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Republican Ideas on Economics Are as Bad as Their Ideas on Abortion

Democrats have gone all in on abortion rights as the primary midterm message. But pro-corporate, trickle-down GOP policies are worth highlighting too.

BY DAVID DAYEN OCTOBER 5, 2022



GRAEME SLOAN/SIPA USA VIA AP IMAGES

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy speaks to the media about the GOP's "Commitment to America" plan, with Republican members of Congress, at the Capitol, September 29, 2022.



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Democrats have settled on a national strategy for the midterm elections: portraying themselves as the party of reproductive rights, and Republicans as extremists who will take those rights away entirely. It's a clever inversion of the normal dynamic of voters punishing the party in power in midterms, with the Supreme Court standing in as the party in power. The Court was the most disruptive government force of the past two years, and Democrats want voters to focus on what its rulings have stripped away.

Polling has shown shifts among independent voters when abortion rights are given the primary focus. I've seen in my own reporting that swing-district Democrats are turning to abortion as their main argument, and Lindsey Graham certainly helped them a great deal by filing a national abortion ban and vowing to pass it if Republicans gained power. Most of the advertisements from the Democratic side hit this issue, including one from former Rep. Max Rose of Staten Island intimating that Republican attacks on reproductive rights will cause women to die. Georgia Senate candidate Herschel Walker allegedly funding the abortion he wants to criminalize has only added fuel to the strategy.

There are some hiccups to this approach—the one pro-life Democrat in Congress (Rep. Henry Cuellar of Texas) benefiting from millions of dollars in Democratic



campaign cash, for example—but it's a powerful message that draws simple contrasts between the consequences of Democratic and Republican rule. You can absolutely see why Democrats are taking this path, especially after high-profile victories in special elections and votes in the previous few months.

More from David Dayen

Perhaps the biggest of those votes was in blood-red Kansas, where voters rejected an effort by far-right groups to change the state constitution to allow for abortion bans. That makes it even more remarkable that the Democratic governor of that state, Laura Kelly, is not leaning into abortion rights in her tight re-election campaign against Republican attorney general Derek Schmidt.

Kelly has been focused instead on the economy. She's run an ad about a Panasonic EV battery factory coming to De Soto, one about eliminating a tax on food that has brought down the cost of living marginally, and several about fully funding schools, defending them from the slash-and-burn project of Republicans like her predecessor Sam Brownback. Despite resounding support for abortion rights in Kansas, Republicans' patently unpopular stance on the issue hasn't factored into Kelly's messaging.

It's weird to hear analysts say that sidestepping abortion is the right strategy for Kelly after an election that showed a large bipartisan majority in favor of retaining abortion rights in the same state. But polling in the race shows that three times as many voters care about the economy relative to abortion access. A similar prioritization is seen in national polling, where economic issues take precedence over social policy, and Republicans tend to be seen as more trustworthy.



if there were no way to penetrate the republican advantage on economic matters, maybe the focus on abortion would be seen as Democrats' only recourse. But there is a story to tell here, based much like Graham's proposed bill on what Republicans have explicitly said they would do if they got back into power.

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The Inflation Reduction Act has a silly name, but if there is anything in the bill that will actually reduce the cost of living, it's the measure to negotiate prescription drug prices with Medicare. I speculated that Democrats would have a hard time making the sale on this measure because negotiations don't kick in until 2026, meaning Democrats would have to promote something that voters won't feel in their lives for four years.

But Republicans are helping out by vowing to repeal the law, on the record and in public. “If the courts haven't gotten to it beforehand, yeah we've got to do our job and try to defend the Constitution,” said Rep. Morgan Griffith (R-VA) last month, intimating a constitutional right to protect a particular industry from bulk purchasing discounts. I haven't really seen advertising that lays out this promise from Republicans to make prescription drug prices higher.

President Biden has mentioned that Republicans would damage Medicare and Social Security if elected, using the blueprint of Sen. Rick Scott (R-FL), chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee (the Senate GOP campaign arm), as evidence. But it's not just Scott. Don Bolduc, running for Senate in New Hampshire,



advocated privatizing Medicare in August. Arizona Republican candidate Blake Masters has mused about privatizing Social Security, as has Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson. There have been scattered ads and mobilization about this, but nothing like the concerted effort around abortion.

Many candidates have explained to me and other *Prospect* reporters that they are highlighting a Republican vote against oil company price-gouging in their campaigns. One broader point, made by frontliner Rep. Mike Levin (D-CA) in a *Los Angeles Times* piece and others, is that Republicans have articulated no solutions to higher prices other than incoherent bellowing, while Democrats have put forward short-term and long-term proposals. (Levin mentioned the price-gouging bill.)

Finally, there's the signature Republican vow to defund the tax police, by repealing the \$80 billion for IRS efforts in the Inflation Reduction Act. Polls show that voters detest the two-tiered tax system, one for the wealthy and large corporations and one for everyone else. Republicans are publicly determined to keep that going, and to reverse Democratic efforts to end that dynamic.

Women's health is obviously critically important, and highlighting the Republican position of criminalizing reproductive rights creates a larger perception of GOP policy aims as extreme. But so does reminding voters that Republicans continue to worship at the feet of trickle-down economics, with tax cuts and business deregulation seen as the answer to any possible problem. They want to remake America in the image of the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom, last seen furiously backpedaling from a tax-cut policy proposal that virtually collapsed its economic system. It's worth not letting that get lost in the midterm shuffle.

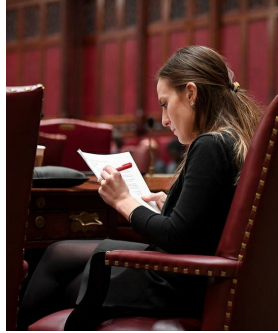


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