

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

Republicans have spent tens of millions of dollars on the ads, part of an attempt to help them win over suburban female voters.



By Shane Goldmacher


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With just four weeks until the election, Donald J. Trump and Republican candidates nationwide are putting transgender issues at the center of their campaigns, tapping into fears about transgender women and girls in sports and about taxpayer-funded gender transitions in prisons.

Since the beginning of August, Republicans have poured more than \$65 million into television ads in more than a dozen states on these topics in some of the country's most competitive races, according to a New York Times analysis of advertising data compiled by AdImpact.

The flood of ads in races for the House, Senate and White House inflame cultural divisions and cast Democrats as outside the mainstream. They are a sign that Republican strategists believe they have found a potent third leg for their messaging stool in 2024, along with the mainstays of inflation and immigration.

Republicans are returning to a message that was tried, mostly unsuccessfully, in the 2022 midterms, as they attempt to motivate their base and curb their losses with female voters repelled by the party's stance on abortion.

Mr. Trump's most aired ad about Vice President Kamala Harris in recent weeks ends with the tagline: "Kamala is for they/them. President Trump is for you." 

In Ohio since the start of September, every ad about Senator Sherrod Brown from the leading Senate Republican super PAC has touched on transgender topics, such as accusing him of “allowing transgender biological males in girls’ sports.” Mr. Brown is one of the nation’s most vulnerable Democratic incumbents.

In Montana, five ads have deployed similar lines about transgender women in sports and bathrooms as Republicans press the case that Senator Jon Tester, another endangered Democrat up for re-election, is too liberal for the heavily Republican state.

“It’s one of the issues where Democrats are furthest from the center of the country,” said Brad Todd, a Republican ad maker who has produced commercials on transgender issues in multiple races this year. “They are doing something that is totally illogical to appease a tiny slice that is very radical in their base.”

Republicans acknowledge there are relatively few instances in which transgender athletes compete in youth sports. But they said highlighting the unwillingness of Democratic politicians to break with their party’s progressive wing on the issue was a powerful tool for depicting lawmakers as liberal or extreme.

Up and down the ballot, Democratic candidates have mostly tried to ignore the onslaught, preferring to pivot toward more favorable policy terrain, such as abortion, rather than to be dragged into public debates on transgender issues.

Privately, though, Democratic strategists concede 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.



Senator Sherrod Brown, Democrat of Ohio, has been the target of what his campaign estimated was \$37 million in attacks on transgender issues. Haiyun Jiang for The New York Times

Kelley Robinson, the president of the Human Rights Campaign, one of the country's leading L.G.B.T.Q. advocacy groups, said Republican attempts to use transgender people as political tools had failed in key races in 2022 and 2023. She predicted they would fall flat again in 2024.

"It shows that Republicans are desperate right now," Ms. Robinson said. "Instead of articulating how they're going to make the economy better or our schools safer, they're focused on sowing fear and chaos."

Attacks on what Mr. Trump calls "transgender insanity" have reliably been one of his loudest applause lines at his rallies. But now Mr. Trump has shifted significant resources to move that message far beyond his most fervent fans.

In the last three weeks, Mr. Trump's campaign alone has spent more than \$15.5 million on two television ads that resurface comments Ms. Harris made in 2019 describing her support for policies that "every transgender inmate in the prison system would have access" to gender-affirming surgery.

Chris LaCivita, one of Mr. Trump's two campaign managers, said what made the commercials potent was using Ms. Harris in her own words. "It doesn't require any hyperbole," he said. "It's her."

In that 2019 interview, Ms. Harris said she supported gender-affirming surgery for state prison inmates, and she expressed support in an American Civil Liberties Union questionnaire that year for gender-transition care, including surgery, for federal prisoners and detained migrants.

"She wants to do transgender operations on illegal aliens that are in prison," Mr. Trump said at their debate last month.

The Harris campaign declined to comment.

Transgender-focused ads have been running in key Senate races, including in Montana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas and Wisconsin. Many are from the Senate Leadership Fund, the super PAC aligned with Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the top Senate Republican.

Most of the Republican ads do not criticize the transgender community in general. Instead, they zero in on specific wedge cases, such as transgender women and girls in sports, transgender women's sharing of locker rooms, the use of taxpayer funds for gender-affirming surgery for people in prison and access to transition services for minors, such as puberty blockers.

Leigh Finke, the first transgender member of the Minnesota House of Representatives and the executive director of the Queer Equity Institute, said the more narrow focus could make the attacks especially hard to address because they were more about emotion than evidence.

"There is no way for the data to show that trans inclusion is somehow a threat," Ms. Finke, a Democrat, said, adding, "This is really an argument that is based on an impulse someone might feel. It's hard to argue with someone's feelings."



Leigh Finke of the Minnesota House of Representatives said that ads about transgender issues were hard to address because they were about emotion rather than evidence. Andrea Ellen Reed for The New York Times

Republican strategists said the focus on transgender women and girls in sports had been particularly effective with a key group of voters the party has hemorrhaged support from in recent years: college-educated suburban women.

“One of the things you see in the focus groups is the moms get really visibly angry on this issue,” said Jim McLaughlin, a Republican pollster who works for Mr. Trump and other Republican campaigns. “It’s a fairness issue. They don’t want their daughters to lose a scholarship, and they don’t want them to get hurt.”

Those are some of the recurring themes in the ads.

“It’s just wrong,” one mother says in a Republican ad in Wisconsin.

“It’s unfair and dangerous,” a grandfather says in a Republican ad in Ohio.

“Our girls’ sports are under attack,” another Montana mother says in an ad.

The Trump campaign placed its transgender ads in heavy rotation during football games in recent weeks, according to a person with knowledge of the ad-buying strategy. The popular radio host Charlamagne Tha God said on his show, “The Breakfast Club,” last week that the transgender commercial was especially striking because of when it aired.

“I don’t know if it was the backdrop of football, but when you hear the narrator say, ‘Kamala supports taxpayer-funded sex changes for prisoners’ — that one line, I was like, hell, no, I don’t want my taxpayer dollars going to that,” he said. “That ad was effective.”

It has helped Republicans that there have been high-profile examples of transgender athletes, especially the swimmer Lia Thomas, who in 2022 became the first transgender athlete to win an N.C.A.A. Division I title.

One of Ms. Thomas’s past competitors, Riley Gaines, narrated ads in the Missouri and Tennessee Senate races this year.

“Woke politics made me swim against a man,” Ms. Gaines says in the Tennessee ad.



Riley Gaines, a former collegiate swimmer, has become a prominent anti-transgender activist. She narrated ads in the Missouri and Tennessee Senate races this year.

Rebecca Noble for The New York Times

A Gallup poll in 2023 showed that only 26 percent of Americans believed transgender athletes should be able to play on sports teams that fit their gender identity — a drop from two years earlier.

At the same time, polls routinely show that a majority of Americans believe society should accept transgender people for the gender they identify with, including in five presidential battleground states surveyed by The New York Times and Siena College: Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina and Wisconsin.

That was also the case in Ohio, where 54 percent of voters agreed, and yet no one has faced a more relentless focus on the issue than Mr. Brown.

Mr. Brown's campaign has been the target of what it estimated was \$37 million in attacks on transgender issues, including all the ads from the Senate Leadership Fund since Labor Day. Reeves Oyster, a spokeswoman for Mr. Brown, said the senator agreed with the state's Republican governor, Mike DeWine, that decisions about sports participation should be determined by local school districts, individual sports leagues and the state athletic commission.

In the presidential race, a pro-Trump super PAC began to echo the campaign commercial over the weekend with an ad of its own, calling Ms. Harris a "crazy liberal," showing the same clip about surgery for prisoners and ending with the same "they/them" tagline. The ad featured an image of Jonathan Van Ness, the star of the show "Queer Eye," wearing a dress. Mr. Van Ness has said he identifies as nonbinary.

"Coming after a renowned celebrity star that people love and adore that has been in our living room for years doesn't seem like the right strategy to win hearts and minds," said Ms. Robinson of the Human Rights Campaign.

Ms. Harris met with Mr. Van Ness and the "Queer Eye" cast in July. An image from that meeting appeared in a recent ad from the American Principles Project, a socially conservative advocacy group. Terry Schilling, the group's president, said

that in a dozen focus groups it conducted last year, it found that when it introduced the issue of minors and gender identity, liberal women were much less comfortable than they were with any other issue.

Mr. Schilling said the most effective ad his group had run in 2024 focused on Ms. Harris and her previous statements on transgender issues and that, when shown to viewers online, the 30-second ad had a completion rate of 91 percent, meaning 91 percent of viewers watched to the end and did not click the “skip ad” option.

“This is where Republicans can run the numbers up, make Democrats look extreme and also reach the base,” Mr. Schilling said. “It’s three birds with one stone.”

Jeremy W. Peters contributed reporting.

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