

# Top takeaways from 2023 election results — and what they mean for 2024

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Tuesday was Election Day 2023, with Kentucky and Mississippi holding gubernatorial elections, Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin's (R) political future on the line, a new congressman elected and abortion rights looming as many voters headed to the polls.

And while surely a partial picture, it's the most data we have thus far gathered on actual voters at the polls between the 2022 midterm elections and the 2024 presidential contest in 12 months.

Below, some takeaways from this off-year election.

## **1 Another good election for Democrats (when they really needed it)**

Democrats probably won't stop panicking about the 2024 election — not with another poll Tuesday night, this one from CNN, showing Donald Trump leading President Biden.

But for now, they keep having good elections.

The big ones Tuesday:

Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear (D) turned aside a challenge from Trump-backed state Attorney General Daniel Cameron (R) relatively easily in a red state.

Ohio became the latest red-leaning state to vote in favor of abortion rights on the ballot — and by a large margin. It passed Issue 1, enshrining the right to abortion into the state constitution. The pro-abortion-rights position has now won on all seven state ballot measures since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned in mid-2022. Turnout was also strong in Ohio, suggesting this issue continues to animate voters.

Democrats not only avoided a potential GOP takeover of the Senate in much-watched Virginia, but they actually flipped the state House, taking full control of the legislature.

It's the latest of many post-2016 elections in which Democrats can come away feeling good. They clearly won in 2018 and 2020 and, in 2022 after *Roe* fell, had one of the best midterms for a president's party in modern history. They have also continued to significantly over-perform their 2020 presidential margins in special elections and other races throughout 2023.

(Worth noting: Democrats did lose a governorship in Louisiana last month. But that's a very red state, and Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards was term-limited. Republicans also held Mississippi's governorship, by about five points..)

As for how much solace this night provides a year before the 2024 election? There's a real question about whether Republicans just don't turn out when Trump isn't on the ballot. Beshear was an incumbent. Virginia leans blue. And even if Democrats as a whole are well-poised, that doesn't necessarily mean Biden, with his various liabilities, will be able to take advantage.

But you'd rather have good elections than bad ones. And Tuesday should at least give Democrats a modicum of badly needed hope.

## **2 Even when abortion rights weren't literally on the ballot, they won**

Ohio wasn't the only place where the signs on abortion rights continued to be strong for Democrats.

Youngkin and Virginia Republicans campaigned hard on what they reasoned was a more-palatable 15-week abortion ban (as opposed to a total or 6-week ban), after antiabortion GOP hard-liners struggled mightily in 2022. It didn't work.

Among those hard-liners was Cameron, who at one point endorsed a state law banning abortion with no exceptions. (Cameron later said he would support exceptions.) The race featured a late, powerful Beshear ad with a childhood rape survivor criticizing Cameron.

Think of that: a red-state Democrat running on abortion rights and winning. Only in a post-Roe world.

Democrats also won a Pennsylvania state Supreme Court race in which they sought to emphasize abortion rights. While the race wasn't determinative for control of the court, it echoed Democrats running and winning on the issue in a vital state Supreme Court race in another swing state earlier this year: Wisconsin.

The Ohio result is worth emphasizing for a couple other reasons. Republicans had sought a workaround to defeat the measure in August: raising the threshold for passing ballot measures to 60 percent. So voters effectively rejected the GOP's position by large margins twice.

The Ohio measure also appeared to be flirting with the high 50s — suggesting Ohio could vote more in favor of such a measure than neighboring and swingier Michigan (56.7 percent).

We'll see if this continues to look as if it's Democrats' silver bullet. At the very least, Republicans should probably thoroughly revise the way they have been pushing an issue that's still vexing them. And Democrats will surely now put this on as many ballots as possible (see: Arizona, South Dakota, Missouri and Florida), making it as much of an issue as they can.

### **3 Youngkin down, Beshear up**

The big question heading into Tuesday night was what the results might say about Youngkin's potential heft on the national stage. The night ended with more reason to believe that Beshear might one day wind up there.

A governor has only so much control over state legislative races, and Virginia (again) is a blue state. But Youngkin invested heavily in trying to get a state legislature that could help him push along his agenda and seemed to lean into the election's 2024 implications.

"I think they're the most important elections in America, because these issues that are so important to Virginians are also the ones that are going to be so important to Americans next year," he said over the weekend.

The fact that Republicans not only failed to win the state Senate but also lost the state House should help extinguish whatever illusions people might still have about Youngkin riding in as a late Trump alternative in the 2024 race.

But as one hopeful fades, another rises. Beshear has now won two races in a state that favored Trump by 26 points in 2020. The first could have been dismissed as a fluke, given that in 2019 he faced an unpopular Republican incumbent in a tough environment for the GOP. But he significantly expanded his margin of victory this time. He's also just 45 years old.

He's not the only governor to win multiple times in an unfavorable state for his party. Such governors tend to have little hope nationally because of how much they have to moderate and even criticize their party. But in Beshear, Democrats could actually have someone potentially acceptable to their base. He's largely in line with his national party on key social issues.

At the very least, you'd have to consider him a very attractive possible running mate — whenever Democrats might be looking to assemble a new ticket.