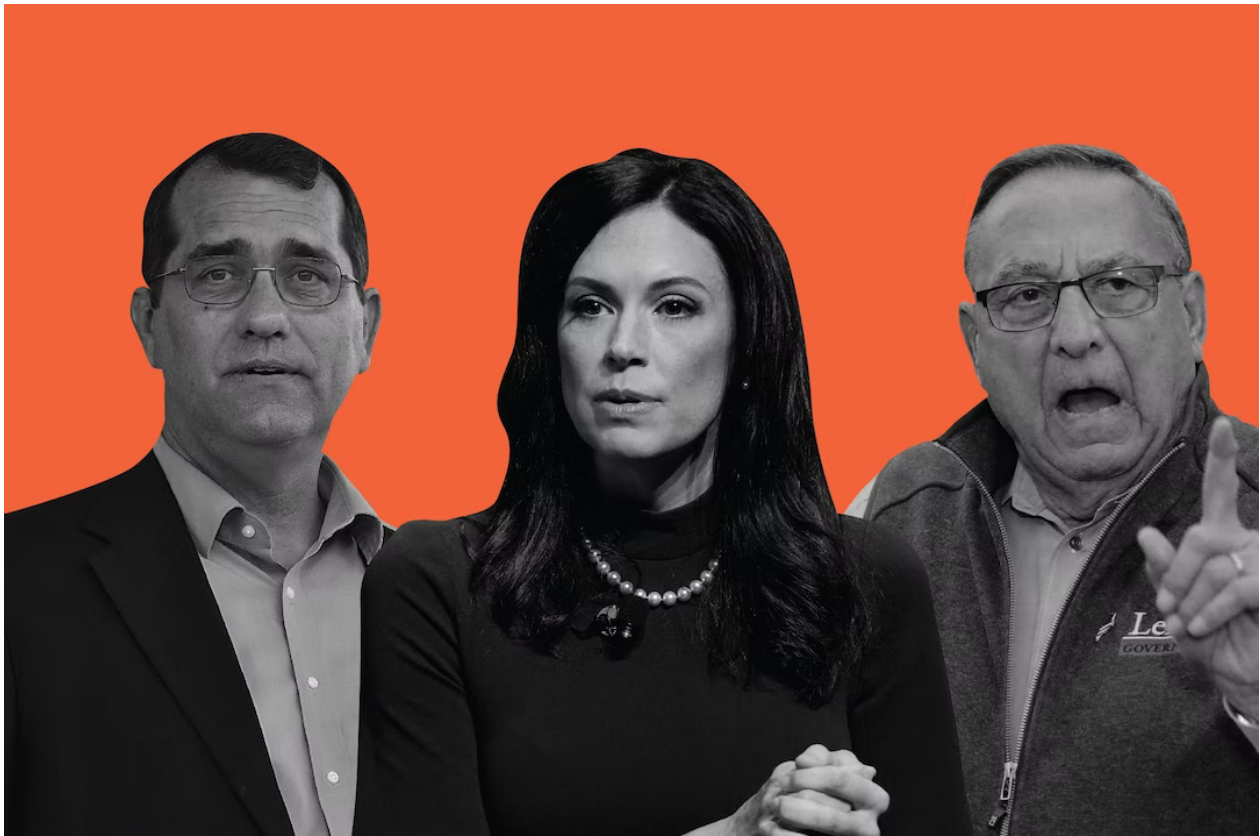


GOP Attacks on Transgender Kids Fell Flat



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Culture war attacks have been the crux of the Republican Party’s strategy for the past few elections. And while some hit their mark this time around—particularly on crime and immigration in races where Democrats failed to rebut them early and forcefully—others fell flat. GOP fearmongering on the “transgender agenda” hit an all-time high this year, with ads targeting transgender children running in at least 25 states totaling at least \$50 million. Yet the candidates who made these attacks the centerpiece of their argument to voters failed at the ballot box.

We used AdImpact to look at ads run in September and October in the most competitive gubernatorial races in the US to assess the political effectiveness of these attacks. Three Republican candidates ran high-expenditure attack ads around transgender kids during these months, and all three lost their races. If attacking transgender kids was the silver bullet some on the far right seem to think it is, they would’ve won these Governor’s seats.

Losing Republican Gubernatorial Candidates Ran Anti-Trans Ads

Republican gubernatorial candidates heavily relied upon ads attacking transgender people in three states: Kansas, Michigan, and Maine. All three seats were held by incumbent Democratic Governors being challenged by the right, and all three races were expected to be close—especially in Kansas, a reliably red state.

Kansas saw the largest investment in anti-trans ads, at nearly \$3 million over the months of September and October. In October alone, Derek Schmidt ran 11 ads attacking Governor Laura Kelly on her record around issues related to transgender people, specifically her two consecutive vetoes of a bill banning transgender athletes from competing in sports in the state. The campaign even ran ads featuring the swimmer who lost to Lia Thomas, the first transgender woman to win an NCAA Division I national championship. In fact, almost all of Schmidt’s education ads in October focused on or mentioned Kelly’s support for the “transgender agenda.” The Republican candidates for governor in the other two states also invested substantial amounts in anti-trans ads. Tudor Dixon spent \$1 million in September and October attacking Governor Gretchen Whitmer for wanting to put a “drag queen in every classroom.” Paul LePage spent \$900,000 in September and October attacking Governor Janet Mills for allegedly teaching kindergarteners “radical transgender policies.”

But when it came to Election Day, these three Republicans didn’t narrowly lose—they lost by healthy margins. In Kansas, a state that went for Trump in 2020 by more than 14 points, Democratic Governor Laura Kelly beat her Republican challenger by 2.1 points. And in the two swing states of Michigan and Maine, Democratic Governors Gretchen Whitmer and Janet Mills beat their Republican challengers by 10.6 points and 12.9 points, respectively. Clearly, these heinous ads didn’t appeal to the swing voters these Republicans needed to declare victory.

Voters had Different Priorities

For many voters, LGBT issues are low- salience, often not top of mind when choosing which candidate to support. Polling we conducted just before Election Day with Impact Research found that only 3% of voters saying laws related to gay and transgender people should be a first or second priority for policymakers.

In 2022, issues around transgender people didn’t crack voters’ top 10 when asked what drove their choice. According to a CNN poll, the economy and abortion took the top two spots, with 51% of voters saying the economy and inflation would be the most important to their vote and 15% saying the same about abortion. The remaining list of voters’ priorities was filled out by immigration, voting rights and democracy, crime, gun reform, COVID-19, and climate change.

It's clear that issues around transgender people were not decisive for swing voters, but it turns out they also weren't a driving force for Republicans. According to polling conducted by Navigator, only 20% of Republican voters cited keeping "transgender athletes out of girls' sports teams" and stopping the "promotion of transgender surgeries on our children" as one of the biggest reasons they voted for Republican candidates. Instead, Republican voters said they were motivated by inflation and government spending, crime and public safety, and immigration. Whether intended as a persuasion or turnout tactic, attacks against transgender Americans simply didn't appeal to the voters Republicans needed to win.

Leaders on Anti-LGBT Legislation Ran on Other Issues, and Won

By contrast with these losing candidates who focused on anti-trans attacks, two of the country's most transphobic governors—Governor Ron DeSantis, a steward of Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill, and Governor Greg Abbott, who ordered Child Protective Services to investigate the parents of transgender children—didn't run a single ad on the issue.

According to AdImpact, Governor DeSantis did in fact focus his ad spending on education, but without a mention of transgender kids; rather he focused on keeping schools open during COVID, funding K-12 education, raising teacher pay, and protecting parents' rights. His second biggest ad expenditure was on immigration, border security, crime, and law enforcement. In Texas, Governor Abbott spent \$20.9 million after Labor Day on ads on immigration, border security, crime, and law enforcement, relevant issues for his border state. His next biggest ad expenditure was \$7.7 million on energy and inflation. Despite spearheading attacks on LGBT kids during their first terms, DeSantis and Abbott seemed to understand that doing so in their campaigns wouldn't pay off politically. They both won their elections by double digits.

Conclusion

Republicans ran on a number of culture war issues this midterm cycle, including crime, immigration, critical race theory, and "radical transgender policies." The three Republican gubernatorial candidates who made anti-trans ads a cornerstone of their campaign strategy lost their races by healthy margins. Two of the most notorious anti-LGBT Governors didn't even mention the issue in paid media because they knew it wasn't a winning one with voters. As these midterm results demonstrate, attacking transgender kids isn't the political win some on the right seem to think it is.