

Abortion-Rights Backers Move To Expand Ballot Push in 2024

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Fresh off another round of victories in Tuesday's elections, abortion-rights activists are seeking to put the issue on the ballot in numerous states in 2024, a wild card that could influence next year's campaigns for the White House

and control of Congress.

When Ohio voters this past week passed a measure to protect abortion under the state constitution, it gave abortion-rights groups seven consecutive victories in ballot initiatives since the Supreme Court last year eliminated a constitutional right to the procedure. Those successes have come in

politically diverse states, from Kansas and Kentucky to Michigan and California.

Now, well-funded and organized efforts would place abortion initiatives on the ballot in Arizona, which is poised to figure heavily in next year's presidential election, and Florida. There are also nascent efforts to push referendums in

states such as Colorado, Nebraska and Nevada.

Then there is New York, where voters will consider an equal-rights amendment to the state constitution that includes protections for abortion
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◆ No Labels group concerns some Democrats..... A4

More Votes On Abortion Are Planned

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access. While the state has broad abortion rights, New York Democrats hope the referendum will boost them after a poor showing in 2022 that arguably cost the party control of the U.S. House.

How those efforts fare could color races up and down the ballot, potentially giving Democrats a weapon to help energize their base and counter voter disenchantment with the economy and President Biden. Republicans, for their part, have struggled to develop a winning message on abortion since the Supreme Court's ruling.

While Democrats are eager to capitalize, abortion-rights groups don't want to rush in with efforts lacking resources to tee up ballot initiatives they might lose. Initiative battles, which often require hundreds of thousands of voter signatures, take an enormous investment of time and money, and competition for political fundraising and voter attention will be fierce in 2024. Recent ballot campaigns in some states have cost upward of \$40 million.

"I think that would be a real misread of the opportunity to try to do it everywhere," said Deirdre Schifeling, chief politi-

cal and advocacy officer for the American Civil Liberties Union.

Advocacy groups are pinning many of their ballot-initiative hopes on Arizona. That state has some nearly ideal conditions for abortion-rights groups: restrictive abortion laws on the books, a sympathetic governor and attorney general and a relatively straightforward process for getting a measure on the ballot. The state also has an electorate receptive to messages about personal freedom.

"When you can put it in the context of freedoms, then you can build big winning coalitions," said Tory Gavito, president of Way to Win, a non-profit that helps get Democratic candidates elected.

Once a GOP bastion, Arizona has become a political battleground, with former President Donald Trump losing the state in 2020 after winning it four years earlier. The state will also have competitive races for the U.S.

Senate, House and the state legislature next year.

In Florida, abortion-rights groups say they are on track with more than half of the number of signatures they need ahead of a Feb. 1 deadline. State Attorney General Ashley Moody, a Republican, has filed a challenge to the initiative with the Florida Supreme Court, arguing its language is vague and confusing.

Abortion proponents "have proposed an amendment to the Florida Constitution using a misleading ballot summary

to trick voters into freezing in place a legal framework that conceals the amendment's potentially sweeping legal effects," Moody wrote in a legal brief filed last month.

In Nevada, abortion-rights groups this fall filed a petition to try to place a constitutional amendment strengthening protections for abortion on the ballot. Under state law, it would also need to pass in two elections, in 2024 and 2026.

Voters so far have been most motivated in states where there was a real threat of abortion restrictions. While California voters passed an abortion-rights amendment last year, the issue didn't appear to have a galvanizing effect or spillover impact in a state where abortion access already was robust.

The same dynamic could be in play in New York. Supporters say that referendum would make laws restricting abortions unconstitutional. State Sen. Liz Krueger, a Manhattan Democrat who sponsored the amendment, said she purposefully chose to place the referendum on the ballot in 2024.

"Voters in New York state are going to the ballot box both for this constitutional amendment but also against people who don't support these rights," she said.

Iona University political science professor Jeanne Sheehan Zaino said other voter concerns likely would be more salient. "In New York, while you can scare people on certain things regarding their right to choose and what's happening elsewhere, they're not going to be as fearful of that as they are on issues of crime, security and things like inflation," she said.

—Eliza Collins
contributed to this article.

\$40M

The approximate cost of recent ballot campaigns in some states.