

‘Abortion is a winning issue’: victories in 2023 US elections raise hopes for 2024

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5 More than a year after the US supreme court overturned *Roe v Wade*, handing states the power to decide if and how to ban abortion, voters have again overwhelmingly rejected attempts to curtail access to the procedure. A string of successes for abortion rights groups on Tuesday are raising hopes among Democrats that, despite recent dismal polls, the issue will lift their odds in 2024.

10 In Ohio, the only state to hold an abortion-related ballot referendum in 2023, more than 56% of voters agreed to enshrine the right to the procedure into the state constitution. In Virginia, Democrats won back full control of the state legislature after Republicans campaigned on the promise of a “sensible limit” that would ban most abortions past 15 weeks of pregnancy. In Kentucky, the incumbent Democratic governor, Andy Beshear, bested his anti-abortion Republican opponent. And in Pennsylvania, in a race dominated by talk of abortion, Democrats won a seat on the state supreme court.

What do these victory mean for next year?

15 In 2024, abortion-related referendums may be on the ballot in roughly a dozen states, including in critical swing states like Nevada, Florida, Pennsylvania, Arizona and Iowa. Democrats will almost certainly lean on the issue to buoy their party in races for Congress and the White House. And Tuesday’s results in Ohio raise hopes that they might be able to pluck voters from the other side. While Joe Biden lost Ohio in 2020, garnering only about 45% of the vote, Issue 1, the proposal to add abortion rights into the state constitution, won with an estimated 56% of the vote on Tuesday. That sweep indicates that Republican voters are abandoning their party on this issue.

20 “Abortion is a winning issue, including in states that are considered red,” said Kimberly Inez McGuire, executive director of Urge: Unite for Reproductive & Gender Equity. “Young people, black voters, rural voters – voters all across the state came out and we saw support in every single corner of the state. The lesson for other states is: don’t take anyone for granted. Don’t assume they’re going to support you, but also don’t assume that they’re going to oppose.”

25 The issue turns voters out in high numbers, which could also prove a boon for Biden at a time of low enthusiasm: nearly 4 million people voted this year on Issue 1, according to early data from Ohio’s secretary of state office. That’s only slightly less than the 4.2 million people who turned out to vote in Ohio’s gubernatorial race last year.

30 The failures in Ohio and Virginia also leave Republicans without a clear roadmap for messaging on abortion – an issue that led them to underperform in the 2022 midterms. Their strategy is in question, and any course they choose risks alienating key constituencies.

35 “If the GOP moves to the center on abortion, they’re afraid that they’ll lose conservative donors and base voters – who are the ones who tend to be the most passionate Republican voters, the ones who turn out the most reliably and also people who donate a lot of money,” said Mary Ziegler, a university professor who studies the legal history of reproduction.

40 Despite being directly responsible for overturning *Roe v Wade* through his appointments to the supreme court, Donald Trump has attempted to stem the damage by distancing himself from much of his party, coming out against a national abortion ban. But polling shows that voters don’t necessarily trust Republicans who say they will not totally ban abortion. That may be in part due to their decades-long partnership with an anti-abortion movement that would like to eliminate the procedure entirely.

45 “Republicans can spend their money saying that, ‘We are the moderates on this,’” said Joey Teitelbaum, vice-president of research for Global Strategy Group, a Democratic polling firm. “But in voting for Democrats in Virginia and voting for Andy Beshear, where abortion was a major part of that race and the communications, voters are clearly saying, ‘We do not trust Republicans on this.’”