

Making Meaning of Crime in 2023's Off-Year Elections: Five Takeaways

By Insha Rahman, Brian Tashman, and Sam Raim

Coming into 2023, and especially the fall election cycle, politicians, pundits, and voters were all looking for clues to 2024. From mayoral to gubernatorial races, in bids for local and state legislatures as well as district attorney races, Republicans and Democrats tested messages and strategies they hope will work in next year's presidential cycle. And once again, crime took center stage in many races.

Here are five takeaways on what voters brought to the ballot box on issues of crime on November 7. The message is clear that while “tough-on-crime” rhetoric doesn't always land, opponents of “tough-on-crime” candidates have to lead with a strong, affirmative message on preventing crime and delivering safety to inoculate against those attacks.

1. The Democratic advantage on abortion remains resistant to crime scare tactics.

As Democrats ran heavily on protecting access to abortion, [Republicans resorted](#) to a familiar political cudgel: “tough-on-crime” rhetoric.

Abortion Rights Fuel Big Democratic Wins, and Hopes for 2024

Election results from Tuesday showed that Democrats, independents and even some moderate Republicans can coalesce around the issue.

(Source: [New York Times](#))

In Virginia, which [many saw](#) as a bellwether for both parties heading into 2024, Democrats spent [\\$16.7 million on ads about abortion](#) alone—roughly half their [total election ad spend](#) and by far their top spending issue. In response, [Republicans ran ads on crime](#), attacking their opponents as “too extreme.” Despite the onslaught of attack ads stoking fear around crime, voters saw through the scare tactics. Democrats held onto their majority in the state Senate and took control of the state House.

Two Virginia Democratic Senate candidates attacked hardest by their opponents' “tough-on-crime” rhetoric were Russet Perry and Schuyler VanValkenburg. Perry, a former prosecutor, was accused of aiding “[violent criminals](#),” while VanValkenburg was attacked for supposedly “putting criminals first and victims last” (in an [ad since removed from Facebook](#)). Nevertheless, both Democratic candidates won their seats, with VanValkenburg unseating an incumbent.

In one of the most competitive Virginia races, HD-65, the GOP candidate, a sheriff's captain, leaned hard into "tough-on-crime" rhetoric with dog whistling ads juxtaposing his opponent, Democratic Delegate Joshua Cole, with a hooded gunman and other "violent criminals" to insinuate that Cole was "soft on crime."



Source: [YouTube](#) (left), [Twitter](#) (right)

Again, the scare tactics failed against a candidate who addressed real voter concerns—and underlined them with heavy ad spending—\$2.32 million compared to the GOP's \$1.8 million. In addition to focusing heavily on abortion, Cole also addressed other voter concerns, like traffic and public safety, on the campaign trail. He talked about his support for "criminal justice reform measures to foster trust between local law enforcement and their communities" along with "rehabilitation in place of incarceration, ending private prisons in Virginia and decriminalizing possession of marijuana."

The abortion advantage held true even in deep red parts of the country, like Kentucky. There, incumbent Democratic Governor Andy Beshear made the race a referendum about abortion against his GOP challenger, Daniel Cameron, who initially supported an outright ban. The abortion advantage held up against potent "soft-on-crime" attacks that alleged Beshear had "released rapists" and was a "criminal-coddling governor."

2. Affirmatively owning safety, accountability, and justice is a winning strategy—and a path forward to win over Democratic and independent voters.

Voters overall have low confidence in either party's handling of crime, but the confidence gap is more pronounced for Democrats.

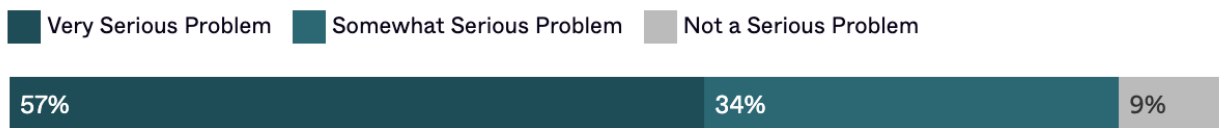
However, Gov. Beshear demonstrated that owning the issue of safety, accountability, and justice—by affirmatively defining your own platform and policies—is a winning strategy to overcome any doubts about a Democratic politician's handling of crime. During his first term as governor, Beshear called for criminal justice reform and, in the early days of COVID-19, his administration issued a directive to curb the use of money bail for people accused of low-level and nonviolent offenses. He also commuted the sentences of more than 1,800 people in prison to avoid the spread of COVID-19 behind bars.

On the campaign trail, Beshear's opponent seized upon these measures to paint him as "soft on crime." According to an Ad Impact report, the GOP flooded the airwaves in Kentucky with crime attack ads, with Cameron and his allies trying to make an issue out of Beshear's commutations. Beshear responded to their attack with his own ad narrated by law enforcement officials saying he "followed Trump's lead for early release of non-violent offenders during COVID." Despite the high-profile role that criminal justice reform has played during Beshear's first term and the crime scare tactics lobbed on the campaign trail that could have undermined voter confidence, Beshear remains hugely popular heading into his second term, with 60 percent of Kentuckians rating his governorship favorably.

3. Abortion and avoidance won't save Democrats on crime forever.

Virginia Republicans embraced the conventional political wisdom that attacks on crime would help them overcome their unpopular positions on abortion, but the conventional wisdom proved wrong. Nevertheless, while scare tactics didn't work in Virginia—just as they by and large didn't help Republicans win in the 2022 midterm election cycle despite spending \$157 million on ads painting Democrats as “soft on crime”—that doesn't mean voters don't care about crime. According to an October poll conducted by George Mason University and the Washington Post, 64 percent of registered Virginia voters said crime was a very important issue, and 25 percent said it was fairly important. This aligns with the national outlook; in a September 2023 poll commissioned by Vera Action and released by polling firm GQR, 57 percent of voters said crime was a very serious problem, while 34 percent called it a somewhat serious problem.

How serious of a problem is crime?



Source: GQR survey commissioned by Vera Action (September 2023)

Although violent crime is falling nationally, worry about crime has only gone up in recent years, and there is no reason to believe that it will dissipate by the 2024 election cycle. On the campaign trail, Democrats by and large have handled crime in one of two ways: by ducking the issue and trying to pivot to a more favorable one (like abortion, for example) or by mimicking the opposition's rhetoric (doubling down on the message “I too am tough on crime” by running ads about more funding for police, for example). This approach to crime—hoping to avoid the issue and that it won't come back to bite them—is not a sustainable strategy. Moreover, even if “tough-on-crime” attacks don't pierce the Democrats' current abortion advantage, Republicans still maintain an edge on crime by having the louder message. In a poll commissioned by Vera Action and released by PerryUndem after the 2022 midterms, voters said they heard more on crime from Republicans than Democrats by a margin of 46 percentage points (58 percent to 13 percent, respectively).

Democrats cannot count indefinitely on a highly motivating issue like abortion bailing them out of their deficit on crime. The uncomfortably close final results in the 2022 New York gubernatorial race and the narrow loss in the Wisconsin U.S. Senate race, as well as some key 2023 losses like the prosecutor races in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, and Loudoun County, Virginia, (more on these races below) presage a warning for Democrats: even when abortion is on the ballot it may not be enough to inoculate against “tough-on-crime” attacks. While polling shows that the most effective response to a “tough-on-crime” attack is a comprehensive, solutions-based vision for safety, Virginia Democrats' main response to “soft-on-crime” attacks was to run a few ads touting their support for law enforcement or to go on offense that Republicans undermine safety by opposing commonsense gun control laws. As in the 2022 midterms, abortion helped bail out Democrats despite relentless GOP “soft-on-crime” attacks and, with notable exceptions like John Fetterman or Brandon Johnson, having no real affirmative strategy or message for addressing crime and safety. When elections are won and lost on the margins, without a plan to affirmatively own safety, accountability, and justice, the Democratic confidence gap on crime remains significant heading into 2024.

4. If a message of safety, accountability, and justice does not break through, DA elections and other races in which crime is a top issue remain challenging to win.

Throughout 2023, mayoral candidates who owned a message of safety, accountability, and justice won several high-profile races—from Chicago; Jacksonville, Florida; and Lincoln, Nebraska; in the spring, to Boise, Idaho (where the losing candidate was a former police chief); Indianapolis; Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee; and Tucson, Arizona, this fall.

In the Chicago mayoral election, Brandon Johnson defeated Paul Vallas, who ran on a “tough-on-crime” platform with the backing of law enforcement unions. Johnson ran on approaching “public safety in a more holistic way,” championing a comprehensive message of making “critical investments preventing crime before it happens.” An exit poll of Chicago voters conducted by GQR and Vera Action after the election similarly observed that a majority said “the best way to address public safety in Chicago is to fully fund things that are proven to create safe communities and improve people’s quality of life, like good schools, a living wage, and affordable housing, and do more to prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health, drug addiction, and cracking down on illegal gun sales,” compared to the status quo approach of more police and stricter sentences.

Earlier this fall, Nashville residents elected Freddie O’Connell mayor, who touted alternatives to policing and comprehensive crime prevention during the campaign, pledging to “work to ensure that our police can focus on crime” by “allow[ing] mental health providers and paramedics to be involved when someone is experiencing a crisis that is not necessarily a crime. Crime prevention means thinking beyond policing—because crime is often borne out of hopelessness.” In Memphis, Paul Young won the crime-centered mayoral race while campaigning on crime prevention and more accountability.

This year’s spring primaries also saw voters in several states endorsing Democratic district attorney candidates who campaigned on reforming the office to advance safety, accountability, and justice. In Virginia, Buta Biberaj, Steve Descano, and Parisa Dehghani-Tafti all fended off tough primary challenges from the right. In Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, former public defender Matt Dugan overcame longtime “tough-on-crime” prosecutor Steve Zappala in the primary.

However, in the general election on November 7, the same reform DA movement suffered high-profile losses—in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania; Loudoun County, Virginia; and Broome County, New York. In two jurisdictions, the results seem internally contradictory. In Loudoun County, the Democratic state Senate candidate, Russet Perry, won her general election despite facing some of the same “soft-on-crime” attacks as the incumbent progressive prosecutor, Buta Biberaj. In Allegheny County, Sara Innamorato, the Democrat who won the election for county executive, openly embraced many of the same policies on safety, accountability, and justice as Matt Dugan, the losing DA candidate.

The explanation for this contradiction likely lies in the unique nature of the DA’s role—whose job in the narrow view of voters, is simply to seek convictions and mete out punishment—compared to other elected executive and state legislative positions, who voters may associate with a more comprehensive approach to safety, including prevention. According to recent not-yet-published public opinion research on prosecutors commissioned by the Vera Institute, the public has limited understanding of what it means to “reform” a prosecutor’s office. Biberaj lost even though her office reports that violent crime has decreased 31 percent since her election in 2019. Polling reveals that voters consistently prefer a comprehensive approach to safety over a “tough-on-crime” approach (particularly among independents), but it is clear that DAs running on this platform and their supporters have work ahead in convincing voters that this aligns with the function of the office.

In addition to these hurdles for reform DA candidates, unique circumstances in each of the DA races during the general election phase likely contributed to the losses. Both Dugan and Biberaj spent significant time on the doors and money on ads during their primaries to inform voters about their candidacies and policy positions. In contrast, voters heard more about controversies in the general election cycle—with relentless accusations by the GOP of Dugan’s campaign being “Soros-funded,” and Biberaj’s opponent Bob Anderson highlighting one horrific case under her tenure in which a man murdered his wife with a hammer after being released. And after losing the Democratic primary to Dugan, Zappala switched affiliations and ran on the GOP line in the general election, using bipartisan support—courting Allegheny’s independent and Republican voters—to overcome his nearly 20,000-vote deficit to Dugan in the primary.

A related takeaway from other November 7 losses in races where crime was the top issue is that an “I-too-am-tough-on-crime” message also did not prevail. In New York, where crime has dominated elections as a top voter priority for years, a closely watched race for county executive in Suffolk County (Long Island) between a “tough-on-crime” Republican and a “tough-on-crime” Democrat resulted in a win for the Republican. David Calone, the Democrat in the race, touted his experience as former prosecutor and “tough-on-crime” credentials, spending millions of dollars making his case to Long Island voters. To the extent that any one race is a bellwether for 2024, as some pundits are arguing for the Suffolk County executive race, trying to “out-tough” an opponent is not a winning strategy. And indeed, recent GOR polling found that for Democrats, a comprehensive, solutions-oriented strategy to prevent crime before it happens performed better against Republican “tough-on-crime” attacks than an “I-too-am-tough-on-crime” response that mimics the opposition’s rhetoric.

5. A message of safety, accountability, and justice wins when it is front and center.

One notable win for justice reform was Ohio’s ballot initiative to legalize recreational cannabis, which voters passed by a 57-43 margin. The ballot initiative, known as Issue 2, overcame opposition from the Ohio Sheriffs’ Association, the Ohio Association of Chiefs of Police, and the Fraternal Order of Police of Ohio. Legalization supporters called out law enforcement opponents’ “scare tactics” prior to the election, and the Coalition to Regulate Marijuana Like Alcohol, which led the campaign to pass the ballot measure, emphasized in their ads that tax revenue from cannabis sales would “cover public safety, roads, and drug treatment.” Even the “vote no” coalition said that “nobody should go to jail for smoking a joint” in their messages, an apparent acknowledgment of the unpopularity of criminalization and the War on Drugs.

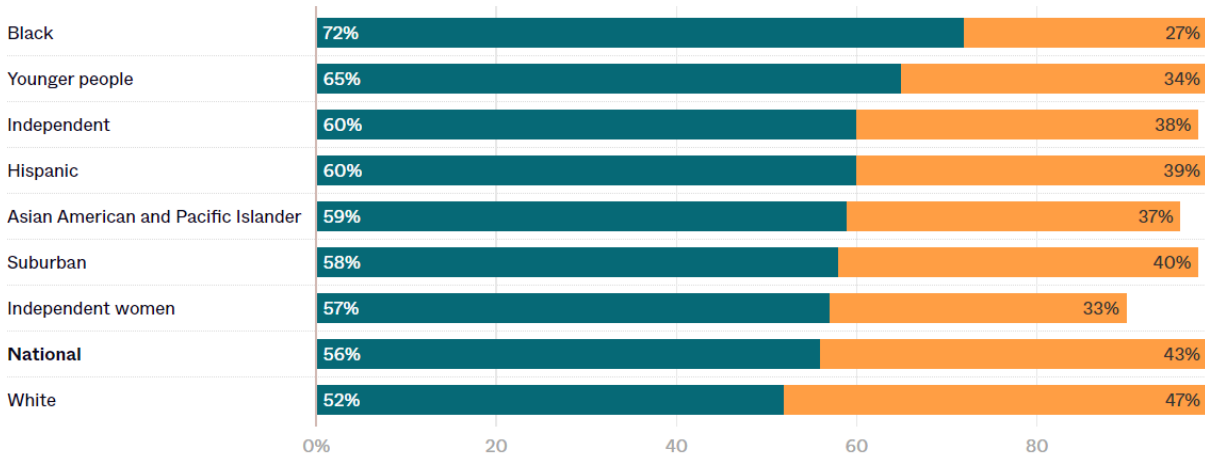
Additionally, November 7 saw the defeat of two far-right sheriffs—races where crime is largely the only issue. In Snohomish County, Washington, Democrat-supported Susanna Johnson defeated Republican-endorsed incumbent Adam Fortney, while in Culpeper County, Virginia, incumbent Scott Jenkins lost to assistant police chief Tim Chilton, who embraced reforms including body cameras.

The lessons learned from the 2023 election cycle—from the early races to the primaries and into November 7—underscore that for candidates who challenge the “tough-on-crime” status quo, their message of safety, accountability, and justice must be louder and more forceful than the opposition. Voters want a proactive, comprehensive approach to safety: in a recent national GOR poll commissioned by Vera Action, 56 percent of voters nationally preferred a comprehensive solutions-based approach to safety by preventing crime before it happens, compared to 43 percent who preferred a punitive, narrow “tough-on-crime” approach. The polling also shows that when Democrats add crime and safety to their overall “kitchen table” message, they gain support—particularly among independent women, Latino, and younger voters, as well as voters who say they do not feel safe.

Voters prefer comprehensive prevention over a “tough-on-crime” approach.

Comprehensive prevention “Fully fund things that are proven to create safe communities and improve people’s quality of life, like good schools, a living wage, and affordable housing, and do more to prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and getting illegal guns off the street.”

“Tough-on-crime” “Doing more to get tough on crime, like having tougher sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep potentially dangerous people in jail, and providing police more support and resources.”



Note: Don't know/refused not shown.

Source: GQR survey commissioned by Vera Action (September 2023)

Looking to 2024, the results from recent elections indicate a clear path forward—especially for Democrats looking to motivate [young voters](#) and [Black voters](#), two voting blocs that polls show are increasingly disconnected from the party. Instead of running away from the issue of crime, or only addressing it on defense when attacked for being “soft,” in next year’s election cycle politicians must:

- define themselves on this issue with a strong, affirmative platform on safety, accountability, and justice;
- prioritize talking about crime and safety—in ads, on the doors, and as part of the “kitchen table” stump speech; and
- be louder than their opposition so that the message that resonates with voters is the candidate’s own platform, not the opposition’s attacks.