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Democrats see abortion as electrifying issue in 2024

BY [CAROLINE VAKIL](#) - 03/09/23 6:00 AM ET

SHARETWEET



Annabelle Gordon

Supporters against abortion are seen during the annual March for Life in Washington, D.C., on Friday, January 20, 2023. This is the first march since the Supreme Court overturned Roe vs. Wade.

Democrats see abortion as an electrifying issue heading into 2024 amid signs voter energy hasn't abated in the months since Roe v. Wade was overturned.

The party and abortion rights activists credit the issue with keeping competitive races in play for them this year, including Virginia's state Senate special election in January and last month's Wisconsin Supreme Court primary.

Members of the party now warn against writing off abortion as a key issue in upcoming elections as states like Florida, where a six-week abortion ban was filed in the state legislature this week, keep the issue top of mind for voters.

"If you're looking for canaries in a coal mine, we don't have to squint to see this in the same way that we undervalued, perhaps, the role that the Dobbs decision was going to play in the 2022 midterms," said Wisconsin-based Democratic strategist Joe Zepecki.

"I think it is extremely unwise for people to undervalue the issue of abortion as a force in American politics going forward."

ADVERTISING

Some Democrats, including Zepecki, argue that politicians last cycle underestimated the magnitude to which abortion motivated voter turnout and swung decisive voting blocs – even bringing in new voters like what the Wisconsin Democratic strategist called "Dobbs dads," or men who became more aware of the issue through their daughters.

Democrats point to the enduring salience of abortion in the Wisconsin Supreme Court's primary in February – a race that has been recognized as nonpartisan in name only. The battle over legal abortion looms large in the race, given that the state Supreme Court is likely to weigh in on an 1849 abortion law that bans close to all abortions in the state.

Milwaukee County Judge Janet Protasiewicz, seen as one of the liberal candidates, has been an outspoken supporter of abortion rights and featured the issue in one of her ads ahead of the primary. She notched 47 percent of the vote during the primary while former state Supreme Court Justice Daniel Kelly, seen as one of the conservative candidates, received 24 percent. Both will proceed to the April 4 general election.

In a nod to abortion as a mobilizing issue, her campaign rolled out a new ad on Thursday morning highlighting the difference between her and Kelly on the issue of abortion, calling Kelly "an extremist" and alleging that he supported the centuries-old law while calling Protasiewicz a "common-sense judge." Kelly has been backed by several anti-abortion groups in the state, but unlike the ad's assertion, he has not said how he would rule on the 1849 abortion law.

“The common thing that we’re seeing between what happened in the governor’s race last year, what’s happening in this race is that people are just kind of tired of the extremes, right,” said Sam Roecker, a spokesman for Protasiewicz’s campaign who also worked on Gov. Tony Evers’s (D) reelection campaign in 2022.

“I think abortion is an example of an issue that falls into that, but I don’t think it’s the only issue,” he added.

Republicans, too, have taken note of how abortion shaped the November midterm landscape.

“The leak, release – whatever you want to call it – of the court’s decision on abortion was the shot in the arm that the Democrats needed at the time because they were imploding. Biden’s numbers were just in the tank,” said Wisconsin-based GOP strategist Brandon Scholz.

Polling has shown that most Americans support *Roe v. Wade*, which protected the federal right to abortion until fetal viability. An NPR/Ipsos poll released in January found that 60 percent of voters believed the landmark 1973 decision was the correct ruling, including 86 percent of Democrats, 61 percent of independents and 35 percent of Republicans.

Meanwhile, the poll found 4 in 10 saw the Supreme Court’s decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* as the right decision, including 69 percent of Republicans, 43 percent of independents and 19 percent of Democrats.

Even months after the Supreme Court’s decision, groups on either side of the issue don’t see the prominence of abortion letting up anytime soon as eyes turn toward 2024.

“I think abortion will continue to play a really important part in our upcoming elections, and I think that if done right, it’ll be a motivating and winning issue for Republicans,” said Noah Brandt, vice president of communications at the anti-abortion group Live Action.

Brandt said Republicans did themselves no favors last cycle by shying away from the issue and avoiding holding a firm stance on abortion.

“I think that after *Dobbs*, there were a lot of folks running for office who were a little afraid to say the words ‘abortion’ or ‘pro-life’ for a couple months, and I think that that hurt them because you can hide from the issue, but the issue will find you,” he said.

“So the key is staking out a strong position; being able to recite why that position is scientifically, morally and ethically correct; and then defending it.”

After the November midterms, some abortion opponents suggested that the key to success was learning how to define their challengers as “extremists” and stake out their clear positions on the issue.

“GOP pro-life candidates win in competitive races if they define their opponents as abortion extremists who support abortion on demand with NO limits, and contrast that with a clearly defined pro-life position centered around consensus such as pain-capable or heartbeat limits,” Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of the anti-abortion group Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life, wrote to allies after the November midterms.

But abortion rights activists don’t necessarily agree with that strategy and argue that even Republicans began to see their stances on abortion were unpopular among voters, which is why they were forced to moderate or scrub previous messaging on the issue.

“It’s not because they have some change of heart, it’s because they saw polling and they knew that it was a huge liability for them with voters across the political spectrum,” said Ryan Stitzlein, senior national political director for abortion rights group NARAL Pro-Choice America. “Because the bottom line is support for abortion access is not partisan.”

Florida is the latest test of how galvanizing abortion may be in post-Roe elections.

State lawmakers filed legislation on Tuesday, the first day of the legislative session in the Sunshine State, that would ban abortion after six weeks with limited exceptions, including specific cases of incest and rape. During a news conference, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) called the exceptions in the legislation “sensible.”

A Florida Republican operative suggested it wasn’t clear if the six-week abortion ban would pass. But the operative suggested the issue of abortion may not make waves in Florida given current state demographics and the diminished standing of Florida Democrats.

“One, the Democratic Party in Florida is weak. That doesn’t mean they can’t make a strong comeback,” the operative said. “Two, Florida is one-quarter senior citizens. So the demographics are such and also ... the group that’s the largest in Florida on the minority side is Hispanics — Cuban, Venezuelan, etc. — and they tend to be much more pro-life. So I don’t know how that’s going to play out.”

But Democrats argue against underestimating abortion as a voting turnout mechanism.

“What’s happening is that the Republicans are so emboldened that I think they’re starting to overplay their hand. They’re overreaching in ways that, even just two years ago, I think many of us thought were unimaginable,” Florida House Minority Leader Fentrice Driskell (D) told The Hill.

Porter on Silicon Valley Bank collapse: ‘You can’t bet on interest rates staying low forever’ Kennedy: Biden decided to ‘demagogue the issue’ of Social Security, Medicare

Driskell acknowledged that Democrats didn’t have the numbers to stop a six-week abortion ban from passing if it had enough Republican support, but said, “you can expect a real fight from House and Senate Democrats on this issue.”

“If abortion wasn’t teed up to be an issue in 2024, [DeSantis] just made it one.”

–Updated at 8:11 a.m.