MEMO *Published February 22, 2023 • 5 minute read*

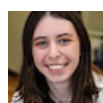# Who Appealed to Non-College Voters in the Midterms?

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As Democrats' coalition has evolved to rely heavily on college-educated voters, they have also been hemorrhaging support from voters without college degrees. They have been losing significant ground with white non-college educated voters since the Obama years, and in more recent elections, they have lost support with non-college voters of color as well.

In 2022, Democrats' unexpected overperformance compared to historical precedents obscured their continuing struggles with voters without a four-year college degree. Because midterm-year electorates tend to be more highly college educated than those in presidential years, Democrats have had stronger than expected showings in recent midterm cycles. But looking to 2024, Democrats will need to increase their support with non-college voters in several states in order to hold the presidency and maintain their Senate majority.

A few Democratic candidates were able to overperform with non-college voters in 2022, and their campaigns offer a roadmap for future Democratic outreach. These candidates appealed to non-college voters without alienating college graduates, and they overperformed with white non-college voters and non-college voters of color at the same time. Their campaigns rejected false choices between voter groups and made successful pitches to groups who nationally are trending away from Democrats.

Who overperformed?

A number of candidates in competitive races overperformed Biden's margins with non-college voters in their states in 2022. These candidates offer a glimpse at how Democrats can increase their appeal—or at least stop the bleeding with this crucial voter group.

Overperforming candidates include Tony Evers, Gretchen Whitmer, Josh Shapiro, John Fetterman, and Tim Ryan. These five candidates overperformed Biden's margins with white non-college voters, and four also bested his performance among non-college voters overall in their states (all except Evers, who tied it). Among white non-college voters, Raphael Warnock and Mark Kelly held steady with Biden's level of support in 2020, though they both slightly underperformed his margin with non-college voters overall.

While at first glance Senator Warnock's 22% support from white non-college voters might appear paltry, this performance actually marks a striking success. White non-college educated voters in Georgia are overwhelmingly conservative, and Warnock's ability to maintain Biden's 22% support with these voters, particularly as a Black candidate facing built-in disadvantages with southern white voters, is notable. His success is a testament to his hard work establishing credibility and support among swing voters across the state.

Mark Kelly's performance is also notable, as he managed to hold support nearly constant in a state where non-college voters are heavily Latino, while other Democrats continued to lose support with Latino voters in many regions of the country.

Whitmer, Shapiro, Fetterman, Ryan Overperformed Biden With Non-College Voters

	Non-College Share vs. Biden 2020	White Non-College Share vs. Biden 2020
Tony Evers	0	+1
Mandela Barnes	–2	–2
Raphael Warnock	–1	0
Stacey Abrams	–4	–5
Gretchen Whitmer	+5	+4
Mark Kelly	–1	0
Katie Hobbs	–2	–2
Catherine Cortez-Masto	–2	–6
Steve Sisolak	–4	–6
Josh Shapiro	+7	+10
John Fetterman	+2	+3
Tim Ryan	+2	+2

Source: Fox News Voter Analysis Survey of Voters and Nonvoters Nationwide.

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What will Dems need in 2024?

To build a winning coalition in key Senate and Electoral College states in 2024, if the electorate looks similar to 2020, Democrats will need to appeal to a big slice of non-college graduates. Below is an overview of the targets Democrats will need to hit with white non-college voters and non-college voters overall, in order to hit 50% statewide.

Democrats' 2024 State Targets With Non-College Voters

	WI	GA	MI	AZ	NV	PA	OH
White Non-College	43.5%	30.4%	39.2%	39.7%	41.2%	36.5%	44%
Non-College	46.2%	48.0%	46.2%	46.1%	49.1%	45.3%	49.5%

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This past year, several candidates cleared these targets—but others fell far short. Tony Evers, Gretchen Whitmer, Mark Kelly, John Fetterman, and Josh Shapiro hit these marks. In fact, Whitmer and Shapiro cleared them by wide margins, Shapiro by 12 points with white non-college voters and by seven points with all non-college voters. Whitmer cleared her state's target with white non-college voters by six points and with all non-college voters by seven.

By contrast, Catherine Cortez-Masto, Katie Hobbs, Steve Sisolak, Raphael Warnock, Stacey Abrams, and Tim Ryan were not able to clear their state targets with non-college voters. Cortez-Masto, Hobbs, and Warnock were aided by the slightly more college-educated midterm electorates this year that enabled them to win with slightly lower non-college voter margins. But with a less college-educated presidential year electorate, Democrats face serious challenges in these states (Nevada, Arizona, and Georgia). In Georgia, the 2022 electorate had a lower share of white non-college voters compared to 2020 (33% vs. 36%) which benefited Warnock. In Nevada, the electorate share of white non-college voters was six points lower than in 2020. In Arizona, five points lower.

Tim Ryan did deliver a strong showing in Ohio, overperforming Biden with white non-college voters as well as with all non-college voters. But he still fell short of what Democrats will need to win in 2024 with non-college voters by over five points and with white non-college voters by seven points. These gaps highlight the challenge Sherrod Brown faces, as Democrats are still far from where they need to be with non-college voters to win in Ohio.

Evers, Whitmer, Kelly, Shapiro, Fetterman Exceeded Targets

	Non-College Share in 2022 vs. 2024 Targets	White Non-College Share in 2022 vs. 2024 Targets
Tony Evers	+1.8%	+1.5%
Mandela Barnes	−0.2%	−1.5%
Raphael Warnock	−2.0%	−8.4%
Stacey Abrams	−5.0%	−13.4%
Gretchen Whitmer	+6.8%	+5.8%
Mark Kelly	+0.9%	+2.3%
Katie Hobbs	−0.1%	+0.3%
Catherine Cortez-Masto	−2.1%	−5.2%
Steve Sisolak	−4.1%	−5.2%
Josh Shapiro	+6.7%	+11.5%
John Fetterman	+1.7%	+4.5%
Tim Ryan	−5.5%	−7.0%

Source: Fox News Voter Analysis Survey of Voters and Nonvoters Nationwide.

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How did they overperform?

Overperformances with non-college voters were not random. Rather, candidates who showed particular strength with these voters touted platforms and ran campaigns that targeted non-college graduates and offered them a compelling appeal.

Whitmer's ad campaigns emphasized hard work; both her own hard work and Michiganders'. Her campaign certainly placed significant focus on abortion, and she capitalized on her opponent's extremism as well. But she also ran on kitchen-table issues that provide tangible benefits to voters without college degrees. Her ads highlighted her successes on tuition free community college and increasing support for apprenticeships, as well as increasing school budgets without raising taxes. She also emphasized getting schools re-opened and helping kids catch up from time lost to COVID-19 school closures. She emphasized childcare affordability and discussed the importance of creating opportunities for young people to find success in Michigan, rather than leaving the state.

Shapiro similarly benefited from an extreme opponent and from the salience of the abortion issue in Pennsylvania. In his ads, however, he focused on his work as Attorney General holding bad actors accountable, particularly in the health care and pharmaceutical industries. He discussed prosecuting those who contributed to the opioid epidemic, which has hit Pennsylvania particularly hard, and his work protecting pensions.

Conclusion

There is no magic bullet for Democrats to appeal to voters without a college degree. But one thing is for sure: to hold onto the White House and tough Senate seats in 2024, they will have to increase their levels of support with non-college graduates in key states and prevent further erosion in support across the board.