt remained after 2021 about the effectiveness of culture-war issues for Republicans, Ron DeSantis' midterm performance in Florida should have put those to rest. No governor in the country has fought more aggressively or publicly against woke ideology on gender and race than DeSantis. In the weeks and months leading up to the election, DeSantis banned the teaching of gender identity and sexual orientation from kindergarten through third grade, went after Disney for opposing the bill, effectively banned gender transitions for minors, and fired a prosecutor for refusing to enforce the law. After all that, he won formerly purple Florida by nearly 20 points.

DeSantis' victory was even more conspicuous given the fact that Republican candidates elsewhere campaigned far less on culture-war issues. Critical race theory, for example, appeared in only around 0.5 to 1.7 percent of ads, even in gubernatorial races.<sup>98</sup> And very few candidates touched transgender issues either. Apart from some aggressive ads from Marco Rubio,<sup>99</sup> as well as a few from Herschel Walker<sup>100</sup> and Blake Masters,<sup>101</sup> gender issues were nearly absent from the most important, toss-up races.

As noted at the outset, it is perplexing that so many Republican candidates chose not to





engage their Democrat opponents on these culture-war issues, only one year removed from an election in which those very issues were critical to improving GOP margins by double-digits. Why that successful playbook was ignored is difficult to say for certain. Evidence exists, of course, that GOP consultants still see using these issues as primarily a base-turnout method while continuing to miss their swing-voter appeal.<sup>102</sup> But regardless of the reason, Republicans will need to shift gears if they want to win in 2024.

As demonstrated above, Republicans' preferred economic focus clearly did not resonate. Voters just aren't as concerned about big-spending bills as the GOP establishment is. Republicans need to understand how much voters care about even the kinds of culture-war issues that D.C.-types consider most gauche. As *The New York Times*' Nate Cohn has pointed out:

In early March 2021, a Morning Consult/Politico poll found that nearly half of Republicans said they had heard

"a lot" about the news that the Seuss estate had decided to stop selling six books it deemed had offensive imagery. That was a bigger share than had heard a lot about the \$1.9 trillion dollar stimulus package enacted into law that very week.<sup>103</sup>

This wasn't just limited to Republicans either. While 41 percent of independents had heard a lot about the stimulus package, a similar number (37 percent) had also heard a lot about the Dr. Seuss story.<sup>104</sup> Voters across the board are hearing just as much about even minor culture-war spats as they are about major spending bills.

This should be good news. On these types of issues, more so than on the budget or other economic issues, Republicans have an overwhelming advantage — their positions are popular, while their opponents' positions are not. GOP candidates should take the opportunity and start pitching their cultural message more aggressively. They cannot afford to leave their best weapon unused.



# ADVERTISING DISADVANTAGE

**A**lthough, as we have argued up to this point, poor persuasion efforts were a significant factor in Republicans' 2022 underperformance, there was also one tactical area where the GOP fell critically short: spending on campaign ads.

Looking at the results of various races, it's easy to spot a correlation between Republicans' performance compared to 2020 and their advertising dominance, or lack thereof, in October. If more of the television ads in October were pro-Republican than pro-Democrat (as was the case with DeSantis, Rubio, Kemp, Abbott, Mike DeWine, and Henry McMaster), the Republican candidate did very well. If, however, the GOP candidate was in a competitive election and fewer than 30 percent of October ads were pro-Republican, that candidate did poorly.

In some of the most important Senate races, Republicans were thoroughly buried on the television airwaves. According to the Wesleyan Media Project: "The difference in ad sponsorship is quite large in several states. In Arizona, for instance, 88,400 ads aired that backed Democrat Mark Kelly during the general election period compared to 33,000 that backed Republican candidate Blake Masters. In Georgia, there were 93,000 airings that backed Democrat Raphael Warnock and 47,000 that supported Republican Herschel Walker." In Pennsylvania, Fetterman seems to have held at least a 10,000 ad advantage. Likewise, Democrats had the

advertising advantage in all lean-Democratic and almost all toss-up House seats.<sup>105</sup>

The situation in the digital ad space wasn't much better, and was sometimes downright abysmal: "In Georgia, for example, Warnock's campaign spent well above \$6 million [on Google and Facebook ads] while his Republican opponent, Herschel Walker, spent around \$1 million."<sup>106</sup>

As AdImpact put it, Democrats held a "large advantage" in advertising overall:

In House, Senate, and Gubernatorial general elections in 2022, Democrat candidates and issue groups outspent their Republican counterparts by \$390M (\$2.11B D vs. \$1.72B R). However, closer examination causes further concern on the Republican side. Republican Issue Groups outspent their Democratic counterparts by about \$100M (\$1.06B vs. \$986M), but Democratic candidates outspent Republican candidates by more than double (\$1.06BM vs. \$498M). Because of the advantageous rates afforded to candidates, this translated to Democrats in House, Senate, and Gubernatorial general elections being able to run nearly 25% more broadcast airings than Republicans. Republican side. Republican Issue Groups outspent their Democratic counterparts by about \$100M

(\$1.06B vs. \$986M), but Democratic candidates outspent Republican candidates by more than double (\$1.06BM vs. \$498M). Of the top 10 highest spending candidates this cycle, 7 were Democrats and 3 Republicans.<sup>107</sup>

Ad disparities also go a long way towards explaining some of the gaps between gover-

nor and Senate candidates in various states. In Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, and Ohio, gubernatorial candidates did better in part because they were able to air more ads than their senatorial counterparts. In states like Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, where the situation was reversed, the Republican Senate candidates did better.

State	Broadcast Ad Share in October		Performance vs. Trump 2020	
	Gov.	Sen.	Gov.	Sen.
Arizona	30.1%	23.9%	-0.6	-4.9
Florida	80.9%	56.8%	+19.4	+16.4
Georgia	53.3%	41.2%	+7.5	-0.9
Nevada	42.6%	40.4%	+1.5	-0.9
Ohio	67.3%	43.8%	+25	+6.6
Pennsylvania	6.2%	42%	-14.8	-4.9
Wisconsin	36.4%	44.1%	-3.4	+1

Source: Wesleyan Media Project

Republicans need to be able to at least somewhat even the odds if they are going to have more success in 2024. Part of this will require more hard-dollar fundraising, as candidates have access to better ad rates than outside groups. Republicans' reliance on outside groups for advertising meant that pro-Republican ads cost significantly more to air on average than pro-Democrat ads in 2022.

Republicans will also have to allocate resources better. Nine million dollars would have done far more to help Republicans' Senate chances if it had been spent in Arizona rather

than, as Mitch McConnell decided, defending Lisa Murkowski against a Republican challenger in Alaska.

Campaign fundraising and ad spending are such obvious components of political campaigns that they are often easy to overlook when assessing results. However, to win the next election, Republicans cannot afford to overlook the obvious. Even more than turnout operations or ballot harvesting, the GOP's ad strategy and spending must be improved if the party desires any chance to turn around its underperformances in crucial, toss-up races.

# CONCLUSION

**D**espite seemingly good circumstances and strong turnout, Republicans did miserably in the 2022 midterms. They took the same demographics as 2021, a similar-to-better turnout advantage, added in a worse economy, and somehow got a worse result.

The establishment GOP's plan — an overwhelming focus on the economy and crime, while dropping the culture war and refusing to counteract the left's abortion messaging — was a failure.

Democrats did a better job allocating resources to close elections and had a huge advertising advantage. Republicans will need to

mitigate that advertising disparity in the future in order to remain competitive.

Even worse, however, and more concerning for the GOP, is the fact that the Democrat message in close races was simply more effective than the Republican one. Democrats ran on economic populism and tried to moderate their social-issue stances. Republican candidates, meanwhile, ran on vague economic hawkery and social-issue silence. The results speak for themselves.

What makes the midterm results especially frustrating is that Republicans had easy solutions at their fingertips. It would have been



simple, and effective, to contrast a 15-week national abortion ban (with exceptions) to the abortion-on-demand-until-birth regime every Democrat had publicly supported. It would have been natural to build on the success of 2021 by doubling down on the cultural war on issues of education, critical race theory, and gender identity. And up until a moment ago, the Republican Party had been the leaders on the populist economic message that Democrats were allowed to so easily co-opt.

On each of these points, the more common-sense course of action was intentionally rejected by national GOP leadership. They wanted to talk about crime. They wanted to talk about the deficit. They were determined to avoid wading into abortion politics and culture warring. They were desperate, in the first election after Trump's presidency, to return to the good old days of Romney-Ryan and the "truce strategy."

But this strategy hadn't worked in the good old days either. As we argued a decade ago in our autopsy of the 2012 presidential election,

the old-school GOP message on economics simply doesn't work, and the real opportunity for the Republican Party is with social issues.<sup>108</sup>

If the Republicans were unconvinced by our argument in 2013, the intervening years should have proven our point. Trump ran on a populist economic message and a hard-line on social issues, and, in a shock to the establishment, won both the party nomination and the White House in 2016. Glenn Youngkin and Jack Ciattarelli took advantage of a culture-war firestorm in 2021 and each moved their state around 12 points to the right. The only significant bright spot of the 2022 midterms came in Florida — where the single most aggressive culture-warring GOP governor won his formerly purple state by 19 points.

Republicans have the playbook to emerge victorious in 2024. They have seen it work many times now, and conversely seen the party establishment's own preferred strategy fail miserably time and time again, most recently this last November. It's time for the GOP to stop making excuses, and start playing to win.



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