

## KEY FINDINGS

Below are key takeaways from four groups of 2025 swing voters recruited from across the state of New Jersey.

### The Issue Landscape

- **They claim to be very open to diversity.** These voters claim to support equality and oppose discrimination towards trans people and generally support adults doing whatever they want with their own bodies. They say diversity is a hallmark of living in this area of the country.
- **They are fairly personally familiar with LGBTQ people and issues.** These voters have greater familiarity and first-hand experience with LGBTQ topics and sexuality being taught in schools, children transitioning, and just a generally more present LGBTQ culture. Rather than telling second-hand stories they heard through the grapevine, these voters are talking about LGBTQ people and activism in their own communities.
- **This more liberal environment drives a feeling that LGBTQ culture – and trans people and policy – is being “shoved down their throats.”** They are bothered by a perceived increase in language policing, new pronouns, genders, sexualities, and so on. Because they are experiencing more pronounced LGBTQ culture and shifts in their schools and other public settings, they feel as though these changes are being forced upon them against their will. These voters feel like they aren’t able to live the way they want and are being forced to adapt to other groups and people when ultimately, they want acceptance and tolerance to be a two-way street.
- **This counters their self-described openness for transgender people to live as they are.** Their support for trans rights and equality ends when they feel like others’ decisions impact their own lives. The important thing here: how they define what impacts their own lives is rather broad, ranging from a participant mentioning disdain towards her grandchild seeing a PreP commercial showing a gay male couple to the existence of “trans” (perhaps gender-neutral) bathrooms in a school.

**Although these voters hold more conservative views on trans policies, they were mixed on which political party was more focused on it.** They see both sides using these topics to rile up their base. When it comes to Democrats’ focus, specifically:

- **Many say DEI is proof Democrats drive the focus:** pushing for LGBTQ discussion and trainings in the classroom, workplace, and elsewhere in society where they think it doesn’t belong. Many see these changes as driven by Democrats, and also unnecessary, trivial, and sometimes outright nonsensical (like a math teacher passing out Pride coloring sheets).

- **They feel Democrats act elite and morally superior on these issues.** These voters are irked by the notion that they are doing something ‘wrong’ if they don’t keep up with what feels like a nonstop flood of new politically correct terms and behavior that is ultimately meant to virtue-signal. Some say local families are trying to “one-up” each other by having more LGBTQ children.

### Health Care for Trans Youth

There are two challenges we face when it comes to youth accessing gender-affirming care:

- **These voters see transitioning as a choice. Thus, they see gender-affirming care as cosmetic, or elective** – more akin to getting a tattoo or plastic surgery than a medical necessity. They think it’s no big deal for minors to wait until they’re 18 to access it, just like they have to wait to get tattoos, smoke cigarettes, etc.
- **Many of these voters assume that transgender health care means irreversible surgeries or hormone therapies.** The idea of minors making permanent changes to their body makes them deeply uncomfortable. They don’t see minors as capable of making these decisions or knowing themselves well enough (even if their parent consents) to choose. Many also see being trans as the latest fad, and point to their own youth indiscretions as comparisons, as if being trans is comparable to getting a septum piercing or dying your hair blue.

**Although there is deep opposition at a topline level, it’s a more nuanced story when we dig under the surface – which provides an opening.** These voters are generally alright with minors exploring who they are (even if a minor living as a different gender makes them uncomfortable) and are major proponents of mental health care of all kinds. While there is limited opportunity to educate and explain, if voters understood the type of age-appropriate gender-affirming care actually happening, they would likely be less opposed.

### Dissecting the Attacks

**Sports, and more broadly the idea of parental rights, stuck out in conversation.**

While they’re certainly not with us on youth health care, those concerns were less salient. Meanwhile, sports were most immediately associated with trans issues and many were familiar with rules in local schools to prevent forced outing – believing it was ridiculous for teachers to be forced to hide something like that from parents and an assault on parental rights.

## Specifically...

- **When it comes to sports, these voters talk primarily about fairness (less about safety).** They worry that trans people will have an unfair advantage when it comes to sports and will put cis girls at a permanent disadvantage. Their concerns are much less focused around the issue of safety, which they don't see as big of an issue when it comes to trans kids participating in sports.
- **Sherill's votes and LGBTQ education quote lend credibility to the attacks on her.** These proof points collectively make participants feel they have concrete evidence that Sherrill might tromp on parental rights. If we're the opposition, we'd use her quote to validate the rest of the attacks presented against her. It feeds directly into these voters' central concern about LGBTQ issues more broadly: that it's being pushed down their throats.

Attack	Reaction
<b>ATTACK #1: SPORTS/BATHROOMS/LOCKER ROOMS</b>	
<i>If elected, Mikie Sherrill and the rest of her liberal allies would open the door for radical pro-transgender policies here in New Jersey.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suggests Sherrill will continue Murphy's and national Democrat's push for DEI initiatives and liberal policies in schools</li> </ul>
<i>Sherrill voted against the Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act, forcing young girls to share the playing field and locker rooms with biological men - putting them in unfair, and even dangerous situations...</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citing Sherrill's vote against the "Women and Girls in Sports Act" was powerful as it lent credibility to these claims</li> <li>• Voters were most concerned about fairness, less so about issues with safety on the field or in the locker room. Perhaps because these swing voters were still slightly more liberal, they did not see trans people as a physical threat or sexual predators (which is often implied)</li> </ul>
<i>...Our daughters should not have to worry about biological men leering at them in locker rooms, running them down on the field, or not having a chance in hell to win a high school soccer game because they're forced to play against men. We can't put our daughters at risk because of Sherrill's extreme politics.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tonally, this is seen as overblown and extreme. Some point out that words like "leering" and "running them down on the field" are purposefully inflammatory and inflating the issue – voters don't want the drama, they want straight shooting</li> </ul>

ATTACK #2: PARENTAL RIGHTS/SCHOOLS	
<i>A vote for Mikie Sherrill is a vote to strip us of our parental rights, in exchange for transgender people getting special rights.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental rights are top of mind for these voters, so this frame is damaging</li> <li>• Voters are especially concerned with people getting “special rights,” which ties into their views on fairness in sports</li> </ul>
<i>Sherrill voted against the Parents Bill of Rights Act, allowing students to change genders at school while keeping it a secret from parents...</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Once again, citing Sherrill’s voting record lends credibility to the attack, and makes these voters believe she’d act on policies that would actively strip parents of their rights</li> <li>• Voters are familiar with and largely oppose the existing policy that prevents forced outings in school. It requires explaining to win on this, but with a brief description like the one in this attack, parents think it’s outrageous</li> </ul>
<i>...And in a recent debate, Mikie Sherrill even said, quote, “I would push an LGBTQ education into our schools. Parents have a right to opt out of a lot of things, but this is not an area where they should be opting out.” ...</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While this quote alone wasn’t a strong enough hit on Sherrill, voters were a mixed bag on LGBTQ education. Paired with other parts of the attack, it effectively increased credibility to the claims that Sherrill will act in the best interest of a few, while taking rights away from parents and girls</li> </ul>
<i>...On top of that, Sherrill’s pro-transgender policies would allow children to receive irreversible sex change surgery without their parents knowing and before they’re old enough to make these permanent decisions. Sherrill’s anti-parent views are out of touch with New Jersey.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This part of the attack was seen as overblown and came across as a scare tactic, with voters not believing that children could receive sex change surgery without their parents knowing. If the other side goes too far, we’ll want to exploit these dramatizations to seed doubt in their claims.</li> </ul>

### General Messaging Guidance

**Tonally, we need to sound direct and to the point.** These New Jersey voters are straight shooters – that’s what they value, and are looking for elected officials to do the same. They are quick to call BS and write off anything that sounds remotely evasive, even when the statement in question fairly directly addresses their underlying concerns. This could mean:

- Actually saying the word “transgender”
- Taking a more aggressive posture in calling out the other side’s BS
- Pushing off of Democrats’ elitism

**Our message balance needs to address the issues and move on.** We can't just ignore the issue or even respond as subtly as we can in many states. These voters see both approaches as evasive. But we also need to move on after making a statement. The more time we spend on this, the deeper a hole we dig for ourselves.

**We must consistently emphasize parents and doctors.** Our messages mentioned both, but sparingly. In the absence of these two entities, voters assumed parents were not involved in decisions around their children. We need to constantly remind them that we are on the side of responsible parents.

**Outside messengers may be helpful at delivering the pivot.** When candidates try to quickly pivot away from trans attacks by saying the right wants to "distract us," it typically flops and comes off as evasive. There seems to be promise in a third party acknowledging the attacks and shifting gears towards "the issues that matter."

**Adequate bio and inoculation may be the missing piece to receptive voters.** These voters were generally less receptive to our responses than we have seen elsewhere. We also spent very little time on either candidate's background. While we can't say for certain, it's possible that spending so little time inoculating and building up Sherrill was part of the reason it was so tough to win these voters back relative to our Virginia and Wisconsin focus groups.

#### **Messaging Themes:**

- **Safety:** Talking about safety in Sherrill's response was not as effective with these voters: it felt like a non-sequitur given their primary concern was fairness, not safety. They were unable to connect the dots between safety and policies around transgender people and didn't understand how Sherrill's record of working with police to crack down on child predators and guns had anything to do with her stance on trans issues.
  - One positive takeaway: these swing voters deeply appreciated her record on gun violence prevention. They were drawn to it enough that they stopped talking about her evasiveness on trans issues for a moment.
- **Record of Women's Sports Equality Advocacy:** Leaning into Sherrill's background as a woman in male-dominated spaces and championing of equality in women's sports was popular - among women (and even prompted some backlash with men). For the women, it was a clear antidote to concerns around fairness in sports, because it proved that she cared about women athletes, equality for women, and voters don't believe that an athlete, and mom of two female athletes, would willingly put her daughters (or other girls) in unfair situations.

- One area that could use work: Specifically mentioning Sherrill's work with Title IX reforms was convincing to those who already knew about Title IX, but fell flat and was confusing among those who were unaware. In order for this part of the response to resonate with voters, we'll need to do a better job at explaining what it is.
- **Leaning into Motherhood:** In both responses that touched on this, Sherrill's role as a mother, particularly of two daughters who are competitive athletes, was powerful. At the end of the day, these voters just had a hard time believing she would do something that would put her own children in an unfair or dangerous position, or undermine her own rights as a mother. While this has consistently underperformed in quantitative, we believe it has value.
- **Mental health:** These voters quickly identified mental health as a major challenge facing New Jersey youth. Mentioning Sherrill's work expanding mental health resources to all students shows Sherrill would protect and prioritize students across the state. We should further explore messaging that leverages this and other pro-family/parent proof points that resonate with these voters to nod and soothe on parental rights without ceding ground.
- **Blanket Bans vs. Local Sports Associations:** Responding to sports attacks by reminding voters that there are already rules made up by local entities was a mixed bag – driven by their primary concern around fairness. Many (rightly) pointed out that rules must be statewide because many local schools and districts play each other, so there has to be consistency in order to have fair play and that as Governor, she is responsible for these sorts of state decisions.

*Global Strategy Group conducted 4 online focus groups of swing voters among New Jersey 2025 likely voters on July 8 and July 9, 2025.*