

# [***Why Biden and Democrats are talking so much about freedom***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BTM-24D1-DY7V-G002-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; When Vice President Kamala Harris [*rushed to Arizona*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/12/politics/harris-arizona-abortion/index.html) late last week after the state Supreme Court [*upheld an 1864 law*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/08/us/arizona-supreme-court-abortion-access-tuesday/index.html) banning [*abortion in almost all cases*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/17/politics/arizona-house-abortion-law-repeal/index.html), she began her speech with a stark declaration: "This fight is about freedom, and the freedom that is fundamental to the promise of America."

In a new abortion-focused ad [*that the Biden campaign aired in Arizona last week*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/election-2024-trump-abortion-04-12-24/h_d1f2936a4f95e53087a91b8579ebd392), President Joe Biden somberly asks: "If Donald Trump gets back in power, what freedom will you lose next?"

For Biden, Harris and other Democrats to lean so heavily on the word "freedom" in this campaign is a historic reversal of roles. At least since the New Deal 90 years ago, Republicans have been the party most likely to frame their agenda as advancing "freedom" and "liberty" while Democrats have more often emphasized ideas such as "equality" and "justice."

Republicans haven't abandoned their rhetorical efforts to claim the terrain of freedom. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, for instance, used the word almost as a mantra the past few years to denounce the restrictions many states imposed to fight the spread of Covid-19 and to attack what he calls the left's effort to impose "woke ideology." And Trump disparages Biden's agenda to promote the deployment of electric vehicles as an attempt to deny Americans' freedom to continue purchasing gas-powered cars and trucks.

But [*the GOP push at every level of government*](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/12/republican-states-rights-restrictions/621101/) to roll back the "rights revolution" of the past six decades - symbolized by the proliferation of red-state laws limiting access to abortion and potentially other reproductive health care such as IVF - has provided Democrats a historic opportunity to reverse the direction of this long-running debate, many analysts agree.

"Historically, Republicans have rooted their philosophical world view in liberty: for them it's about freedom to own guns, to practice religion as they see fit" or reducing government taxes, spending and regulation, said Melissa Deckman, CEO of the non-partisan Public Religion Research Institute, which studies the intersection of culture and ***politics***. "What's new is Democrats are using the term in ways to reimagine what freedom really means."

Transforming the debate over freedom may be especially crucial for Biden because polls consistently show Trump with a double-digit lead when voters are asked who they trust more to handle the economy. That means that to win the election Biden will need to convince a substantial number of voters who believe Trump is better for their bottom line to vote against him anyway. The interrelated issues revolving around rights, values and democracy likely offer the president his best chance to do so. "If any issue" is going to flip voters who express more confidence in Trump on the economy, "it is going to be social issues like abortion," said Deckman.

Biden signaled the central role freedom would play in his campaign messaging from the outset, [*in the video he released last year*](https://www.c-span.org/video/?527639-1/president-biden-announces-reelection-campaign) announcing his plan to seek reelection. As an ominous piano key trills behind images of the January 6, 2021, insurrection, abortion rights protesters and the White House, Biden opens the video with a stark declaration: "Freedom. Personal freedom is fundamental to who we are as Americans. There's nothing more important. Nothing more sacred." Later he says: "The question we're facing is whether in the years ahead we have more freedom or less freedom, more rights or fewer. I know what I want the answer to be, and I think you do too."

The overturning of Roe v. Wade and subsequent wave of red-state laws restricting or banning abortion, not surprisingly, featured prominently in Biden's announcement video. But he also raised multiple other issues to accuse "MAGA extremists" of threatening "bedrock freedoms," including book bans, restrictions on voting, "telling people who they can love" (a reference to state laws rolling back LGBTQ rights) and calling for cuts in Social Security.

Harris, who has been the administration's point person in delivering the freedom message, has likewise cast an expansive net. When Harris [*delivered a Martin Luther King Day speech to the NAACP*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/01/16/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-at-naacp-south-carolina-state-conference-on-martin-luther-king-jr-day/) this year that summarized the administration's case for another term, she cited all the issues Biden did in the video and others, such as the restrictions several red states have imposed on the teaching of the nation's racial history and the right "to live free from the horror of gun violence."

Way to Win, a liberal group that funds organizations and campaigns focusing on voters of color, has been pushing the party for several years to emphasize the freedom argument. Jenifer Fernandez Ancona, the group's vice president and chief strategy officer, says linking all these other issues to abortion is key to portraying Trump and his allies as a threat to freedom.

"If [abortion] was the only thing, it would feel different than if you are able to tick off all these other things that they are doing and that they will do," she said. "We can even say it with other kinds of repro [rights]: We can say it with IVF, or now they are going to come for your contraception. Abortion is an entry point: because it is so visceral for people, it is a way to connect to a larger story about rights and freedoms."

Lauren Hitt, a senior spokesperson for the Biden campaign, argued freedom will be a powerful message for the president because it resonates with a broad range of voters. "It ... speaks to the values of traditional Republican voters, [Nikki] Haley primary voters, and suburban voters - as well as to our base who believe deeply that the government shouldn't be making personal decisions for people," she said. "It's a uniquely powerful idea grounded in traditional democratic values that will be critical in winning the swing voters we need to win in November."

The Trump campaign pushed back on Biden's ad asking which freedom Trump would take away next. "Under Joe Biden, Americans are less free, less safe, and less prosperous," Karoline Leavitt, the campaign's national spokesperson, said in a statement.

Daniel Cox, director of the Survey Center on American Life at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, said that broad changes in societal attitudes have encouraged both parties to emphasize their commitments to personal freedom. "Each side recognizes this is something people care about," Cox said. "It's effective language at a time when we are increasingly individualistic. We are not as inclined to be communitarian and oriented toward the concerns of others. So I think it's not a surprise that we're seeing both political parties try to employ this language to their advantage."

Even with all the increased Democratic emphasis on protecting rights, Cox said, the issue remains "contested ground" that can favor either party depending on how it is framed. While Republicans have been "on their heels" defending abortion restrictions [*such as last week's Arizona ruling*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/08/us/arizona-supreme-court-abortion-access-tuesday/index.html), he said, the party has benefited in other races from positioning itself [*as defending "parent's rights," as Republican Glenn Youngkin did*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/07/politics/glenn-youngkin-parental-rights-education-strategy/index.html) while winning the Virginia governorship in 2021. ([*It's notable that when abortion rights and parental rights collided in the 2023 Virginia state legislative elections,*](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2023/10/virginia-15-week-abortion-ban-glenn-youngkin/675555/) Democrats stressing the former won control of both chambers over Republicans emphasizing the latter.)

Polling suggests the public remains split over which party it trusts to defend basic rights and freedoms. To begin with, Democrats and Republicans hold very different priorities over which rights are most important to protect, PRRI found in unpublished national polling shared exclusively with CNN. In that survey, conducted late last year, Republicans were most likely to say their freedom to own guns, to practice their religion and to speak their mind was growing more restricted; Democrats were most likely to say that they were losing the freedom to control their own body. "The parties are talking past each other," Deckman said. "Freedom is a word that is quintessentially American, but it depends on what freedoms you are referring to in the first place."

The public returned a similar split verdict last fall [*in an NBC poll*](https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/first-read/poll-republicans-advantages-immigration-crime-economy-rcna117054) that asked voters which party they trusted more to handle different issues. In the poll, Democrats held a commanding 18 percentage point advantage on dealing with abortion. But when asked which party they trusted more on "protecting our constitutional rights," voters preferred Republicans by a margin of 43% to 35%. Even White women, who strongly preferred Democrats on abortion, split evenly over which party they trusted on the broader question of preserving core constitutional rights.

That GOP advantage [*may reflect the traditional political dynamic*](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9883813/) that conservative voters have been more likely than liberals to believe their rights are under siege and to view government actions as a threat to their liberty. [*In 2022 polling by Penn State University's McCourtney Institute for Democracy*](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c9542c8840b163998cf4804/t/62bdc6c951ebb35a4aebccef/1656604362555/MOTN-APMResearchLab-Liberty%28June2022%29.pdf), Republicans were twice as likely as Democrats to say that they had lost rights and freedoms over the past decade. Republicans were also considerably more likely, though not by as lopsided a margin, to predict that they would lose more rights than they gain over the next decade.

The real-world consequence of that imbalance was on display in the 2016 presidential campaign, when Democratic-leaning voters largely shrugged about Hillary Clinton's warnings that a Trump victory would allow him to move the Supreme Court to the right in a way that would threaten basic rights, like abortion.

Chris Wilson, a GOP pollster who worked for the super PAC supporting DeSantis in the 2024 campaign, said the Penn State polling suggests that Biden still will face difficulty mobilizing key elements of the Democratic coalition with a message about rights and freedoms. He noted that such groups as Generation Z, Blacks and Latinos were much less likely than college-educated Whites or Republicans to express fears in the poll that they would lose rights in the decade ahead.

"To whatever extent the Democrats are trying to make a rights argument, it's not as worrying to the youth and to minorities as it is to Whites, people with college degrees, and Boomers," Wilson said. "Biden's 'rights' argument might be a big hit with his peers, but might be the wrong note to strike if he wants to hold onto the parts of the Democratic coalition that are starting to look shaky."

But the Penn State polling was conducted before the Dobbs decision ended the nationwide right to abortion. And many analysts believe that seismic shift has increased the relevance of questions revolving around rights and freedoms to key groups that Democrats rely on - with younger women especially focused on these threats. While Republicans traditionally responded more to these arguments, Deckman said, "These times certainly have made freedom a more accessible, even an existential, issue for people on the left."

Fernandez Ancona agrees to an extent with both Wilson and Deckman. The 2022 elections, she said, demonstrated how strongly many people react to the risk of losing rights they believed had been settled. "When these things you take for granted are taken away in this very stark way, it's incredibly motivating," she said. But she also believes that Democrats need to tie their case about defending personal freedom into a broader message that portrays the 2024 election less as a personal choice between Trump and Biden than as a fundamental crossroads over America's future priorities that will shape not only personal liberties but also economic opportunity.

"We have to get people to shift their thinking about how this is a choice between two different futures," she said. "It can get people out of this one-to-one candidate-to- candidate [comparison] and asking, 'what I like, what I don't like' about Trump or Biden."

For libertarians, the escalating struggle between Biden and Republicans over the idea of freedom is a source of both bemusement and frustration. Libertarians take a purist position that advocates for minimal government intervention in both personal behavior and the economy; they usually find Republicans deficient on the first count, and Democrats on the second.

David Boaz, a distinguished senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, sees those flaws in both Biden and Trump. The Biden administration, Boaz said, is "very big on reproductive freedom, and very big on a lot of aspects of LGBTQ freedom, but beyond those things, where's the freedom in the Biden-Harris plan?" And while Trump talks about promoting economic freedom by cutting taxes and regulation, Boaz continued, Republicans have also undermined such freedom by promoting high tariffs and using government policy to punish companies they disfavor, as DeSantis did with Disney in Florida.

But while Boaz believes both Biden and Trump have imperfect records when it comes to promoting freedom, he thinks one issue breaks the tie between them: Trump's effort to overturn the 2020 election. "I have friends who say Biden is the biggest spender ever and he's regulating and he's woke and how can anyone consider voting for him over Trump?" Boaz said.

"And I'll say that one reason is that Biden has not tried to stop the peaceful transfer of power. That's a very fundamental issue. You can add up all these [other] issues and weigh them. But the big freedom issue that Biden has over Trump," Boaz added, "is that Trump tried to steal an election."

Analysis by Ronald Brownstein, CNN

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