

Republicans lean into anti-transgender message in closing weeks

GOP candidates are attacking transgender rights in swing states, as part of a final pitch to voters.

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[Donald Trump](#) and other GOP candidates are increasingly targeting transgender people in the election campaign's closing days, invoking them as boogymen at rallies and pouring millions into advertising tying Democrats to transgender rights.

At a recent Trump rally in Reno, Nevada, the Trump campaign played a video that included Rachel Levine, the highest-ranking transgender official in the Biden administration, wishing people a happy Pride Month. The crowd booed. When the screen cut to a TikTok video of a drag queen, the crowd booed even louder.

Trump is also blasting a different version of that message into the homes of persuadable voters across the country. In one [ad](#) by a Trump-aligned super PAC, an image of Harris talking to a drag queen is followed by a narrator intoning "Crazy liberal Kamala is for they/them. President Trump is for you."

The strategy is part of a broader push by Republicans to make attacks on transgender rights a closing piece of the party's message. Republicans running for Senate are spending millions of dollars in anti-transgender ads in swing states. They hope the theme will resonate with, say, suburban moderates who are uncertain whether transgender girls should be allowed to play girls' sports, just as much as it does with the rally-going MAGA faithful.

GOP strategists say the ads help Republicans paint Democratic candidates up and down the ballot as outside the mainstream and are effective on all but the most liberal voters.

Though transgender rights are not top-of-mind issue for most, they are effective as a wedge issue for those who are still weighing their options, Republican campaign officials and political strategists said. And it is particularly effective, they argued, with culturally conservative suburban women and with some Black and Hispanic voters who may consider Harris too liberal.

“This is one of those symbolic issues that will make Trump the next president over Kamala Harris because a lot of voters didn’t realize that she supported this kind of radicalism,” John McLaughlin, one of Trump’s pollsters, said. “She’s trying to portray herself as some mainstream moderate, and she’s not.”

Democrats question the efficacy of the argument and say that Republicans are stirring up hatred for a group of people who make up less than 1 percent of the population and already face discrimination.

Harris’s running mate, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, last week called out Republicans for not focusing on issues like the economy and health care. They’re “running millions of dollars of ads demonizing folks that are just trying to live their lives,” he said.

Some prominent Democrats are predicting the tactic will fail, arguing that Republicans are losing ground on the economy and are turning to culture war issues instead. “This tried and failed tactic is a last resort Hail Mary from a party who’s seen their communications on core kitchen table issues fall utterly flat with voters,” J.B. Poersch, the president of a super PAC that aims to elect Democrats to the Senate, said in a statement.

“The truth is Republicans are doing whatever they can to distract from their support for a national abortion ban, corporate tax handouts, and prescription drug cost hikes.”

One Fox News poll from September found that voters trusted Harris over Trump to handle transgender issues by 16 percentage points. But there are some signs that the attacks have Democrats on the defensive.

Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), who faces an uphill battle to hold on to his seat in red Ohio, released an ad on Sunday in which a narrator directly rebuts a flurry of recent GOP ads that say he supports transgender athletes. Democrat Colin Allred, who is trying to unseat GOP Sen. Ted Cruz in red Texas, did the same, saying in one ad that he “does not support boys in girls’ sports.”

Casting Harris as extreme

Anti-transgender messaging has been a part of Trump’s message for a while, but has featured much more prominently in this election, particularly in the last few months, according to campaign staff and strategists from both parties.

As vice president and as the Democratic presidential nominee, Harris has pivoted to the center on immigration and criminal justice, stressing her past as a prosecutor. Trump and his allies have increasingly turned to her record on transgender rights to try to convince voters she is an extreme liberal.

Trump’s campaign and affiliated super PAC has spent more than \$29 million on ads airing in battleground states and nationally, including during heavily watched broadcasts of professional football games. The ads play video of Harris from a candidate forum in 2019 saying she supports publicly funded transgender health care for prisoners.

The most recent version of the ad campaign aims to appeal to Black voters, featuring an exasperated Charlamagne Tha God, a popular Black radio host, talking about how Harris backs transgender health care for prisoners. “Hell no I don’t want my taxpayer dollars going to that,” Charlamagne says.

Trump’s campaign manager, Chris LaCivita, says that the attacks are working because they play into some voters’ concerns that Harris’s views are too liberal while also reinforcing Trump’s long-standing message that he will protect his voters from rapid social changes in the country.

“If you can be successful in defining through her own words that she could be for something as radical as that, then it makes other issues like raising taxes [or] open borders that much more believable,” LaCivita said in an interview. Harris has said she would seek to raise the tax rate on corporations and high earners making more than \$400,000 and would back tough border security measures.

When asked to comment, a Harris campaign spokeswoman pointed to the candidate’s recent Fox News interview, when she said she would “follow the law” in response to a question about providing gender reassignment surgeries to prisoners. In the interview, Harris pointed out that the Trump administration also offered gender affirming care to prisoners, which some federal courts have ruled the government is required to do under the Constitution.

Anat Shenker-Osorio, a Democratic strategist and messaging researcher, studied the effects of the Trump ad that accuses Harris of wanting to fund gender transition surgeries for illegal immigrants in prison, and saw that it moved about 1 percent of voters — potentially significant in an election that could be decided by just thousands of votes in a handful of states.

“They have unleashed what I call the ‘turducken’ of hate-baiting, and woven together anti-immigrant, tough-on-crime and anti-trans messaging,” she said.

A focus on swing states

Republicans homed in on anti-transgender messaging in the 2022 midterms as well, but with little discernible political benefit.

The issue is on more voters’ minds now, GOP strategists argue, particularly after California passed a law preventing school districts from notifying parents about their children’s gender identity, and college swimmer Riley Gaines filed a lawsuit with other swimmers against transgender athlete Lia Thomas, sparking a larger debate about transgender women in sports.

Twenty-five states have passed laws banning or restricting gender-affirming care, which can include hormone therapy, for minors.

Recent polling suggests that Americans are less accepting of transgender people than gay people, although the majority of voters still support trans people living their lives freely, and are deeply split on the issue of health care for minors who wish to transition.

The Senate Leadership Fund, a super PAC that helps elect Republicans to the Senate, has tied Democrats to policies such as transgender girls playing in girls' sports and minors receiving gender transition care. The strategy is to paint Democrats who are running as moderates in purple and red states including Ohio, Wisconsin, Montana and Pennsylvania as too liberal.

Republicans point to Democrats' support of the Equality Act, a bill that protects against discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation in "public accommodations," which Republicans say could include bathrooms, locker rooms and girls sports. That bill passed the House but has not been voted on in the Senate.

In Ohio, where Republican Bernie Moreno is trying to unseat Brown, the SLF has spent \$29 million on four ads accusing him of voting to allow "transgender biological males to compete in girls sports and introduced a bill letting men into girls locker rooms and bathrooms." PolitiFact, the political fact-checking organization, has rated the ad "false."

In his response ad, Brown's campaign pointed out that transgender kids are already banned from playing in sports that conform to their gender identity in Ohio and said Brown agrees with Republican Gov. Mike DeWine that decisions about sports should be made at the local level.

Just last year, Brown, known as an ally to the LGBTQ community, criticized laws that prevented trans kids from playing in sports as spreading "hate."

In the crucial Montana Senate race, which could decide control of the chamber, Republican candidate Tim Sheehy stresses that "boys are boys and girls are girls" in his stump speech, a line that may have more resonance in a red state where Republicans have battled with Montana's first transgender lawmaker over transgender issues in the past few years.

"Donald Trump and Tim Sheehy are trying to fearmonger about what health care a small subset of Americans might be receiving and that does not resonate," said Montana state Rep. Zoey Zephyr, the first transgender woman elected to the Montana legislature. "We've seen this does not work."

In Texas, Cruz and the political groups supporting him have spent \$11 million attacking Allred on transgender issues — including in one ad where a large man in an "Allred" jersey tackles a young girl during a football game. "Colin Allred could have stopped men from competing in women's sports. But instead, he voted against our girls. What kind of man does that?" says the narrator in an ad by Truth and Courage PAC.

Allred, a former linebacker for the Tennessee Titans, responded to the ads. "I'm a dad. I'm also a Christian. My faith has taught me that all kids are God's kids. So let me be clear. I don't want boys playing girls' sports or any of this ridiculous stuff that Ted Cruz is saying," Allred says to camera.

In a debate, Allred said again he doesn't support "boys playing girls' sports," but he added, "What I think is that folks should not be discriminated against."