

KEY FINDINGS

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

When it comes to transgender people, these voters...

- **Believe being transgender is a choice.** These voters spend so little time questioning their own gender that many struggle to imagine what that feels like and believe being transgender is a decision. And, perhaps more importantly, some say even if being transgender is biological, it's a choice to actually come out and/or transition. In their minds, if someone is making the choice to be trans, then they should have to deal with the consequences.
- **Think there are immutable, biological differences between trans women and cis women.** They are imagining trans women as bigger, stronger, faster, and conversely, trans men as weaker and smaller than cis men.
- **Say the whole issue is sort of annoying and pushed on them...**
 1. **Politically.** It impacts so few people, it doesn't really need to take up as much oxygen as it does. Politicians are forcing it into being a top issue.
 2. **Culturally.** They feel like acceptance, politically correct language, and pronouns have all been pushed at them.

When it comes to policy...

- **They express more openness to government intervention than most.** Virginians – many of whom work in or are surrounded by government workers – are more government-friendly than we've seen elsewhere. They don't have as adverse a reaction to government making decisions on these policies and are open to it (though not set on who should be deciding what).
- **Share many of the concerns about trans women in sports that we've seen elsewhere: fairness and, to a significantly lesser degree, safety.** They believe trans women have an innate advantage over cis women that makes inclusion inherently unfair. They are more concerned about this than physical safety. While they think the innate differences worsen post-puberty, some express concerns at all ages.
- **Worry about permissive policies creating loopholes that bad people can exploit.** While many of these voters concede that trans people looking to be included are probably not trying to do harm, they worry about people (trans or not) with bad intentions taking advantage of the rules to do bad things. Think a cis man claiming to be transgender so he can enter a women's space and then leering at/harassing women.

- **Democrats are the ones focusing on the topic, but Republicans are likely too extreme.** These voters clearly see Democrats as the party focused on transgender people and think that generally, they go too far in supporting inclusion. It's unclear exactly what they feel drives this focus; some say the party forces it, others, the media or donors. That said, these voters are also squeamish about siding with Republicans. Republicans come off as overly cruel towards trans people.
 - *When pushed on why politicians run ads on it, these voters believe it's to create controversy or distract from the fact they don't have solutions to key issues like crime and the economy.*

Dissecting the Attack:

The following attack was shown in groups without Spanberger's name attached to understand where it has merit and why. On the whole, the attack strains credulity, but the fact that it has so many layers makes it hard to counter. It's like playing a whack-a-mole game. Each element of this multi-faceted attack had a different impact but on the whole, these voters say a candidate who does this:

- Doesn't respect our troops generally
- Doesn't get what it takes for Virginia families to live,
- Prioritizes the few over the many, and
- Puts girls' safety at risk

Attack	Reaction
<i>While our troops struggle to pay the bills and get by, this elected official voted against making sure they get paid...</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suggests the candidate isn't patriotic and does not respect the people who defend us. • Seen as specifically hurting Virginia families given preponderance of Navy families in Norfolk. Feels deeply personal. • Suggests the candidate cares about the few (trans kids) over the many (families of our troops and the entire country our troops are defending). • Notably, no one thinks of the families of the trans kids the way they think of the military families.
<i>...in order to ensure that taxpayers will be forced to keep paying for child sex changes.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Massive confusion. They do not understand how trans health care is connected to troop pay - but still concerning! • To the extent they can explain, voters accurately assume it's a bill with tons in it, and these are just two components. • Very concerned about taxpayer funding of anything trans-related. They deem this "elective" surgery akin

	<p>to something cosmetic and believe they should not have to pay for it. This goes back to the idea that being trans is a choice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even absent the taxpayer-funding element, children getting “sex changes” crosses the line for some. These voters did not see it as a matter of “safety” so much as going too far in trusting children to make important decisions or consent before adulthood. • Notably, they do not see “force” as inflammatory in this context and are comfortable with the term “sex change” being used.
<p><i>As Governor, they will have free rein to go even further, forcing biological boys and men into girls’ bathrooms, locker rooms, and on sports teams, putting our daughters at risk.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of this piece pales in comparison to the troops part. • The word “forced” came off as inflammatory in this context. • But the biological men in girls’ bathrooms highlights their concern about opening loopholes in the law that put kids in danger. Safety is at risk here.

Key Components of Abigail’s Profile and How They Can Help:

These voters were concerned but confused by the attack. While they could see it applying to a standard liberal, it felt at odds with pieces of Spanberger’s bio, specifically because...

- **Family military background.** These voters see the military as a particularly important institution in Virginia. The fact that Abigail comes from a military family is a major positive – the details (in this case, related to her dad utilizing the GI bill) makes it feel like an extra strong attribute. It also imbues a sense that she is “all-American” and particularly patriotic.

How it helps: There’s no way someone as patriotic and from a military family like that would ever do something to harm our troops.

- **Her own law enforcement experience** was largely a positive – though more of a mixed bag for Black voters who came to see her as a cop who might stop and frisk them. Many of these voters conflated her experience with actually being in the military, which is a good thing. This background made her come across as serious and provided proof she cares about one of their top issues (crime and child safety).

How it helps: Her experience was about protecting children and keeping them out of harm's way, so she's unlikely to do the opposite. Generally, her bio is more conservative-coded.

- **She's a normal person and specifically, an involved parent.** Key bio details help paint Abigail as someone who *gets it* and isn't as out of touch as other politicians. No doubt this is important generally, but it is especially helpful on this topic, where voters want legislators to be grounded in the concerns of everyday people and worry kids are being trusted to make extremely consequential decisions on their own. Key drivers of this sentiment:
 - **Daughters in public schools:** This is relatable and also combats perceptions of elitism. It was a lot more important to the moms than non-moms, though obviously that difference would be better assessed by quantitative research.
 - **Girl Scout Troop Leader:** Like the above, it shows she is engaged in a normal person's activity and in her children's lives.
 - **Mom in foster care:** These voters believe that having a mom who went through the foster system gave Abigail a perspective that few had and likely helped ground her.

How it helps: She cares about her kids and isn't an out-of-touch politician, so she would never put our kids in danger or do something any 'normal' parent would disagree with.

- **Bipartisanship.** Through her accomplishments and overall bio, these voters buy that she's bipartisan and not a raging liberal. This is especially important given the attack relies on people believing she follows the Democratic party line. Nothing about Spanberger makes this attack believable.

How it helps: Solidifies her reputation for being moderate, reasonable, and unlikely to do something extreme.

Themes to Explore in Messaging:

All-American Military Daughter: Bolstering Abigail's deep military ties through her father, personal understanding of what it means to put your life on the line, and work to help troops/vets addresses concerns that she is unpatriotic and doesn't care about our troops. That she pushed back on Biden to support our troops specifically stands out.

On the flip side, it is less clear whether responding to the veterans part of the attack alone does enough to sow doubt in the rest of the attack. We should explore whether bolstering her military ties from the get makes the eventual attack less believable and which accomplishments best rebut what voters will be hearing.

Children's Safety: This clearly worked well in Wisconsin and shows promise here too, especially as it relates to bathrooms and locker rooms. But, because the core of the attack on Spanberger focused less on these elements and more on troops and "sex changes," safety doesn't feel quite as relevant to some voters. We should continue iterating on how to make it feel maximally resonant.

The two dominant subthemes here are:

- **Abigail has made a career of protecting children.** Tying in her efforts to take down child abusers feels most relevant than protecting kids' health care and from fentanyl. Talking about the actors she is cracking down on who prey on kids in the health care and fentanyl situations may work better.
- **Abigail is invested in children's safety because she's a mother.** We may have more luck focusing on how Abigail is a mom of three school age kids who attend public schools. Her kids and her family would be impacted by the decisions made on these topics, and so of course she would never do anything to put them in harm's way or an unfair situation.

Explaining the Poison Pill: Explaining complicated legislative maneuvers is typically not effective territory, but many of these voters had an a-ha moment when we laid out how the troop pay raise bill she voted against was chock-full of culture war nonsense (like efforts to limit abortion). It also gave us an opportunity to show how Republicans are focused on this and could be a useful technique in debates – both for undermining the attack's effectiveness and driving the narrative in news coverage when these ads eventually emerge. We should explore other ways to do this concisely.

Weaker Themes:

- **Her decisiveness and valuing freedom:** Invoking values – either Abigail's generally or freedom – doesn't rise to the top, but it's probably worth exploring further. It fell flat, in part, because the attack is so specific. Framing it as being specifically about parents/servicemembers having the freedom to make health care decisions for their family to more directly rebut the attack may be more effective.
- **Contrast with Winsome:** Focus group participants never like negative messaging. This was no different, but there was an extra layer here where *just* going on offense without addressing the concerning elements of the attack was not enough. Given Earle-Sears' extreme views and that most people will not see each side's message back-to-back, there's likely more to dig in on here.

Ideas we didn't test directly but could explore with either Spanberger or future candidates:

- **Spanberger doesn't get pushed around by anyone.** Voters can only justify the attack applying to Spanberger by pointing to the D next to her name. They assume that as a Democrat, you must support "extreme" stances because of donors, party leaders, and/or far-left voters. Showing how Spanberger doesn't get pushed around by anyone and stands up to Biden, to members of Congress who want to profit off of us, etc, could help undermine these assumptions even if it doesn't address the attack. It also could help position her as a strong executive – something just a couple voters noted she may be lacking.
- **Positioning Earle-Sears as focused/extreme on this issue.** These voters aren't focused on this issue and are annoyed Democrats are. We may not be able to eliminate that perception, but showing Earle-Sears is just as, if not more, focused may be enough to level the playing field. This would be especially helpful because these voters don't actually love Republicans' handling of this issue to date. Some specific points to keep in mind when doing this:
 - Earle-Sears being a Christian is not a bad thing. Her deciding policy based on her faith is risky though, even with participants who are devout Christians themselves. It suggests a more anti-abortion, cultural focus.
 - Voters think politicians focus on this because 1) they don't know how to solve our actual problems (public safety, cost of living) so they want us focusing elsewhere; and 2) to create controversy. These participants didn't organically use "divide and distract" language.
 - When Republicans use more aggressive language (e.g., force), it perpetuates the helpful belief that they are too extreme as well.
- **Push off of the poison pill to show clear focus.** Voters are irritated by politicians voting on massive bills that include tons of irrelevant issues. That's especially frustrating given how they're struggling right now. They want clear, direct action – not bloated, useless bills. Naming this problem and promising to stay focused on solving the problems affecting voters, one by one, could help 1) undermine assumptions that Democrats focus too much on culture issues, 2) show she's against the kind of government waste taxpayers hate; 3) erode the effectiveness of the attack; and 4) position her as a decisive executive.
- **A clear position on the role of government.** Voters dislike government paying for what they deem "elective surgeries." They don't see that as government's role, and it feeds the notion that Democrats are too spendy. Articulating what government should and shouldn't be involved in could help inoculate. It would also help set her up to respond should they more specifically hit her on providing "sex changes" to kids without referencing troops, etc.

- **Narrowing in on veterans.** Earle-Sears has her own military history so this may not be the best territory for us. However, there may be an opportunity to narrow the conversation in on veterans and their care. This would mean basically positioning any bans on health care embedded in the NDAA as bans on military families' care. This would help 1) show Spanberger cares about the military; 2) implicitly address why government is involved; and 3) put her back on offense. That said, we should try a more direct approach to this than we used in the focus groups. The more rhetorical version came off as a tad too vague and political speak for these voters.
- **Broadening the “taxpayer funding” conversation to popular programs like Medicare and Medicaid.** The voters from northern Virginia are thinking about the Musk/Trump reckless cuts daily. Their communities are being upended. Positioning the attack as another spot where politicians are recklessly cutting *necessary* health care like Medicare and Medicaid, cutting funding from rural hospitals because doctors are using their experience/training to make decisions together with parents may make it feel like more of a negative.

Global Strategy Group conducted 4 online focus groups of swing voters among Virginia 2025 likely voters on April 1 and April 3, 2025.