



To: GOP Candidates
From: American Principles Project
Date: September 17, 2026
Re: Winning Messages for the Midterms

There is no question that Republicans face significant headwinds in the upcoming midterms. Past political trends alone [dictate](#) that the party of the sitting president typically loses congressional seats, regardless of the environment. The current conventional wisdom seems to favor a similar outcome this November.

But even at this late hour, the past need not be prologue. While Democrats may be on the offensive, recent message testing we have conducted in several key swing states suggest that they remain vulnerable on culture-war issues, particularly in their support for transgender ideology and so-called “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI) policies. Still, pressing the advantage on these issues alone, while important, may not be sufficient. Republicans must also make the case to families on what they plan to do to help improve their economic standing.

To win in 2026, GOP candidates will need to both highlight Democrats’ cultural radicalism while also proposing a compelling economic alternative.

Democrats Remain Out-of-Step on Transgender Issues

In 2024, President Trump [showed definitively](#) that the left’s gender radicalism was a massive liability for Democrats—and one that could be used to help Republicans win elections. Despite that outcome, however, most Democrats have not retreated from their extreme positions. Nearly every major Democrat candidate this cycle has some record of supporting males in female sports and private spaces as well as sex-change procedures for minors. Some are even [shockingly open about it](#).

APP’s message testing in various swing states suggest that these unpopular stances can still be used to move persuadable voters in the Republican direction. Messages on Democrats’ support for men in women’s sports and spaces shifted the margin up to 6.6 points towards the GOP in our testing. Messages highlighting Democrats’ support for using tax dollars to pay for sex changes shifted the margin up to 4 points towards Republicans. In Texas, [an ad](#) highlighting Democrat James Talarico’s support for gender transitions for minors moved voters a net 5.7 points towards Republican Ken Paxton. Promoting these contrasts continues to be a smart strategy for GOP candidates in close races.

This cycle, APP also tested a new message, connecting Democrats’ opposition to true mental health treatment for gender dysphoria with the rise in violent acts being perpetrated by transgender-identified, mentally distressed individuals. These messages proved just as persuasive as those noted above, moving voters up to 6.5 points towards Republicans. Given

the salience of this issue in the wake of Charlie Kirk's murder and other similar attacks, GOP candidates would be well advised to go on offense against their Democrat opponents using this angle as well.

DEI Poses a New Vulnerability for Democrats

APP's message testing this summer also found that, in addition to transgender issues, Democrats' support for DEI policies presents a much greater liability for them than was perhaps previously recognized.

In messages we tested focusing on the negative consequences of DEI, two stood out as particularly effective in shifting voters:

- In the first message, we highlighted how Democrats' DEI policies specifically disadvantage young men, leaving them less likely to graduate high school or college, harmed by discriminatory hiring practices, and left with no support as they are increasingly driven to deaths of despair. This message shifted the vote margin by an incredible *10.6 points* in our Ohio gubernatorial race test, one of the highest impact scores we have ever registered.
- In the second message, we highlighted how Democrats' DEI policies to eliminate "disparate impacts" in the criminal justice system have resulted in violent criminals being released back onto the streets, where they have victimized additional innocent people and made communities less safe. This message shifted the vote margin up to 6.8 points towards the GOP candidate.

Although President Trump and Republican lawmakers have taken laudable steps in recent years to end discriminatory and dangerous DEI practices, there has not yet been a widespread attempt to hold Democrats politically accountable for their support of DEI. Our testing suggests that this is an area where GOP candidates should also be going on offense.

Republicans Need a Compelling Message on the Economy

Following Mitt Romney's loss in the 2012 presidential election, APP released our first post-election "autopsy" report, "[Building a Winning Coalition](#)," urging Republicans to adopt a more populist economic message. Since then, we have seen some GOP candidates do this, most notably President Trump in his 2016 and 2024 victories.

Now, however, as we head towards the midterms, the Republican sales pitch to voters on the economy is at best unclear. Democrats, meanwhile, have honed in on DSA-style policies as their answers to the woes American families are facing. Unfortunately, there are early signs this agenda may be [finding a receptive audience](#).

Polling continues to suggest that voters are [concerned about their economic prospects](#) and that they are [looking for candidates who can help them](#). To successfully fend off Democrat attacks, GOP candidates must be able to articulate their own agenda on how they plan to address families' economic concerns. If voters are not provided with an alternative, there is a serious risk that the false promises of socialism will continue to gain ground—and not just in this upcoming midterm.

Conclusion

While Election Day is quickly approaching, there is still time for the GOP to make a successful pitch to the American people. But that pitch must be two-fold: 1) *Continuing to emphasize how Republicans will oppose Democrats' unpopular cultural radicalism on transgender issues and DEI and 2) proposing a compelling alternative to the DSA on how Republicans will help families who are struggling economically.* This has always been the formula for a winning campaign message, and it is all the more critical if Republicans wish to buck the odds this November.