Opinion

NCR Voices



A person with an outline of the state of Ohio on the back of their hoodie fills out a ballot during early in-person voting at the Hamilton County Board of Elections Nov. 2, 2023, in Cincinnati. (AP photo/Carolyn Kaster)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

November 6, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

There will be a few key elections tomorrow but campaign watchers should be wary of any analysis that seeks to extrapolate national trends from these very specific contests. Off-year elections get a lot of attention because they have the stage to themselves, but they do not necessarily serve as a leading political indicator of national trends.

The contest most likely to dominate headlines does not even involve candidates. In Ohio, voters will register their will on a referendum that would put a right to an abortion into that state's constitution. The amendment would guarantee a right to procure an abortion up until the point of fetal viability, about 24 weeks. The law stood at 21 weeks before the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs* v. *Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which allowed states to regulate and even restrict the procedure. Ohio legislators passed a six-week ban but a court barred it from taking effect.

Republicans in the Buckeye State tried to raise the bar for passing an amendment to the state constitution from 50% to 60% in a special election in August, but voters rejected the effort. That result was widely presumed to indicate a pro-choice tilt in the electorate. It also matches the results in other states where abortion was placed on the ballot as a discrete issue: In California, Michigan and Vermont, voters added abortion rights to their state constitutions and even in red states Kansas and Kentucky, voters beat back proposals that might have restricted the procedure. When abortion is on the ballot as a standalone issue, pro-life groups have lost every post-*Dobbs* election.

That doesn't mean abortion dominates other contests. Ohio's popular Gov. Mike DeWine and his wife, Fran, are appearing in an ad opposing the amendment. DeWine, who signed the six-week ban into law, nonetheless romped to victory in 2022, winning 62.5% of the vote. Even when voters oppose abortion restrictions when voting directly on the issue, it is not clear that politicians who are otherwise popular will pay a price for enacting such restrictions. Democrats who think the issue

will carry them to victory in 2024 shouldn't be so confident of that result.

Kentucky is a red state with a Democratic governor. The Bluegrass State, along with Mississippi, Virginia and Louisiana, holds its gubernatorial elections in odd-numbered years. Republican Attorney General Daniel Cameron is doing his best to gin up turnout in the more conservative parts of the state, tagging incumbent Gov. Andy Beshear as too liberal for Kentucky. Beshear vetoed some bills restricting transgender rights, which were then passed over his veto. He also vetoed abortion restrictions only to have the legislature override the veto. As noted above, last year, Kentucky voters rejected a proposal to make it harder to enshrine any protections for abortion in the commonwealth's constitution, a key pro-choice win in a red state.



Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear is pictured in a Nov. 14, 2021, photo. (OSV News/Reuters/Jon Cherry)

Kentucky may be a red state — Donald Trump won it by 26 points over Joe Biden in 2020 — but Beshear is surprisingly popular among Republican voters. Beshear also

gets high marks for how he has handled some recent disasters: flooding, a tornado and a mass shooting. Both campaigns have the race close with Beshear slightly ahead. If he wins, and the GOP loses a ton of seats in the state legislature, we can say that abortion proved decisive. If he wins, and the GOP does fine in other contests, then the result can be attributed to his handling of the crises. Either way, if Beshear wins, pro-choice groups will claim the victory was theirs, not his. Other Democratic candidates shouldn't fall for it.

In Mississippi, incumbent Republican Gov. Tate Reeves should be a shoo-in for reelection when you consider how conservative the state is, but he only captured 52% of the vote when he first won the state's highest office four years ago. His opponent, Brandon Presley, has had strong fundraising numbers and his name is magical for some people. Still, it is unlikely that the state which provided the Supreme Court with the case that allowed it to overturn *Roe* v. *Wade* will suddenly tilt left.

Advertisement

Louisiana has already elected its governor. In that state's nonpartisan primary system, if any candidate wins a clear majority in the primary election, they are declared the winner. This year, Republican Jeff Landry did just that, winning 51.6% of the vote. The state's popular incumbent Gov. John Bel Edwards, the only Democratic governor in the Deep South and the only pro-life Democratic governor in the country, was term-limited and couldn't seek reelection.

In the United Kingdom, when the party in power loses a by-election, it is always considered ominous news for the ruling party, as seen last month when Labour won two such contests, one in a traditional Tory stronghold. Special elections in the U.S. do not necessarily yield such predictive results. For starters, the party system remains strong in the U.K. but here it is a mere shadow of itself. As well, our federal system allows a candidate like Beshear to win in Kentucky even though the national party to which he belongs doesn't stand a prayer in the 2024 presidential race.

Tomorrow, then, the results will be overly parsed and self-interested groups will tout the results in order to claim some measure of the victory. Don't fall for it. If Ohio goes pro-choice on the abortion referendum, it doesn't mean Biden will win there next year. If Beshear wins, it will be in spite of national trends, not because of them. Only if there is a tidal wave that works its way down to state legislative races and

municipal contests will tomorrow's elections be a wake-up call to one party or the other.