



DEFEATING THEY/THEM



**How the Republican Party Learned to
Stop Worrying and Love the Culture War**



**AMERICAN
PRINCIPLES
PROJECT**

WHY DID REPUBLICANS LOSE

in 2022? We covered this at length in our report, *The Failed Red Wave: Lessons from the GOP's 2022 Letdown*:

“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... 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.”¹

Ultimately, Republicans left votes on the table by refusing to run campaign ads exposing the Democrats’ extremism on social issues. To win in 2024, we argued, the Republican Party would need to learn to stop worrying and love the culture war.

And they did.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. The Trump campaign’s closing message argued that Kamala Harris was a radical on transgender issues. It worked.
2. It worked because it is persuasive. The Trump position is extremely popular and mainstream, while the Harris position is extremely unpopular and out of touch.
3. Democrats realize that it worked, but because of the current tenuous makeup of their coalition, they are powerless to do anything about it.

Donald Trump broke the establishment consensus on how to win a national campaign not just once, as he first did in 2016, but now twice.

He did it by cutting through the malaise of the Republican consensus and delivering for his voters. But what made Trump’s 2024 campaign different from the previous two was an explicit embrace of the culture wars: specifically, pushing back against the transgender insanity the Democrats have embraced over the past eight years.

Trump ran heavily on transgender issues beginning in the primary and continuing in speeches and comments throughout the campaign. He repeatedly promised to ban sex changes for minors, get men out of women’s sports, and eliminate transgender indoctrination in public

¹ https://americanprinciplesproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Failed-Red-Wave-Final_web.pdf

schools.² He attacked Biden, and then Harris, over the Democrats' insane radicalism on transgender ideology.

Trump and Republicans Go on Offense

It was on September 10 that the Trump message on transgender issues first grabbed national attention. There, in his first and only debate with Harris, Trump attacked the vice president for supporting taxpayer-funded sex change surgeries for prisoners, including illegal aliens. Commentators were alarmed by the claim, and even more alarmed by the subsequent fact-checks showing that it was true. A little more than a week later, the Trump campaign began airing ads on the issue³:

NARRATOR: Kamala supports taxpayer funded sex changes for prisoners.

HARRIS: Surgery, um –

INTERVIEWER: ...for prisoners?

HARRIS: ...for prisoners. Every transgender inmate in the prison system would have access.

NARRATOR: It's hard to believe, but it's true. Even the liberal media was shocked. Kamala supports taxpayer funded sex changes for prisoners and illegal aliens.

HARRIS: Every transgender inmate would have access.

NARRATOR: Kamala is for they/them. President Trump is for you.

As *The Wall Street Journal* reported, “[the Trump campaign’s] ads until then had focused on economic pressures and portraying Harris as overly liberal on crime and immigration. But polling showed the transgender topic was hitting home. Ads were tested with online focus groups and the reception was huge, elevating the issue above others.”⁴

Trump began bringing up transgender issues more prominently in his speeches and interviews, as well as in his ads. In mid-October, some 40 percent of the campaign’s ads focused on issues of “gender identity” according to the Wesleyan Media Project, more than on immigration, the economy, or jobs.⁵

The focus on transgender issues continued through the final days of the campaign. Women’s sports featured prominently in the campaign’s final ad, an all-out assault on woke: under the Biden-Harris administration “men could beat up women and win medals, but there was no prize for the guy who got up every day to do his job.”⁶ And Trump raised similar issues during his final rally: “[Democrats] have horrible policy. [...] They can have transgender operations at any age, any time you want. They can be pushing men playing in women’s sports. Because [Kamala]’s just a vessel, and Joe Biden was just a vessel. It’s a group of very powerful people that are probably people that hate our country and want to destroy our country.”⁷

All in all, as *The New York Times* reported, “[t]he Trump campaign spent more than \$37 million on television ads that invoked transgender issues, nearly 20 percent of its overall ad budget according to data provided by AdImpact, an

2 <https://www.donaldjtrump.com/agenda47/president-trumps-plan-to-protect-children-from-left-wing-gender-insanity>

3 <https://adm0.page.link/U9nF>

4 <https://www.wsj.com/politics/elections/trump-ads-transgender-rights-harris-election-b287c9d8>

5 <https://mediaproject.wesleyan.edu/releases-102424/>

6 <https://host2.adimpact.com/admo/viewer/d5ae1bbb-a144-41ec-a21f-ad350a7fb8c9>

7 <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2024-11-05/he-said-she-said-trump-harris-make-starkly-different-closing-arguments-as-their-campaigns-end>

organization that tracks political ad placement and spending.”⁸

It wasn’t just in the presidential race either. In late October, *Axios* reported that Senate Republicans and groups supporting them had spent “over \$77 million on ads about transgender issues in races in 10 states, according to AdImpact data as of Oct. 24. [...] The Mitch McConnell-linked Senate Leadership Fund has spent \$32 million in Ohio alone, hitting incumbent Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown on voting for ‘allowing trans biological men in girls locker rooms’ and ‘sex change surgery for kids.’”⁹

According to our own analysis of the AdImpact data, serious Republican ad campaigns about transgender issues on broadcast TV were already underway before the presidential debate in

Texas, Montana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. In late September to early October, a similar campaign began in Wisconsin. More began throughout October in Michigan (by 10/17), Nevada (10/23) and very late (10/30) in Arizona.

Republican Ads Shifted Votes

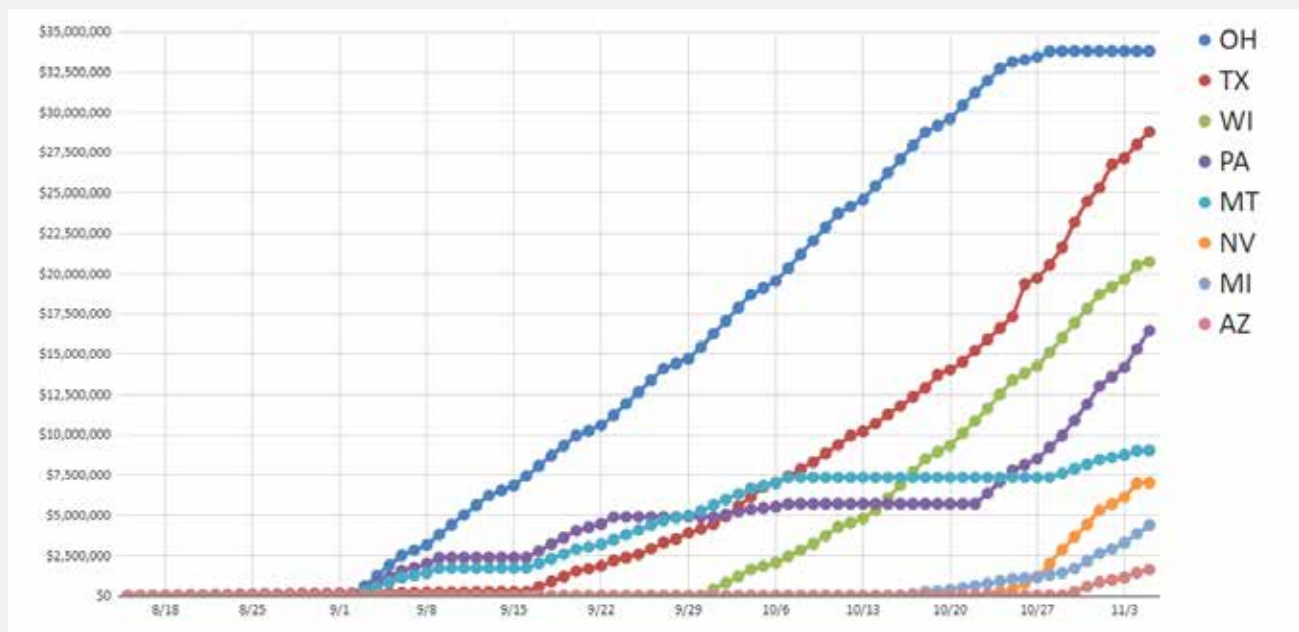
In early October, *The New York Times* reported that Democrat strategists were putting on a brave face in public, but privately “conced[ing] that the transgender attacks are taking a toll in some races. The most aired Trump ad in recent weeks was rated as one of his campaign’s more effective in September in some Democratic testing, according to results reviewed by *The Times*.”¹⁰

8 <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/20/us/politics/presidential-campaign-transgender-rights.html>

9 <https://www.axios.com/2024/10/29/republicans-senate-trans-rights-ads>

10 <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/08/us/politics/trump-republican-transgender-ads.html>

BROADCAST TV SPENDING BY SENATE REPUBLICANS ON TRANSGENDER ISSUES



Source: Data from AdImpact

Left-wing activists who ran randomized controlled trials to study the message's effect found the first Trump ad alone moved voters towards Trump by somewhere between 1.3 and 2.7 points. As a reminder, Trump won Wisconsin by 0.9 points, Michigan by 1.4, the national popular vote by 1.5, Pennsylvania by 1.7, and Georgia by 2.2.

Our own post-election polling found that people remembered the message and that it moved them towards Trump. In an APP-commissioned survey conducted by Cygnal, we asked voters and non-voters whether they had heard about Harris supporting a number of policies, and then asked whether hearing it had made them more likely to vote for Trump, made them more likely to vote for Harris, or made no difference. In every case, the messages proved beneficial to Trump, often by significant margins.

Republican strategists have suggested in the past that transgender issues might work to fire up the base but would be useless for persuasion in a general election. This couldn't be further from the truth. According to reporting from *The Wall Street Journal*, the Trump messages worked especially well with persuadable voters, suburban women, and Hispanic men.¹¹ And data released since the election suggests that these issues were some of the most crucial for swing voters this election.

An analysis from Blueprint 2024, a Democratic firm, tested which arguments against voting for Harris were most compelling to voters.¹² The report found that the third most compelling reason to voters as a whole was essentially the same message as the one in Trump's "they/them" ad campaign: "Kamala Harris is focused more on cultural issues like transgender issues rather than helping the middle class." Even more remarkably, they found that this argument ranked first overall among swing voters, performing even better than messages about immigration ("Too many



The Washington Post

Republicans lean into anti-transgender message in closing week

MSNBC

Anti-trans attacks take center stage in Trump's closing pitch

The New York Times

Trump and Republicans Bet Big on Anti-Trans Ads Across the Country

11 <https://www.wsj.com/politics/elections/trump-ads-transgender-rights-harris-election-b287c9d8>

12 <https://blueprint2024.com/polling/why-trump-reasons-11-8/>

APP POST-ELECTION POLLING

Do you recall seeing, reading, or hearing anything during the election...	VOTERS		NON-VOTERS	
	Yes	Trump Gain	Yes	Trump Gain
...about Kamala Harris supporting taxpayer-funded sex-change procedures for prisoners?	57%	+38	31%	+37
...that Kamala Harris is for they/them and Trump is for you?	53%	+26	33%	+12
...about Kamala Harris supporting sex-change procedures for children under the age of 18 who identify as transgender?	49%	+37	29%	+34
...about Kamala Harris supporting policies to allow men to play in women's sports?	49%	+31	33%	+4

Source: Cygnal/American Principles Project Poll, November 2024

immigrants illegally crossed the border under the Biden-Harris administration”) or inflation (“Inflation was too high under the Biden-Harris administration”).

Swing voters didn’t just find it a compelling message in the abstract; it seems to have actually affected their vote choice. A separate analysis from Blueprint 2024 found that whether a swing voter knew or believed the Trump

message about Harris’s transgender extremism was one of the biggest dividing lines between whether they ended up voting for Harris or for Trump.¹³

Eighty-three percent of swing voters who chose Trump knew that Harris supported using taxpayer dollars to fund sex-change surgeries for detained illegal aliens, compared to just 40 percent of swing voters who chose Harris. In a

¹³ <https://blueprint2024.com/polling/post-mortem-2-nov/>

similar vein, 77 percent of Trump swing voters knew that Harris supported “allowing children under 18 to transition genders without informing their parents,” compared to just 29 percent of Harris swing voters.

These were two of the top five differences between Trump and Harris swing voters in the poll — a 43-point and 48-point split, respectively. The only bigger differences between these groups were whether they knew Harris’s position on letting criminal illegal aliens stay in the country (49 points), on defunding the police (53 points), or on allowing abortion up until the day of birth (53 points).

Many on the left, and some on the right, have insinuated that the only reason the ads worked was because it showed Harris’s misplaced priorities and not because of the actual content of her policies. Some have previously suggested, likewise, that if a Republican runs too many attack ads on gender issues, voters will punish them for focusing on the “culture war” rather than on the real “kitchen table issues” voters care about. Neither of these claims are true.

First of all, Republican attacks really did hurt the Democrats. Despite the fact that Trump’s campaign, and not Harris’s, ran ads on transgender issues, it was Harris who got the blame. In late October, 41 percent of registered voters thought that Harris was focusing too much on transgender issues, compared to 26 percent who said the same of Trump.¹⁴

As *Yahoo! News* put it:

“Vice President Kamala Harris rarely, if ever, brought up transgender rights

during her 2024 presidential bid — but President-elect Donald Trump did, devoting nearly 20% of his ad budget to the issue. That \$37 million investment seems to have paid off. According to a new Yahoo News/YouGov poll, nearly three-quarters of Americans who voted this year (74%) say they heard either “a lot” or “some” about Harris’s “plan” to “protect the rights of transgender people” — far more than say the same about seven other policies that Harris actually campaigned on, such as lowering the cost of living for the middle class (51%) and securing the U.S. border with Mexico (36%).”¹⁵

Secondly, the attacks worked because Harris was *saying something really unpopular*. Although in polling many more voters chose the economy as their top priority rather than transgender issues, it would be a mistake to assume from this that nobody should spend time attacking the Democrats’ extremism. If you had a Democrat on record supporting nuclear war, for example, you wouldn’t hold off on an attack just because only four percent of voters chose foreign policy as their top issue.¹⁶

The misunderstanding stems from the fact that political elites still do not recognize exactly *how much* the general public hates the Democratic position on transgenderism — from women’s sports, to sex-change procedures for minors, to bathrooms and locker rooms, to public indoctrination in middle school, and so on.

14 https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/econTabReport_NgtZTja.pdf

15 <https://www.yahoo.com/news/yahoo-newsyougov-poll-74-of-voters-heard-about-harris-plan-to-protect-transgender-people-more-than-almost-any-other-campaign-issue-130058273.html>

16 <https://www.cnn.com/election/2024/exit-polls/national-results/general/president/0>

The Democrat Conundrum

Democrats know that this Trump message works, but they can't do anything about it. When they saw how effective the Trump ads were, the Harris campaign tested a number of response ads. None of them worked. Over "sharp internal debate," they decided to drop the ads and pivot to the economy instead.¹⁷

The Wall Street Journal reported the fruits of that decision: "Harris had an opening to address one of those ads, which focused on her support for taxpayer-funded transgender surgeries for federal inmates, during her combative Fox News interview in mid-October. But Harris ended up dismissing the importance of voters' concerns on the issue. 'As it relates to the biggest issues that affect the American people, it's really quite remote,' Harris said in the interview."¹⁸

The decision to avoid the issue was criticized by activists and Democrat elites at the time. They believed that Harris's record on gender issues was already too moderate, and that she should have leaned in further. In one article covering the Trump ads, MSNBC noted critically that "[t]he vice president — who does not have a stellar record on trans rights — has declined to voice the kind of support for trans people that she had just months ago, when she was running at the bottom of the Democratic ticket."¹⁹

Democrats weren't able to run away from these issues in Senate races either, although some candidates certainly tried. In our analysis of AdImpact data, we found that Democrat

campaigns ran response ads in Ohio, Texas, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. But none of them were able to come up with a better response than to lie about their position. To remove any ambiguities in 2026 and beyond, it will be essential for the Republican House and Senate to hold tough votes to put vulnerable Democrats on the record on women's sports, sex changes for kids, woke indoctrination for children in schools, and more.

The Biden team apparently realized how big of a liability the issue could turn out to be months ago. In July, a Biden spokesperson tried to disavow transgender surgeries for minors — a sure sign that they were seeing the same poor polling numbers. But the White House was forced to recant after an outcry from far-left activists.²⁰

And even now, the Democrats are powerless to disavow their radical agenda on transgenderism. After the election, when Reps. Tom Suozzi and Seth Moulton sounded the alarm on their party's extremism — though only by meekly suggesting that they should back off on putting men in women's sports — they were roundly condemned.²¹ In Moulton's case, he was criticized within days by many of the most prominent Democrats in his state, and these comments earned both congressmen a stern talking-to from Jen Psaki on MSNBC.²²

The reality is pretty brutal for the Democrats' future political prospects: far-left activists are in charge of their party, and they won't let even their most vulnerable incumbents moderate on these issues one iota. Thus, Democrats find

17 <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/20/us/politics/presidential-campaign-transgender-rights.html>

18 <https://www.wsj.com/politics/elections/trump-ads-transgender-rights-harris-election-b287c9d8>

19 <https://www.msnbc.com/top-stories/latest/trump-anti-trans-attacks-harris-election-rcna176818>

20 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/jul/17/biden-administration-transgender-surgeries-minors>

21 <https://www.the-independent.com/news/world/americas/us-politics/democrats-trans-athletes-suozzi-moulton-trump-b2643882.html>

22 <https://www.msnbc.com/inside-with-jen-psaki/watch/jen-psaki-democrats-are-learning-the-wrong-message-on-trans-youth-224699973900>

themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place. Who will they side with: their extreme base or the vast majority of voters? What will vulnerable incumbents like Sen. Gary Peters or Sen. Jon Ossoff do? What can they do when their activists refuse to allow them to stand up and do the right thing?

If Republicans want to continue to exploit this weakness to win more elections in the future, they will certainly have the opportunity. There is no reason to be scared of this issue now – it’s probably what earned them a trifecta. House and Senate leadership should confidently call votes on a number of transgender issues, including protecting women’s sports and women’s private spaces, banning sex changes for kids, and defunding any and all taxpayer funding from going toward the predatory transgender industry. In fact, it would be political malpractice not to.



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POST-ELECTION POLL: TRANSGENDER ISSUES

	Yes	No	Not Sure
Should biological males who identify as women be allowed to participate in women’s sports events?	13%	75%	11%
Should it be against the law to provide children under 18 with puberty blockers, drugs, and/or surgery to help them transition from one gender to another?	72%	18%	10%

Source: Napolitan News/RMG Research Poll, November 2024



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