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## Democratic governor pushes back against transgender-related attacks by GOP in Kentucky campaign

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Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear sits for an interview in Versailles, Ky., Wednesday, May 17, 2023. Beshear is pushing back against Republican efforts to cast him as an advocate of gender reassignment surgery for minors. The Democratic governor says in a new ad that his detractors have misrepresented his position. Beshear says he has always opposed such surgeries for minors. (AP Photo/Timothy D. Easley, File)

FRANKFORT, Ky. (AP) — Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear is pushing back hard against Republican efforts to cast him as an advocate of gender reassignment surgery for minors, saying his detractors have misrepresented his position and invoking his Christian faith and support for parental rights to explain why he vetoed a measure that banned gender-affirming care for children.

Beshear, a Democrat seeking a second term in a race that could test the political potency of Republican messaging on transgender issues, said in an interview that he has always opposed gender reassignment surgery for children.

“My position on this has always been clear,” Beshear said. “I have never supported gender reassignment surgery for minors, and they don’t happen in Kentucky.”

It’s a direct response to what he says is a patently false Republican narrative that suggested he supports such surgeries. The Courier Journal has reported there is no record of such surgeries for minors happening in Kentucky.

The GOP attacks, coming from groups backing Republican gubernatorial nominee Daniel Cameron and from the candidate himself, were meant to cut into Beshear’s popularity in the conservative-leaning Bluegrass State.

Kentucky's showdown for governor is one of the most closely watched campaigns this year and could provide insight about voter sentiment heading into 2024 elections for the White House and Congress.

A new ad released Monday by the Beshear campaign doubles down on his previous statements opposing the surgeries for minors and his campaign's denunciation of the GOP attack. And it reflects the governor's determination to not cede so-called family values issues to Cameron, the state's attorney general.

Looking into the camera, Beshear invokes his Christian faith and support for parental rights to counter the drumbeat of GOP criticism he's faced in the months since he vetoed a sweeping transgender bill that included a ban on gender-affirming care for young transgender people. The veto was overridden by the state's GOP-dominated legislature.

"My faith guides me as governor and as a dad," Beshear says in the ad. "I'm a deacon in my church and I believe that all children are children of God."

In vetoing the bill, the governor said it allowed "too much government interference in personal healthcare issues and rips away the freedom of parents to make medical decisions for their children." The measure prevents trans youth from accessing puberty blockers and hormone therapy.

"When I took office, I vowed to support parents, because as parents, we know what's best for our kids, not politicians in Frankfort or Washington," Beshear says in the ad.

Tucked into the legislation was a ban on gender reassignment surgery for minors. Republican groups have used Beshear's veto as an opening to unleash the campaign attack on Beshear. In recent comments to news media outlets, the Republican Governors Association said: "If Andy Beshear doesn't support sex change surgery for minors he should have signed the bill that would ban sex change surgery for minors, plain and simple."

The Fairness Campaign, a Kentucky-based LGBTQ+ advocacy group, has never promoted such surgeries for minors, said Chris Hartman, the group's executive director.

Hartman called the Republican attack on Beshear a "gross mischaracterization" of the governor's position.

The transgender health care legislation in Kentucky was part of a national movement, with at least 20 states having enacted laws restricting or banning gender-affirming medical care for transgender minors. Most of those states face lawsuits.

Those who oppose gender-affirming care raise fears about the long-term effects treatments have on teens, argue research is limited and focus particularly on irreversible procedures such as genital surgery or mastectomies. Yet those are rare. Doctors typically guide kids toward therapy or voice coaching long before medical intervention. At that point, puberty blockers, anti-androgens that block the effects of testosterone, and hormone treatments are far more common than surgery. They have been available in the United States for more than a decade and are standard treatments backed by major doctors' organizations.

Beshear's decision to take on the GOP-driven transgender issue represents a new twist in ad strategy. He's focused on touting the state's surging economy — including record-setting economic development and historically low unemployment rates — messages that remain the central theme of his campaign.

Cameron, meanwhile, has played up social issues in his bid to unseat Beshear in November, accusing the governor of having "emboldened a radical gender ideology." In a tweet last month, the Republican nominee echoed the barrage of transgender-related attacks against the governor, saying Beshear and his

allies “believe kids should have access to sex change surgery and drugs.”

Cameron also has hammered away at Beshear’s veto of a bill last year to ban transgender girls and women from participating in school sports matching their gender identity. That veto also was overridden.

“Andy Beshear could not be further from your values than anything,” Cameron said in a recent speech.

Beshear accuses his Republican challenger of trying to stoke divisions with such talk.

"I think we're better than that, and my faith teaches me that we're supposed to love each other as ourselves, and there's no exceptions," the governor said in the interview. "I think people out there are tired of division, are tired of groups of people yelling at each other, and just want to support a candidate or want a government that tries to focus on things that are good for everyone."