

How Abortion Lifted Democrats, and More Takeaways From Tuesday's Elections

President Biden is unpopular, but the winning streak for his party and its policies has been extended through another election night.

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The political potency of abortion rights proved more powerful than the drag of President Biden's approval ratings in Tuesday's off-year elections, as Ohioans enshrined a right to abortion in their state's constitution, and Democrats took control of both chambers of the Virginia General Assembly while holding on to Kentucky's governorship.

The night's results showed the durability of Democrats' political momentum since the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* and ended the constitutional right to an abortion in 2022. It may also, at least temporarily, stem the latest round of Democratic fretting from a series of polls demonstrating Mr. Biden's political weakness.

After a strong midterm showing last year, a blowout victory in the Wisconsin Supreme Court race in April and a series of special election wins, Democrats head into Mr. Biden's re-election contest with the wind at their backs. The question for the party is how they can translate that momentum to Mr. Biden, who remains unpopular while others running on his agenda have prevailed.

Here are key takeaways from Tuesday:

There's nothing like abortion to aid Democrats.

Democratic officials have been saying for months that the fight for abortion rights has become the issue that best motivates Democrats to vote, and is also the issue that persuades the most Republicans to vote for Democrats.

On Tuesday, they found new evidence to bolster their case in victories by Gov. Andy Beshear of Kentucky, who criticized his opponent's defense of the state's near-total ban; legislative candidates in Virginia who opposed the 15-week abortion ban proposed by the Republican governor, Glenn Youngkin; and, above all, the Ohio referendum establishing a right to abortion access. A Pennsylvania Supreme Court candidate who ran on abortion rights, Daniel McCaffery, also won, giving Democrats a 5-2 majority.

Abortion is now so powerful as a Democratic issue that Everytown, the gun control organization founded and funded by Michael Bloomberg, used its TV ads in Virginia to promote abortion rights before it discussed gun violence.

The anti-abortion Democrat who ran for governor of Mississippi, Brandon Presley, underperformed expectations, losing by twice the margin that his party's nominee did in 2019.

It's a sign that no matter how weak Mr. Biden's standing is, the political environment and the issues terrain are still strong for Democrats running on abortion access and against Republicans who defend bans.

The last six Kentucky governor's elections have been won by the same party that won the presidential election the following year. The president may not be able to do what Mr. Beshear managed — talking up Biden policies without ever mentioning the president's name — but he now has examples of what a winning road map could look like for 2024.

In Virginia, a Republican rising star faces an eclipse.

Governor Youngkin had hoped a strong night for his party would greatly raise his stature as the Republican who turned an increasingly blue state back to red. That would at the very least include him in the conversation for the Republican presidential nomination in 2028, if not 2024.

But Mr. Youngkin's pledge to enact what he called a moderate abortion law — a ban on abortions after 15 weeks with exceptions for rape, incest and to save the life of an endangered mother — gave Democrats an effective counter as he sought full control of state government.

The Democratic argument won the day, at least in part. The party seized the majority in the House of Delegates, kept control of the State Senate and definitely spoiled Mr. Youngkin's night. The results offered nervous national Democrats still more evidence of abortion's power as a motivator for their voters while upending the term-limited Mr. Youngkin's plans for his final two years on office, and possibly beyond.

A Democrat can win in deep-red Kentucky, if his name is Andy Beshear.

Being the most popular governor in the country turns out to be a good thing if you want to get re-elected.

Mr. Beshear spent his first term and his re-election campaign hyperfocused on local issues like teacher salaries, new road projects, guiding the state through the pandemic and natural disasters and, since last summer's Supreme Court decision overturning *Roe v. Wade*, opposing his state's total ban on abortion.

That made him politically bulletproof when his Republican challenger, Attorney General Daniel Cameron, who was endorsed by former President Donald J. Trump, sought to nationalize the campaign and juice G.O.P. turnout by tying Mr. Beshear to Mr. Biden and attacking him on crime and L.G.B.T.Q. issues. (Mr. Beshear [vetoed new restrictions aimed at transgender young people](#), though G.O.P. lawmakers voted to override him.)

It's not as if Republican voters stayed home; all the other Republicans running for statewide office won with at least 57 percent of the vote. Mr. Beshear just got enough of them to back him for governor. A Democrat who can win Republican voters without making compromises on issues important to liberal voters is someone the rest of the party will want to emulate in red states and districts across the country.

Attacks on transgender rights didn't work.

As abortion access has become the top issue motivating Democrats, and with same-sex marriage broadly accepted in America, Republicans casting about for an issue to motivate social conservatives landed on restricting rights for transgender people. On Tuesday, that didn't work.

In Kentucky, Mr. Cameron and his Republican allies spent more than \$5 million on television ads attacking L.G.B.T.Q. rights and Mr. Beshear for his defense of them, according to AdImpact, a firm that tracks political advertising. Gov. Tate Reeves in Mississippi spent \$1.2 million on anti-L.G.B.T.Q. ads, while Republicans running for legislative seats in Virginia spent \$527,000 worth of TV time on the issue.

Indeed, in Virginia, Danica Roem, a member of the House of Delegates, will become the South's first transgender state senator after defeating a former Fairfax County police detective who supported barring transgender athletes from competing in high school sports.

In Ohio, voters back both abortion and weed.

Ohioans once again showed the popularity of abortion rights, even in reliably Republican states, when they easily approved a constitutional amendment establishing the right to an abortion.

The vote in Ohio could be a harbinger for the coming presidential election season, when proponents and opponents of abortion rights are trying to put the issue before voters in the critical battleground states of Florida, Nevada, Arizona and Pennsylvania.

[Abortion rights groups entered Tuesday on a winning streak](#) with such ballot measures since the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade last year. And ultimately, Ohio voters did as voters before them had done — electing to preserve the right to an abortion in their state.

And with a margin that was almost identical to the abortion vote, Ohioans also legalized recreational marijuana use. That will make [Ohio the 24th state to do so](#).

Where abortion wasn't an issue, a Republican won easily.

Mississippi's governor's race was the exception to this off-year election's rule on abortion: The incumbent governor, Mr. Reeves, and his Democratic challenger, Mr. Presley, ran as staunch opponents of abortion rights.

And in that race, the Democrat lost.

Mr. Presley hoped to make the Mississippi race close by tying the incumbent to a public corruption scandal that saw the misspending of \$94 million in federal funds intended for Mississippi's poor on projects like a college volleyball facility pushed by the retired superstar quarterback Brett Favre. He also pressed for the expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act to save Mississippi's collapsing rural hospitals.

But in Mississippi, Mr. Reeves had three advantages that proved impenetrable: incumbency, the "R" next to his name on the ballot, and the [endorsement of Mr. Trump](#), who won the state in 2020 by nearly 17 percentage points.

In Kentucky races beneath the marquee governor's contest, Democrats also did not run on abortion, and they, like Mr. Presley, lost.

Rhode Island sends a Biden aide to the House.

Rhode Island is hardly a swing state, but still, the heavily Democratic enclave's election of Gabe Amo to one of its two House seats most likely brought a smile to Mr. Biden's face. Mr. Amo was a deputy director of the White House office of intergovernmental affairs and as such, becomes the first Biden White House aide to rise to Congress.

The son of African immigrants, Mr. Amo will also be the first Black representative from the Ocean State.

White House officials said the president congratulated his former aide on his victory. The special election fills the seat vacated by David Cicilline, a Democrat who [left the seat to run a nonprofit](#).