

Democrats seize on abortion ruling in midterms as Republicans tread carefully

The contrasting reactions reflect the broader midterm calculations of each party ahead of the November elections

By [Annie Linskey](#) and [Colby Itkowitz](#)

Updated June 26, 2022 at 4:00 p.m. EDT | Published June 26, 2022 at 7:06 a.m. EDT

Democrats across the country are seizing on the Supreme Court ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade*, with state and federal candidates seeking to turn anger about the decision into support at the ballot box, even as Republicans aim to keep attention on rising prices and crime less than five months before the midterms.

Led by President Biden, who declared Friday that “Roe is on the ballot” and “personal freedoms are on the ballot,” Democrats on the front lines of the fight to keep the party’s slim congressional majorities have cast their campaigns as key parts of a larger battle to restore abortion rights prevent the rollback of other liberties. Democratic candidates for governor, attorney general and offices at the state level, where abortion laws will now be fully determined, pledged to put the issue at the forefront of their campaigns.

“We are facing a watershed moment for our constitutional rights,” said Cheri Beasley, the Democratic Senate nominee in North Carolina, a key battleground and a state that could draw more women seeking abortions from nearby states barring the procedure. Speaking on Friday at a park in the capital of Raleigh, Beasley warned, “I hope you all know that this doesn’t end this, that the threats don’t stop here.” She urged supporters, “This November let us run, not walk, to the polls.”

Republicans have largely praised the ruling, but some suggested different matters, such as the economic challenges confronting Americans, should take precedence, while others cheered the power of states and lawmakers to decide the future of abortion laws, amounting to a wider range of responses than Democrats, more united in their anger, have offered.

“Roe doesn’t change settled law and it won’t distract voters from unaffordable prices, rising crime or the border crisis,” said Adam Laxalt, the Republican Senate nominee in Nevada, which has a state law legalizing abortion.

The contrasting reactions reflect the broader midterm calculations of each party. Democrats trying to overcome Biden's low approval ratings as well as high gas prices and violent crime have been searching for ways to shift the focus to other issues and give voters second thoughts about replacing them with Republicans. Republican leaders, who have long felt well-positioned to make gains, are wary of refocusing on topics that could diminish their advantage.

While it is unclear whether the ruling will change the contours of the midterms, the Friday decision that overturned the constitutional right to abortion established nearly 50 years ago has added a new element to some of the biggest races across the country.

More than a dozen states have trigger laws that automatically ban most abortions and more could ban the procedure soon due to previously blocked laws that could take effect, including Georgia and Ohio, where there are Senate races that have generated interest from leaders in both parties.

"This is insanity. Ohio has traditionally been a centrist state," said Rep. Tim Ryan, the Democratic Senate nominee in the Buckeye State. He said the issue will be important in his campaign: "This level of extremism is not going to play in Ohio."

While Ohio does not have a trigger law to automatically ban most abortions, shortly after the decision Friday, Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost (R) filed a motion to lift a stay on a 2019 state law that banned abortions after about six weeks. Yost later wrote on Twitter that the injunction had been removed, though liberal groups are still fighting his move.

Ryan also sought to tether the debate over abortion to the cornerstone themes of his campaign: "We built a campaign around issues like freedom — economic freedom, good middle class jobs and wages and making sure we rebuild the middle class. This is an issue of freedom as well," Ryan said.

In neighboring Pennsylvania, Democratic Senate nominee John Fetterman sought to sum up the decision confronting voters this way in a statement: "If there were any doubts left about what's at stake in this race, it became crystal clear today. The right to an abortion will be on the ballot this November in Pennsylvania."

Democratic Rep. Val Demings, running to unseat Florida GOP Sen. Marco Rubio, said she's traveled the state and at every campaign stop someone has asked her about *Roe*. "I do think going back and treating women and girls like second class citizens or property, I think that matters a hell of a lot to men and women in Florida," Demings said in an interview on Friday night.

Senate Democrats saw a significant spike in grass-roots fundraising immediately following the Supreme Court ruling, making for the best day of online fundraising to date this cycle, said an aide to the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to disclose internal fundraising trends.

Biden on Friday urged voters to elect more members of Congress so that abortion rights can be codified in federal law. But unless that happens, abortion laws will be decided state-by-state, giving greater significance to races there this year.

In Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer (D), who is up for reelection in a swing state, renewed her call for the state court to clarify the status of a 1931 law banning abortion and said she will "fight like hell" to preserve reproductive rights.

Some Democratic candidates for attorney general pledged that they would not prosecute those seeking or performing abortions. “This will be the number one issue in my campaign,” said Kris Mayes, a Democrat running for Attorney General in Arizona.

Democratic strategists argued that such a massive change in the legal landscape will trigger a drumbeat of news coverage as states adapt to the new legal realities, keeping the issue front of mind for a sustained period. Some argued it could also help the party improve its standing among women, including those in the suburbs who grew frustrated with Democrats over pandemic school closures.

“If you are in a close race this will be a game changer,” said John Anzalone, a Democratic pollster working in several midterm campaigns.

But Republican strategists predicted that the fundamental contours of the election haven’t changed. “The universal issue is the concern over the economy and that’s going to drive the election more than any other issue as much as the Democrats are trying to prevent that from happening,” said John Brabender, a veteran GOP operative.

Republicans in tough races issued a raft of statements in the aftermath of the decision, largely praising it but also downplaying the impact in the near-term.

“The Court’s ruling correctly empowers the people’s representatives in each state to decide how best to protect unborn lives,” said Rep. Ted Budd, who is North Carolina’s Republican Senate nominee, in a [statement](#).

Republicans in some places have injected a populist message in their response to the decision. J.D. Vance, the GOP Senate nominee against Ryan in Ohio, said in a statement that the decision marks a “new phase” in the antiabortion movement where easing the financial burden of raising a family moves to the forefront.

“We will continue the fight to ensure that every young mother has the resources they need to bring new life into the world,” Vance said.

In Pennsylvania, GOP Senate nominee Mehmet Oz also pivoted to the importance of supporting young families. “As we lift up life, we must focus on the needs of mothers and children, for whom this decision can be the greatest gift of all,” Oz said in a statement.

Like other Republicans in swing states, Oz downplayed any immediate changes that will be brought by the decision. “I am relieved that protecting the lives of America’s unborn children will once again be decided by the people through their elected representatives,” said Oz.

In 2019, Oz voiced concerns on “The Breakfast Club” radio program about a near-complete ban on abortion in Alabama and said that while he didn’t want family members to have an abortion, he also didn’t “want to interfere with everyone else’s stuff.” He faced criticism in the Republican primary over his past remarks.

In the past few days, Democrats have moved quickly to remind voters what GOP candidates have recently said on abortion. In Georgia, the Democratic Party tweeted a video of Republican Senate candidate Herschel Walker being asked if he supported any exceptions to an abortion ban.

“There’s no exception in my mind,” Walker told reporters in May ahead of his Republican primary. “Like I say, I believe in life. I believe in life.”

A GOP Georgia operative, who spoke on the condition of anonymity so he could speak candidly about the fraught issue, acknowledged that the decision could help Democrats but said, “the thing that keeps me optimistic is Democrats are going to overreact.”

