Opinion
Guest Voices



(Unsplash/Yasmin Peyman)



by Maxwell Kuzma

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

November 18, 2026

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The story of the 2026 midterm elections is not just about impressive wins for the Democrats (The New York Times called it a "blue tsunami"), but more critically a reminder that voters are concerned with the material realities of their lives: Eighty-nine percent of voters identified the economy as the crucial factor motivating their choices at the ballot box. Republicans bet big (to the tune of $183 million) that ads attacking transgender people would move the needle, but scapegoating transgender people failed to motivate voters.

Taking people's economic concerns seriously also means taking seriously the dignity and rights of those most vulnerable to discrimination. Democrats should not fall for the false choice between addressing the cost of living and standing up for transgender people. Both are part of the same commitment to building a more just society.

The election also offered a reminder that transgender people are not merely a talking point but active participants in the democratic life of this country. Several openly transgender or nonbinary candidates won legislative seats, including Allison Montgomery in Alabama, Bentley Hudgins in Georgia, and Jaelynn Scott in Washington, while Delaware's Sarah McBride was reelected to Congress. Their victories reflect the contributions transgender people are already making to public life and the communities they serve.

Although anti-trans laws remain in force across the country at the state and local levels, transgender journalist Erin Reed wrote that the balance of power has shifted enough in four states to give Democrats a chance to overturn some of the worst anti-transgender laws.

In a just society, everyone should have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives and have the same opportunities to participate in public life as everyone else. Ensuring that this is the case respects the dignity of the most vulnerable members of our society.

This principle is central to Catholic social teaching and the preferential option for the poor. As Pope Leo XIV writes in *Dilexi Te*: "I am convinced that the preferential choice for the poor is a source of extraordinary renewal both for the Church and for society, if we can only set ourselves free of our self-centeredness and open our ears to their cry."

For Democrats, this means refusing to abandon vulnerable and marginalized groups such as transgender people just because our rights may be politically inconvenient. Standing with marginalized communities is not separate from the work of building a more just society.

Part of what Leo points to in *Dilexi Te* is setting aside our own assumptions and expectations about someone and actually listening to them. It's the model of encounter that Pope Francis so beautifully lived out, as seen in his encounters with LGBTQ Catholics, including myself. His message of welcome became almost inseparable from our recollection of him, particularly through his famous words, "*todos, todos, todos*."

Related: How did Pope Francis treat trans people? He gave us presence, warmth, love

Genuine listening, of course, requires more than just waiting for your turn to speak. It requires a willingness to be changed by what we hear, by what we learn about someone who is different from us. This is relevant to the lives of transgender people, especially when so much energy has been devoted to talking about us rather than actually talking to us. It's also relevant to the life of the church: Catholic theology demands that the church actually reckon with the lives of the vulnerable and the marginalized, and from that reckoning, be changed.

Unfortunately, many commentators are not able to do this when it comes to transgender people, including Michael Sean Winters. In a column for this newspaper published on Nov. 6, "What should the Democrats do now?", he continues his trend of categorizing transgender people as "cultural issues," othering us rather than leaning in to encounter and learn about us.

In the section of Winters' article devoted to discussing trans rights, his failure to respect transgender identity forces him into a kind of linguistic contortion. For example, he follows the sentence, "Democrats should fight unjust discrimination against transgender persons as part of their core commitment to fairness and inclusion," while later advising them to abandon "trans issues" — a stance that is at odds with that commitment and could leave transgender people more vulnerable to discrimination.

He lampoons Democrats' past support for transgender people, citing both Josh Turek's use of the phrase "biological males" and James Talarico's description of his

own past comments as "cringeworthy," then quickly invokes Francis to cover his bases: "love and compassion, but no gender ideology."

Leaving aside the gender ideology strawman, this approach only resembles the Pope Francis position if you jettison the listening and encounter that were central to his pastoral approach. So-called "compassion" without genuine listening or encounter can easily become paternalism, where someone decides what is best for someone else without actually taking that person's life or story seriously.

Winters also doubles down on his ongoing commitment to misgendering transgender people, using terminology that the trans community has rejected and that is not a necessary part of accurate communication about trans identity. Like Turek, Winters has used the "biological" language, writing, "trans women, who are biological males."

Grammatically speaking, the adjective "trans" itself is sufficient to let the reader understand the background of a transgender person. Insisting on this phrase, which is incredibly hurtful and offensive to transgender people, is a way to reject trans identity and imply that transgender people are pretending to be who we say we are. This is another failure of encounter. Listening begins with taking seriously the language people use to describe their own lives.

Advertisement

On the culture point, Winters uses an "inoculation" and "flu shot" metaphor to make the pursuit of equal rights sound like a political infection Democrats need to protect themselves from rather than a core commitment that should be central to their platform. Debate on specific policies using the most accurate and up-to-date evidence is healthy, and the established science and research on trans identity is well-established: This is not a developing field, although further research will always bring greater insights.

Repeatedly framing a minority group's rights as a liability not only represents a moral failure but will ultimately prove to be a political one as well.

Catholics are called to a higher standard. The social teaching of the church demonstrates time and time again that the preferential option is expressed through the lives of those who experience poverty and exclusion.

Think about that $183 million spent on ads attacking transgender people. Living in the real world, transgender people face rates of homelessness and income insecurity that remain disproportionately high. There is no shortage of money to manufacture fear about the trans community.

But that does not mean that we have to embrace this narrative. The story of the 2026 midterm elections should be a story about what type of country we want to build. Democrats should not look at issues related to transgender people as a political infection they need inoculation from. Democrats should remain committed to their advocacy for vulnerable groups, as should Catholics.

That means defending transgender people's equal access to public life, opposing discrimination, and ensuring that the people most affected by policy decisions have a meaningful voice in shaping them. It means treating transgender people not as a political problem to manage, but as constituents whose dignity and participation matter.

We can discuss evidence, age-appropriate care, and how to handle participation in sports without turning trans people into scapegoats or equating our identities and lives with an ideological threat. Genuine engagement requires more than discussing these questions from a distance. It requires listening to transgender people, respecting the language we use to describe our own lives, and allowing our experiences to inform the decisions that affect us.

That is what encounter and listening really looks like. And it is how we can model the respectful care and kindness that Francis showed to the transgender community.

This story appears in the **2026 Midterm Elections** feature series. View the full series.