

Emboldened by wins, GOP goes all in on the culture wars

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Republicans believe they've found an edge in the culture wars.

On the campaign trail, they're railing against critical race theory and gender identity discussions in schools. In [state legislatures](#) and [via executive fiat](#), they are trying to limit medical procedures for transgender children and punishing large companies they view as overly politically correct. They've found success by weaponizing the left's "defund the police" movement, which advocates for reallocating resources to limit police power.

And they're already accusing President Biden of catering to college-educated elites as he considers forgiving student loan debt.

In primary races ahead of November's midterm elections, Republican candidates are embracing contentious battles over gender, sexual orientation and race rather than sticking to tried-and-true attacks on inflation or Biden's low approval ratings.

Many say these issues will broaden their coalition by peeling away socially conservative working-class voters. Their focus comes as a rollback on abortion rights, one of the biggest culture-war issues, could become a crowning achievement for the right. A leaked Supreme Court draft opinion showed that after a half-century of activism, the high court appears poised to erase the nationwide right to abortion.

"Either party can end up in the wrong place on culture issues," said Tony Fratto, a Republican political strategist and former deputy White House press secretary to President George W. Bush. "Where we are in this cycle is, Democrats have stretched themselves further left and seem unreasonable to the center."

Democrats argue that Republicans have already gone too far in the other direction, particularly in attacking LGBTQ rights, which have broad public support, and banning library books. Some conservatives acknowledge that abortion is now a complicated issue for the midterms, with [leading Republicans last week downplaying the pending Supreme Court ruling](#).

But numerous GOP candidates in recent weeks have signaled that they will continue leaning hard into the culture wars this fall.

“We keep showing up at cultural war knife fights with neatly arranged 3-by-5 index cards,” thundered Mehmet Oz, a front-runner in Pennsylvania’s Republican primary for the U.S. Senate, during his closing remarks at a debate last week. “We have to get into these issues. The liberals are taking over our media, they control much of government, the corporate suites are dominated by the ‘woke’ ideology, and our universities as well.”

Some Democrats, meanwhile, are explicitly backing away from those battles.

“You want culture wars? I’m not your guy,” Rep. Tim Ryan said in a video released just before he won Ohio’s Democratic primary for U.S. Senate — a video in which he also denounced the idea of defunding the police. “You want a fighter for Ohio? I’m all in.”

J.D. Vance, the Republican who will face Ryan in November, offered a heavy dose of culturally fueled grievance during his victory speech last week. Minutes after capturing the GOP nomination, he complained that the Democratic Party “bends the knee to major American corporations and their ‘woke’ values,” and he predicted that Ohioans feel alienated by the left.

In a brief interview while he was campaigning in West Chester Township, Ohio, Vance offered a critique of the identity politics he said Democratic politicians are embracing. The emphasis on race, gender and sexual orientation by the left is a distraction, dividing voters who should be united against powerful interests intent on preventing prosperity in the lower classes, Vance said.

“Very often what is framed as diversity, equity and inclusion is actually an excuse to make the American people poor,” Vance told *The Washington Post*. He noted that Democrats celebrate Janet L. Yellen as the first female treasury secretary, rather than debating whether her ideas have led to inflation.

Polling offers a bleak picture for Democrats on many culture-war mainstays. Seventy-one percent said they are “very” or “extremely” concerned about illegal immigration, according to a recent Fox News poll, while 73 percent said they are “very” or “extremely” concerned about “what’s taught in public schools,” according to the survey.

The notion of culture wars in American politics dates to Southern resistance to integration, said Sean Wilentz, a U.S. history professor at Princeton University, stretching to Richard M. Nixon’s strategy of catering to disaffected White voters in the South.

“It’s very effective,” Wilentz said. “They’ve been working at it forever with lines playing on all kinds of social resentments, cultural resentments, class resentments, regional resentments. It’s the politics of mobilizing resentments.”

The Democratic embrace of identity politics has played into the Republicans’ hands, he argued. “Traditionally, the Democratic Party is the party of integration as well as inclusiveness, not of divided identities,” he said.

Some Democrats acknowledge that their party has not yet figured out how to best approach race and identity and the basket of culture-related issues.

“Democrats need to talk about that promise of America, the exceptional nature of America, the sense of opportunity and hope that America represents for millions,” said Rep. Ro Khanna (D-Calif.), whose parents emigrated from India. “Then we have to say, look, there’s been huge challenges. One, we made 40 years of mistakes where we offshore jobs, we got rid of production.”

“I don’t think we should shy away from issues of race or issues of culture,” Khanna added. “I think what we ought to say is, what makes America exceptional is that we are a nation not founded on blood, not founded on creed. What makes America exceptional is, we’re going to become the first multiracial, multiethnic democracy in the world.”

Republicans have not always had the upper hand on culture-war issues. In 2016, a North Carolina bill requiring people to use bathrooms that matched their biological sex at birth led to a huge backlash against Republicans.

Major companies including PayPal canceled plans to move or expand in the state. Then-Gov. Pat McCrory (R), who signed the bill into law, paid the ultimate political price for it, becoming the first North Carolina governor to lose a bid for reelection in a state that also voted to send Donald Trump to the White House. Exit polls showed that two-thirds of voters opposed the law.

Now, Republicans say the landscape has changed. “I definitely feel that momentum is on our side,” said Ralph Reed, founder of the Faith and Freedom Coalition and a leading social conservative. “The left has engaged in an awful lot of policy overreach across the board, and the cultural issues are no exception.”

Republicans appear more emboldened to take on major companies on culture issues after four years of Trump’s willingness to break with corporate America. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has confronted Disney over parental rights legislation it opposed and attacked Disney’s tax privileges.

Shortly after, Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) introduced legislation also aimed at what he called “woke corporations.”

“Our tax code should be pro-family and promote a culture of life,” Rubio said in a statement about the bill. His legislation would prohibit companies from claiming tax benefits when employees travel to obtain abortions or for expenses for gender-affirming care for their children.

Some conservatives say their culture-war messaging plays particularly well for a key demographic. “The lodestone in American politics right now ... is the Hispanic vote,” Reed said.

One example is immigration, where Republicans have been gaining ground consistently. Fifty-seven percent of Hispanics supported keeping Title 42 immigration restrictions in place, an order that barred many migrants from crossing the southern border during the coronavirus pandemic, according to a recent Fox News poll. Biden has signaled that those restrictions would be lifted this month.

Democrats risk alienating this part of their coalition on other issues. Sixty percent of Hispanic voters support laws that ban the discussion of sexual orientation or gender policy in schools below the fourth grade, according to a recent Fox News poll. Democratic leaders oppose these measures.

Reed said he views the parental rights legislation as a “twofer” for Republicans because it appeals to both minority voters and suburban mothers with school-age children, he argued.

With the fate of *Roe v. Wade* in the balance, the GOP has faced some difficulty crafting a message. For instance, as Louisiana Republicans push to make abortion a crime, the National Republican Senatorial Committee, the main campaign arm for Republicans, has tried to back away from that policy, and in a messaging document, it explicitly told members to say: “Republicans DO NOT want to throw doctors and women in jail. Mothers should be held harmless under the law.”

Marjorie Dannenfelser, the president of Susan B. Anthony List, a leading opponent of abortion rights, acknowledged the muted response from GOP lawmakers but said Republican leaders have actually been more vocal than usual. Five or six years ago, Republican lawmakers “would not have taken [media] calls” about abortion rights because they would have wanted to completely avoid it, she said. “They would be so afraid to utter the ‘a-word.’ ”

Some Democrats say they’re not fighting hard enough on the issue. “Where the hell is my party? Where’s the Democratic Party?” California Gov. Gavin Newsom said last week during a stop at a Planned Parenthood office in Los Angeles.

Overall, Fratto described a dynamic that many Democratic lawmakers have noted privately: that ideological purity tests on issues such as trans rights in schools or other LGBTQ rights have not left room for argument.

“The problem with a lot of these issues is, if you don’t adhere to the views of the ideological poles, then you’re not pure enough, and so you’re going to be in disfavor,” Fratto said. “So there’s a sense that you need to go further to the point where you find yourself where the middle of America looks at you, frankly, like you’re weird.”

Fratto acknowledged that the gender debate in America is a “complex issue.” But, he said, “most people aren’t looking at it with a lot of complexity.”