Comparing Candidate Responses to Attacks Around Transgender Athletes

After the 2024 post-election narrative, it was not a surprise that attacks on trans issues became a staple in Republicans' 2026 political advertisements, spending nearly $400 million on them this cycle according to AdImpact. Rather than avoiding the issue this time, many Democrats fought back with a balanced, values-based, fairness-first approach and flipped Trump districts and states.

Texas

Races up and down the ballot in Texas saw Republican attacks on transgender issues and drew a variety of Democratic responses. In Texas' 34th district (PVI R+3), Democratic Rep. Vicente Gonzalez released an ad saying that he voted "to keep boys out of girls' sports and their locker rooms." While Gonzalez kept his seat and outperformed Democratic '24 margins by 25.8 points, James Talarico outperformed Democrats statewide by 26.1 points without misgendering transgender people.

TX-Senate: James Talarico (PVI R+6)

Senator-elect James Talarico took a balanced approach in response to the $55.67 million Republicans spent against him on trans issues. He said on Fox News that he would "oppose trans athletes playing in girls' sports if it risks safety or fairness." He prioritized fairness without backing blanket bans or calling transgender girls "boys," and his improvement over the 2024 Democratic presidential margin shows that candidates can win with such a message in even the reddest of states.

Ohio

As in Texas, Ohio Democrats faced millions of dollars' worth of Republican anti-trans attacks and responded in different ways. In Ohio's 9th district (PVI R+5) Democratic Rep. Marcy Kaptur released an ad saying that she voted with Republicans on transgender issues and that "boys should not play in girls' sports." Kaptur held her seat, overperforming Democrats' 2024 margins by 16 points, but Senator-elect Sherrod Brown achieved an identical 16-point overperformance statewide without repeating the language of the attacks.

OH-Senate: Sherrod Brown (PVI R+5)

A $9.68 million Senate Leadership Fund ad featured a woman claiming that she had been falsely diagnosed as transgender and received inappropriate healthcare, and that Democratic candidate Sherrod Brown supported sex changes for minors. His response was quick and impactful, providing evidence that the ad was false and then pivoting to explain how Republican candidate Jon Husted voted to block the release of the Epstein files after taking money from Epstein associates.

Iowa (PVI R+6)

Democrats in Iowa also responded to transgender issues with an array of responses. Just 10 days before the election, Senator-elect Josh Turek came under fire for an ad saying he opposed "males competing in female sports." Days before, Democratic Rep.-elect Sarah Trone Garriott of Iowa's 3rd district (PVI R+2) released an ad saying she didn't believe "adult men should be in girls' locker rooms." Turek flipped the state by 17.3 points from 2024, and Trone Garriott did so in her district by 11.6 points, but two other Iowans achieved similar results with a different approach.

IA-02: Lindsay James (PVI R+4)

In Iowa's 2nd district, Lindsay James invoked her experience as a chaplain, saying that her faith teaches her to protect kids and use common sense to keep sports fair. James flipped the district, improving on the 2024 Democratic presidential margin by 13.9 points, outperforming her neighbor,

Sarah Trone Garriott.

IA-01: Christina Bohannan (PVI R+4)

In Iowa's 1st district, Christina Bohannan responded to Republican attacks by highlighting her experience as an athlete and how she cares about fairness in girls' sports. She then pivoted to attack incumbent Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks for her alleged collusion with drug companies. Bohannan not only ousted Miller-Meeks, but she overperformed Democrats '24 margins by 17.6 points, more than either Turek or Garriott.

NC-01: Don Davis (PVI R+5)

Democratic Rep. Don Davis responded to the $9.47 million spent against him on transgender issues with an approach similar to Bohannan's: an ad highlighting his experience as an athlete and underscoring that he cares about fairness and safety in women's and girls' sports. Davis was subjected to major redistricting efforts and was rated the most vulnerable Democratic incumbent of the cycle by Cook Political Report, but he still won by 3.3 points in a district Trump would have won by 11.6.

MT-01: Sam Forstag (PVI R+5)

Republicans spent $1.5 million attacking Sam Forstag on transgender issues, and his response was simple but, evidently, effective: briefly clipping one of the attack ads and then stressing that he believed in kids' safety, fairness, and keeping politicians out of people's business, whether it's the gun safe or the doctor's office. Forstag won Montana's Trump+11.5 district by 3.5 points.

AZ-06: JoAnna Mendoza (PVI R+0)

JoAnna Mendoza delivered another red-to-blue flip in Arizona's 6th district, which Trump won in 2024. Mendoza responded to the attacks against her on transgender issues with an ad underscoring her experience as a mother and her focus on safety and fairness, then pivoting to argue that Republicans are focused on the wrong issues. Her margin of victory is still being counted.

Conclusion

As evident in this data, the candidates who articulated a values-based response emphasizing fairness and the need for rules were able to blunt anti-trans attacks and win even in purple-to-red territory. And they did so without boxing themselves into support for blanket bans or embracing the language of the right-wing attack. There's no evidence in these results that repeating right-wing language or calling transgender girls "boys" or transgender women "men" would have increased their electoral prospects. In fact, from what we can observe of these case studies, there's no discernible benefit to adopting the rhetoric of the anti-trans attacks. And there's plenty of evidence that another path can calm the concerns of swing voters, while not alienating the base, or more importantly, locking yourself into policy positions that will harm transgender people.