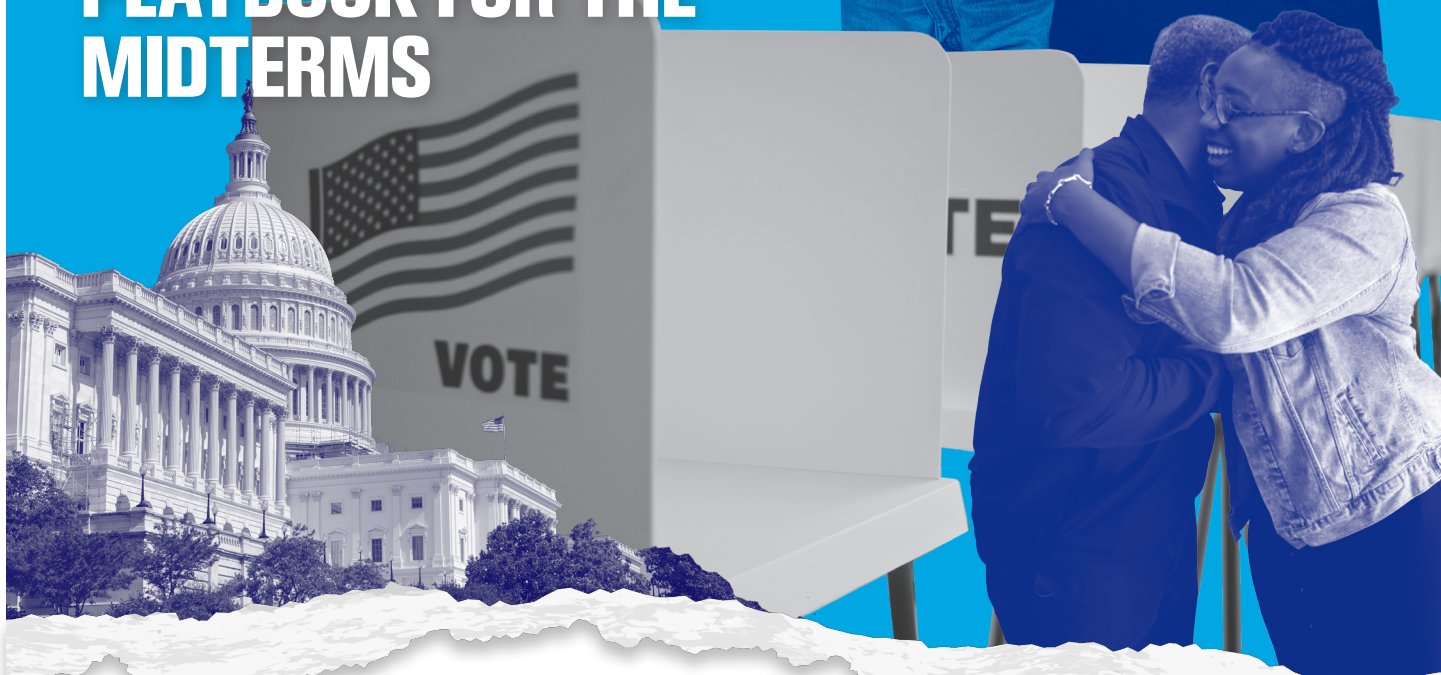
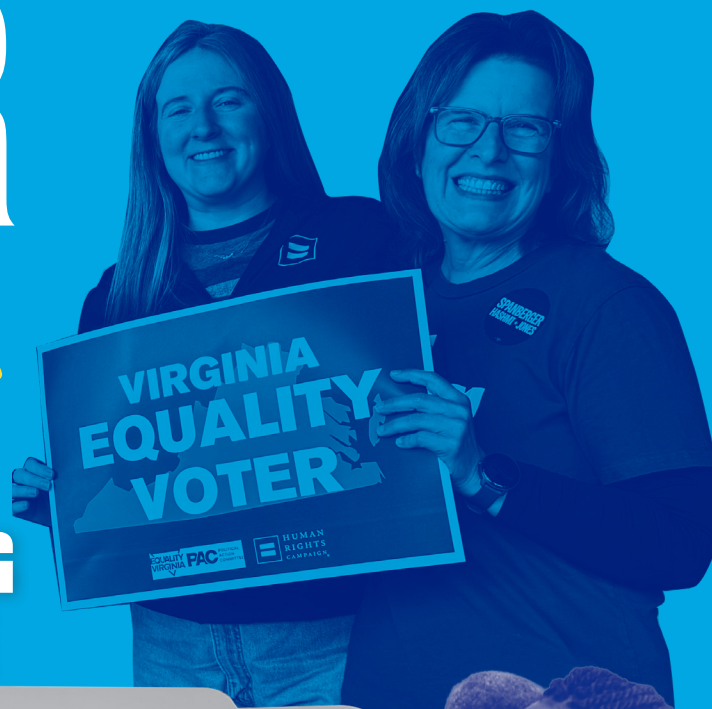
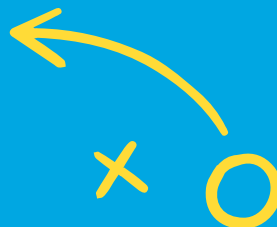


# ONE YEAR OUT

LGBTQ+ MESSAGING  
PLAYBOOK FOR THE  
MIDTERMS



HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
CAMPAIGN®





## NOTE FROM KELLEY

In June 2023, the Human Rights Campaign declared a national state of emergency for LGBTQ+ Americans. We saw what was coming. We told every candidate, every campaign, every party leader who would listen: this is about to get worse, and you need to be ready to stand up.

Some listened. Too many didn't.

Now we're living in the emergency. And now some of those same candidates are asking me: What do I do when they come after me for supporting LGBTQ+ people?

Here's what I tell them: This is not the moment to hedge. This is not the moment to focus-group your values. This is the moment to say what you believe—with your whole chest—and fight like you mean it.

Since I became president of the Human Rights Campaign in 2022, I have traded texts with candidates for school board, taken calls ahead of gubernatorial debates, and talked shop with members of Congress in the middle of major fights. Increasingly, these conversations have centered on political ads that target candidates for supporting equal rights—and the harm these ads cause, both to campaigns and to transgender Americans in particular.

Wherever I go, candidates ask me the same question: Should we respond to these attacks?

The answer is always yes.

Silence has never protected our community. Silence has never stopped bullies. Silence has never defended democracy. And silence has never won an election.

That truth is written into our history.

At the height of the AIDS epidemic, when the government turned its back on us, we showed up for each other and we forced this country to respond. When "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" told our people to hide who they were in order to serve, we organized, we challenged it, and we changed the law. When they said marriage equality was impossible — that America would never see our families as equal — we showed up again, in courtrooms and churches and living rooms and streets, and we won.

In the fight for equality, the question has never been whether we respond. The question is how we respond — how we build trust, how we cut through fear, and how we keep our people safe. The answer is right here in this playbook.

But let me be blunt about something else: We need candidates who are willing to take a risk. We need allies willing to speak out. We have no use for politicians who believe in equality in private but go mute when the cameras turn on. If you're not willing to stand in your values when it's hard, you were never really standing in them at all.

Here's what the data shows—and what recent election cycles have proven: Equality is a winning issue. Not a liability. Not a trap. A winning issue. Candidates who stood strong on LGBTQ+ rights didn't just survive—they won by double digits. Abigail Spanberger won by 15 in Virginia. Mikie Sherrill won by 14 in New Jersey. John Ewing Jr. won by 13 in Omaha. They were attacked relentlessly, and they did not flinch. They leaned in, responded with strength, and earned the trust of voters who were hungry for leaders with conviction.

This playbook is for candidates who are ready to stop playing defense and start leading with conviction. It draws from real campaigns, real data, and real wins to show how pro-equality leaders can go on offense, neutralize extremist attacks, and build durable support—not just for LGBTQ+ people, but for the kind of country where everyone belongs and everyone can thrive.

One year out from the midterm elections, the path forward is clear: Run your race on your values. Don't let them define you—define yourself. And when they come for you, don't back down. Show voters who you are and what you're made of.

Silence isn't a winning strategy. This moment calls for candidates willing to proudly stand by their values and refuse to back down on equality.

I, for one, believe we're going to find the leaders this moment needs—and I believe we're going to win.

**Kelley Robinson**

President of the Human Rights Campaign



## OVERVIEW

When the Human Rights Campaign was founded nearly 50 years ago, it had a single purpose: to support pro-equality candidates for public office. While our mission has since expanded, that work has remained critical to everything we do.

Since 1980, HRC has trained countless candidates, supported thousands of campaigns, and organized a voting bloc of millions. As a result of this work, equality has gone from a tough sell on the stump to a proven path to victory.

In the current political context, that progress is at risk. Candidates who don't support equality are targeting those who do—by scapegoating and endangering LGBTQ+ Americans. In an effort to divide voters and distract from economic instability, Donald Trump and his allies are using transgender people, and particularly transgender youth, as political pawns.

Too often, these attacks have been met with silence. Unsure of the right thing to do, some pro-equality candidates have shied away from their support for equal rights. The 2024 and 2025 elections, however, demonstrated that silence can leave candidates vulnerable, while having the courage of conviction can lead them to victory. Heading into 2026, our research shows:

In the face of anti-trans attacks, pro-equality candidates can win decisively—with a strong response.

This playbook draws from post-election analysis and polling that supports this strategy and offers field-tested guidance on how to effectively push back. These pages also advise candidates on how to lead with equality throughout their campaign—because the best defense is a good offense.

These midterms are a pivotal turning point for the country and one thing is clear: Americans want real leadership. In a time of great uncertainty, voters prefer candidates who stand strong on equality.

## ANALYSIS / 2024 + 2025

“Kamala Harris is for they/them. Donald Trump is for you.”

In the aftermath of the 2024 election, some politicians and pundits pointed to this glib phrase as the number one reason Trump won.

The data, however, tells a different story.

The infamous “for they/them, for you” ad—designed to drive fear among Americans while distracting from Trump’s un-American antics—aired nearly 55,000 times in 2024. However, a post-election survey by the Human Rights Campaign and GQR found that while 64% of Americans recalled seeing an anti-trans ad during the campaign, only 4% of voters said opposition to transgender health care or sports participation motivated their vote.

**64% of Americans saw an anti-trans ad in 2024. Only 4% said the sentiment affected how they voted.**

The data makes one thing clear: the culture war didn’t win the election – the cost of living did. Voters were worried about paying the bills, affording groceries, and holding onto their homes. The GOP ads left many people feeling unseen by the Harris campaign and still asking who was going to show up for them.

Among non-Harris voters, transgender inclusion ranked far below the economy and other concerns. At the same time, the ad, and anti-trans attacks, did plenty of harm outside the electoral context, putting transgender Americans at risk and American voters in search of candidates willing to defend them.

In 2025, anti-equality candidates misread the takeaway and doubled down on Trump’s anti-trans strategy. This time, however, pro-equality champions were prepared to respond.

In Virginia, Lieutenant Governor Winsome Earle-Sears’ campaign and its allies spent 57% of their paid media budget on ads echoing Trump’s bigoted rhetoric. In the face of such attacks, Governor Abigail Spanberger did not stay silent. Her preparation and responses were swift and strong. She introduced herself and her values to voters long before the attacks came, launched her own ad to counter the message, and called out Earle-Sears directly on the debate stage. Spanberger’s strategy was successful. She won by 15 points.

In New Jersey, Governor Mikie Sherrill argued that students should be taught our nation’s full history—including LGBTQ+ history. Her opponent, Jack Ciattarelli, hit back with ads. They proved ineffective. Sherrill won by 14 points.

In New York City, Mayor Zohran Mamdani spent the days just before his election rallying LGBTQ+ voters at queer bars and parties. This was strategic, not spontaneous. His campaign understood the power of the LGBTQ+ voting bloc.

Detailed exit polling revealed that LGBTQ+ voters in New York City made up 14% of the electorate—double the national share. Mamdani won LGBTQ+ voters by 62 points; but among non-LGBTQ+ voters, he failed to get a majority. Without LGBTQ+ voters, Mamdani would not be mayor today.

The 2025 elections prove that pro-equality candidates can win big—if they make clear who they are and what they stand for.

## GUIDANCE / 2026

The midterm races have already begun. And despite the results of the 2025 elections, anti-equality candidates are at it again—running campaigns based on bigotry.

During the NCAA Final Four last April, the Senate Leadership Fund financed an ad targeting Georgia Senator Jon Ossoff. Referring to his vote against a bill that would prevent transgender children from playing sports with their friends, the ad returned to familiar language: “Man-to-man defense isn’t woke enough for Ossoff. He’s for they/them.”

Similar efforts are underway in North Carolina’s senate race, Texas’ senate race, and Oklahoma’s gubernatorial race. In a recent speech at the Kennedy Center, Donald Trump encouraged Republicans to lean in on attacks targeting transgender people, and party strategists now expect those attacks to dominate several pivotal House contests this year.

Anti-equality candidates remain convinced that scapegoating transgender Americans is a winning tactic. Pro-equality candidates cannot allow silence to turn that belief into reality. Candidates can neutralize the attacks by going on offense and responding with strength.

Ahead of the 2026 elections, the Human Rights Campaign and Global Strategy Group (GSG) surveyed 1,000 likely voters in battleground U.S. House districts to identify the most effective messaging. After analyzing the results, we have developed a five-part framework for midterm candidates:

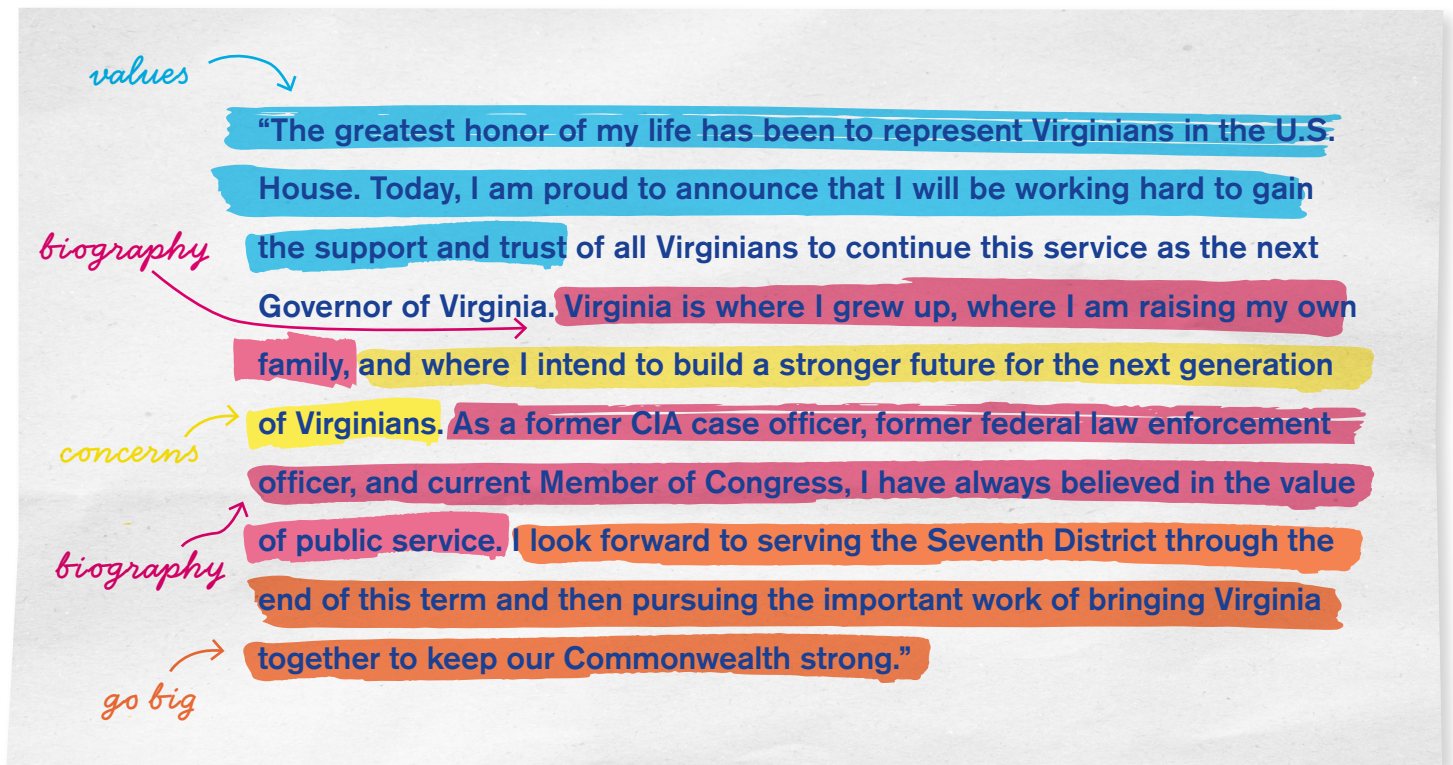


## 1. SHARE YOUR STORY EARLY AND OFTEN.

It is the responsibility of candidates to introduce themselves: who they are, what they stand for, why they are running, and how they will lead. This is not only about endearing themselves to voters: Every time a candidate shares their story, it inoculates them against attacks.

When an opponent launches a smear campaign—for instance, criticizing a candidate's character by spreading lies about transgender athletes—voters are more likely to question the claims or reject them altogether if they already feel like they know the candidate.

In Virginia, Spanberger announced her campaign for governor on November 13, 2023. She had been a fixture in Virginia politics for years, but as she launched her campaign, she took the opportunity to re-introduce herself:



This was long before her opponent, Earle-Sears, began attacking Spanberger for her—and her party's—support for transgender inclusion. When the time came, Spanberger's pushback aligned with what she had been telling voters for months already. In an ad titled "Mom," she narrates:





Photo: Steve Helber / AP

*biography* →

*biography* →

*values* →

I'm Abigail Spanberger, mom to three girls in public school. Nothing matters more to me than the safety of all our kids. And as a law enforcement officer, I went after child predators. So it really angers me to hear these lies about who I am. I believe we need to get politics out of our schools and trust parents and local communities.

*Survey says —> If you can, connect with voters as a parent.*

*You say —> As a dad, I know how important it is that our kids are safe and treated fairly.*

Voters knew her, so they trusted her response.

## 2. LEAD WITH YOUR VALUES.

Values like fairness, safety, autonomy, and equality can be used to connect with voters on any number of issues—from making life affordable to making equality attainable—which builds consistency for campaigns. Shared values, when expressed authentically, can also motivate believers, persuade skeptics, and help candidates defuse attacks.



*Survey says —> Don't just support inclusion; oppose exclusion.*

*You say —> "It comes down to basic fairness: I don't believe anyone should be denied care, lose their job, or be excluded from their friends simply because they're transgender."*

As a candidate and an elected official, Governor Andy Beshear has stood strong with LGBTQ+ people in Kentucky. His argument is drawn from his faith:

"All children are children of God."

Beshear is speaking like Beshear: a believer, a father, a son of Kentucky. And that speaks to voters.

While Beshear has led with the value of inclusion through the lens of religion, Zohran Mamdani has done the same—through the language of movements.

During his campaign, Mamdani released a video titled, "Until It's Done: Sylvia Rivera." It was not in response to a direct attack; rather, he posted it on National Coming Out Day—an important day for LGBTQ+ Americans everywhere. In it, backed by the music of trans artist SOPHIE, he said:

"We can't bring Sylvia [Rivera] back, but we can honor her memory by building a city where trans New Yorkers are cherished."

Here again, Mamdani is speaking like Mamdani: an artist, ally, and activist. And here again, that speaks to voters.

Rhetorically, these messages are not the same, but substantively, they are. Beshear and Mamdani lead with the value of inclusion, in a manner most authentic to them.

### 3. ADDRESS CONCERNS DIRECTLY.

In their effort to divide Americans, anti-equality candidates often cast equal rights as special rights. The HRC/GSG survey found that, gone unaddressed, this argument can be effective. But when pro-equality candidates directly reassure voters that the fight for equality benefits everyone, they can sway voters and build support.

*Survey says —> State, don't placate.*

*You say —> "No one should get special rights, but we all deserve to be treated equally."*

In 2024, New Yorkers voted on whether to expand equal rights by amending the state's constitution to include protections based on gender identity and expression, among others. Opponents cast Proposition 1 as a "Trojan horse" for special treatment for transgender Americans.

At a rally before Election Day, New York Governor Kathy Hochul acknowledged the strategy:

"They're trying to scare us and say all these things are going to happen if you pass this. Don't let them win."



And after the election, Hochul issued a statement to reassure voters:

“The safety and wellbeing of New Yorkers are my top priorities. I’m committed to working with anyone on policies that make our state stronger, safer and more livable—but my administration will also be prepared to protect New Yorkers’ fundamental freedoms from any potential threats.”

In the face of misinformation, Hochul and her allies put voters at ease—and Proposition 1 passed by more than 62%.

Meanwhile, on the topic of transgender children playing sports, the HRC/GSG survey found that voters have concerns about fairness and safety. It also found that engaging directly with those values can reassure and persuade voters.

*Survey says —> Engage on fairness and safety concerns.*

*You say —> “I will do everything I can to make sure that every child is safe and treated fairly at home, at school, and on the field.”*

Take the Ossoff campaign’s response to the March Madness ad:

“American parents don’t need federal bureaucrats confirming our children’s genitalia. Athletic associations and local school districts can ensure fair, safe competition in childhood athletics.”

Ossoff addressed voters’ concerns about fairness and safety head on—while correcting the record about the attack itself.

#### 4. TURN THE TABLES AND GAIN VOTERS..

The truth is that equality remains a winning strategy—even in the current political climate.

The HRC/GSG survey found that a majority of voters in battleground states—including Republicans and Independents—support laws that make it illegal to discriminate against someone based on their gender identity or sexual orientation:

- 88% oppose legislation that would limit healthcare for those who need treatment for HIV
- 77% oppose legislation that would force transgender people off transition-related medication
- 75% believe Congress should prohibit discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, including against transgender people
- 73% believe Congress should protect the right to same-sex marriage

Whether or not they are faced with anti-trans attack ads, pro-equality candidates can use this consensus to drive understanding and build support among voters.

*Survey says —> Draw a clear contrast.*

*You say —> “I want to protect everyone from discrimination.  
My opponent wants to make it a privilege to keep your job or stay  
in school.”*

Marci Collier Overstreet won her race to become Atlanta's next city council president after raising concerns about federal budget cuts to HIV programs:

“Housing for those with AIDS should never be a place where we are not doing our best as a city.”

In her successful race for governor of New Jersey, Sherrill took on her opponent's words on same-sex marriage in social media post:

“It's 2025 and the Jack Campaign opposes same-sex marriage.”

And on the debate stage in Virginia, when Earle-Sears defended her stance that refusing to hire someone based on their sexual orientation is “not discrimination,” Spanberger did not flinch. She pushed back on stage—and then ran an ad titled “That's Not Discrimination” that made plain Earle-Sears' views.

From Georgia to New Jersey to Virginia, equality remains a winning strategy.



## 5. GO BIG.

Whereas candidates opposed to equality are small-minded and narrowly focused, pro-equality candidates can win by being bigger-hearted and helping voters see the biggest picture.

Congresswoman Sarah McBride of Delaware explained the importance of broadening the aperture in the midst of the affordability crisis:

“We have to connect this fight and these attacks to the broader economic needs of the American people. We have to pull back the curtain on the fact that they are using trans people as pawns in their broader effort to gut the federal government in order to line the pockets of Donald Trump’s best friends, all at the expense of working people.”

In Omaha, Nebraska. John Ewing did just that. His opponent, Mayor Jean Stothert, relied heavily on anti-trans attacks to bolster her reelection campaign. Ewing called out the sitting mayor’s myopia—and pivoted to the issues that were top of mind for voters in his city. In just a few words, his campaign went big:

“Jean is focused on potties. John is focused on fixing potholes.”

Strong, straightforward, and sticky—exactly the sort of tagline that moves voters. Ewing won his election 57-43, becoming Omaha’s first Black mayor.



Photo: Kevin Wolf / AP



In his victory speech, Mamdani went big by connecting the fight for transgender equality to immigrant justice, civil rights, and women's rights:

"[W]e believe in standing up for those we love, whether you are an immigrant, a member of the trans community, one of the many Black women that Donald Trump has fired from a federal job, a single mom still waiting for the cost of groceries to go down, or anyone else with their back against the wall. Your struggle is ours, too."

*Survey says —> Tie attacks on LGBTQ+ equality to other attacks on freedom.*

*You say —> Voting rights, abortion rights, equal rights—we can't lose more of our personal freedoms.*

Beshear, while vowing to veto a bill that would allow for conversion therapy in Kentucky, demonstrated yet another way to go big:

"Kentucky and the rest of the country cannot possibly reach its full potential unless our people feel supported to be themselves. Discrimination against LGBTQ+ people is unacceptable, it holds us back, and in my Kentucky accent, 'It ain't right.'"

Here, Beshear uses his refrain to contextualize the fight for LGBTQ+ equality: when LGBTQ+ Americans are held back, all Americans are. This is about a better future for everyone.

## CONCLUSION

Ahead of the midterm elections, the Human Rights Campaign is supporting pro-equality candidates across the country.

Practice and preparation are critical in responding effectively. After a recent training, a candidate reflected, "When your opponent comes at you with wild, unfounded claims, the instinct can be to stay quiet or run away. But voters want leaders who stand strong. HRC gave me the tools and words to do that."

HRC has more trainings scheduled in the coming months, and we also plan to deploy organizers to help campaigns in real time. During the 2025 elections in Virginia, New Jersey, and California, HRC supporters carried out more than 200,000 actions, from knocking doors to mailing postcards—making our organization one of the most active political operations in the nation. After the sweep, campaigns told us, "We couldn't have done it without you."

Our greatest strength heading into the midterms is our people. There are 3.6 million members and supporters; 13.9 million LGBTQ+ adults, and 75 million Americans who vote with equality in mind. Equality Voters make up one of the fastest-growing voting blocs in the country—more than all

registered voters in every swing state combined. As we saw in New York City, Equality Voters can decide elections.

It will take all of us to claim victory in 2026:

- If you are a candidate who wants guidance, reach out to [candidates@HRC.org](mailto:candidates@HRC.org).
- If you are an activist who wants to get involved, visit [hrc.org/get-involved](https://hrc.org/get-involved)
- To support key candidates, visit [hrc.org/candidates](https://hrc.org/candidates)
- If you are a donor who wants to support HRC's political efforts, visit [hrc.org/donate](https://hrc.org/donate)

We are building momentum. The midterm elections are within reach. No matter what the other side says or does, it is up to pro-equality candidates to share their story, lead with values, address concerns directly, stand strong, and go big.

That is how we will win big.







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