THIRD WAY

Rebutting Anti-Transgender Attacks in 2026

In this midterm cycle, President Trump and his allies have spent nearly $400 million launching anti-transgender attacks against Democratic candidates in virtually every state and district. While the party was caught flat-footed in 2024—refusing to counter directly the infamous they/them ad, which contributed to a perception that it was out-of-touch and extreme—this year, Democrats did something different. They took the concerns of swing voters seriously, combatted the attacks, and won the battle of reasonableness on transgender issues. In our pre-election poll of Congressional battleground voters, they said they trusted Democrats on these issues more than Republicans by 11 points. Numerous public polls agree. And among Trump voters who now view him unfavorably, they too side with Democrats on the issue by a point.

This did not happen by accident. Extensive research conducted by Third Way, the Transgender Freedom Alliance, and other allies plotted a path forward for candidates and policymakers to push back against these noxious attacks in ways that helped manage the concerns of cross-pressured voters. The most recent rounds of research built on more than three dozen conducted over the last few years, and it pointed to three key takeaways: 1) silence is deadly; 2) you can meet swing voters where they are without endorsing blanket bans; and 3) that approach is *at least* as effective as repeating the Republican attack, potentially more so.

1. SILENCE IS DEADLY

The latest research confirmed what was extremely evident to even a casual political observer: anti-trans attacks can seriously damage a candidate's support, if left unanswered. Too many consultants and advocates pushed Democrats simply to ignore these attacks and change the subject in previous cycles. That was a mistake.

In a July 2026 ad test we conducted with ads made by 76 Words and measured by Grow Progress, an attack mirroring many we saw this cycle in countless races reduced support for the Democratic candidate by eight points. While few voters say transgender issues are a top priority, they do care about these issues, have real concerns, and take it as a sign that a candidate is either extreme, evasive, or both if he or she fails to address them.

2. VOTERS WANT RULES AND PARENTAL GUARDRAILS

Supermajorities of voters oppose discrimination against transgender people and support a wide array of policies to ensure they have the same basic rights as all other Americans. However, as evident in public polling, many have concerns about transgender girls participating in elite, competitive sports and about certain kinds of health care for transgender young people. Those concerns can be assuaged by touting support for rules (not laws) and parents (not politicians).

When it comes to sports participation, we all want sports to be fair and student athletes to be safe. That's why sports associations absolutely can and should make rules to keep girls' sports fair. But those rules don't need to be the same in college and kindergarten. Sports associations know best how to keep things fair within different ages, levels of competition, and sports. We don't need politicians to overrule them with blanket bans that target kids who are just trying to run around with their friends at recess.

When it comes to health care for transgender adolescents, parents know best how to make nuanced health care decisions for their own kids, and they shouldn't be overruled by politicians. No young person should be able to access this care without the knowledge, involvement, and consent of their parents (which is already required in every state). And no parent should be jailed for getting their child the health care they need.

We tested the anti-trans attacks against direct responses that incorporated these approaches and then pivoted to other issues. Not only did they gain back the support lost (-8) when voters first heard the attacks, they boosted the Democratic candidate above where they started—adding nine, 12, and 14 points, respectively.

3. RULES AND GUARDRAILS CAN BEAT BANS

Many political commentators, consultants, and candidates were spooked by the reported impact of the they/them ad and the fury of the post-election narrative in 2024. In the maelstrom of a media environment claiming transgender issues were "80%/20%" against Democrats, some candidates running in purple and red places responded by accepting the premise of the attacks and acceding to the Republican demand for blanket bans on sports participation or health care for young people. A few decided to repeat the language of the attacks as well, calling transgender girls or women "boys" or "men."

We tested those approaches against other possible responses to the attacks, including our own recommendations based on dozens of rounds of research. We found that compared to the existing party brand, a Democratic candidate who says "I don't believe biological boys should play girls' sports" is indeed viewed more favorably (61%, 55% with Independents). But a candidate who focuses on rules and safety, without adopting the MAGA frame, outperforms those numbers by double digits. A Democrat who says "Sports associations should set rules to ensure girls' sports remain fair and safe—not politicians" gains 73% favorability (63% with Independents), and one who says "Keeping our daughters safe is my top priority, whether it is on the playing field or in the locker room" hits 75% (71% with Independents).

We also ran an ad test, rebutting an anti-trans attack with either a "no boys in girls' sports" framing or an alternative that focuses on rules rather than blanket bans and does not misgender transgender women and girls in the process. The attack took 10 points off the candidate's support, but the rules approach 1) fully neutralized the attack, 2) added support to our candidate's baseline, and 3) outperformed the harsher approach.

The upshot is that a candidate does not need to repeat the anti-trans attack language to appeal to cross-pressured voters. What's more, calling transgender girls "boys" starts down a path that leads to Republicans insisting on calling Representative Sarah McBride "Mr. McBride." You don't have to misgender people to assert your strong support for rules in sports and parents in health care. A fairness, rules, and parental guardrails approach can calm concerns of swing voters without causing backlash from others in a majority-making coalition or using language many feel is disrespectful.

CONCLUSION

Democrats learned and demonstrated this cycle that they can win the battle of reasonableness on these issues. We worked with Global Strategy Group to ask congressional battleground voters in our last round of research this cycle (August 2026) which candidate they would prefer:

The Democrat who says, "*As a parent, nothing matters more than keeping my daughters safe. It's why I believe sports associations should be setting rules to keep women's and girls' sports safe and fair. But protecting kids goes way beyond the girls' playing field. It means releasing the Epstein files, putting sexual predators behind bars, and giving parents more insight and control over their kids' online safety. That's what I'm focused on.*" OR

The Republican who says, "*My opponent is another extreme liberal who wants biological boys in our girls' locker rooms and on our girls' playing fields. They are putting our daughters at risk and taking away your rights as a parent.*"

The initial generic ballot started out with Democrats up three in the sample (47%/44%). After hearing this pair of statements, the Democratic candidate ended up 12 (56%/44%). That's the sort of response that led to Democrats having a big night.