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Trump predicted Dr. Oz would have an edge with women voters. Does he?

Suburban moms may be the key to winning Pennsylvania, but they won't be won over by *The Dr. Oz Show* alone.



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Mehmet Oz, the Republican nominee for U.S. Senate in Pennsylvania, poses for a photograph in Carlisle, Pa., Saturday, May 14, 2022. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

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HUNTINGDON VALLEY, Pa.—If it weren't for a man in a red "Oz" ball cap striding towards this plain building in the Philadelphia suburbs, one would never recognize it as the Republican Senate nominee's office. The cap-wearer unlocks the door and summons another aide, who hands over a business card printed with the phrase "America's Doctor. Pennsylvania's Senator."

On the day celebrity doctor Mehmet Oz won the recount that secured him the nomination, the neighborhood's lush green lawns were mostly devoid of yard signs, except for a few proclaiming: "We support our Lower Moreland police" and "We support our Huntingdon Valley firefighters." But even if the physical signs of political activity are sparse, don't be fooled: Suburbs like these will decide the ultra-competitive Pennsylvania Senate race.

"[Democratic nominee John] Fetterman is able to contest the Pittsburgh-Western PA vote more than a lot of other Democrats have been able to do," said Democratic pollster Celinda Lake, an expert on women voters. "That forces the battleground into the Philadelphia suburbs."

Oz rival-turned-supporter Jeff Bartos also highlighted the importance of the region, drawing on his own experience touring the state as a Senate candidate.

"The battle for the general election is going to be fought in the suburbs of our cities," Bartos said. Oz, he argued, is the man to fight it, the sort of candidate who can win over independents, centrists, women, and voters of color.

“He has broad appeal to every one of those voter groups, especially voters who—and I talked about this on the campaign trail a lot—who are not traditional Republican voters,” Bartos said.

Suburban women, especially, will have the power to decide this election, a dynamic President Trump seemed well aware of when he endorsed Oz in April.

“Women, in particular, are drawn to Dr. Oz for his advice and counsel,” Trump wrote. “I have seen this many times over the years. They know him, believe in him, and trust him.”

Among Oz supporters and some political experts, this is conventional wisdom. Not only does he come from outside of the GOP establishment, which is still dominated by male strategists and donors, but the celebrity doctor has spent years as an advocate for Americans taking charge of their health, a domain often left to moms caring for their families. He also built his brand on the sort of diet and anti-aging advice that disproportionately targets women. “Why Are Ladies So Obsessed With Dr. Oz?” read a 2012 [headline](https://jezebel.com/why-are-ladies-so-obsessed-with-dr-oz-5924484) (<https://jezebel.com/why-are-ladies-so-obsessed-with-dr-oz-5924484>) in the feminist website *Jezebel*.

“For 12 years, he had a successful talk show, and then before that, he was a regular guest on *Oprah Winfrey*,” said Eileen Sobjack, the president of the National Federation of Republican Women. “These are programs with women viewers. ... Coupled with the fact that he just competed in a difficult primary, where there were also several women as candidates, that shows he really does appeal to women.”

As Montgomery County Republican Committee Chair Liz Havey, a self-described suburban mom, spoke to *National Journal* this month, she was fielding texts from other women who wanted to attend Oz’s general-election launch speech in nearby King of Prussia that night.

“I do talk to a lot of moms, Democrats and Republicans, and there is a concern about John Fetterman,” Havey said. “Even with Democrats. Listen, there were Conor Lamb signs all over my area. That's somebody that definitely appealed to the Democrats' soccer moms around here.”

Nonetheless, Fetterman emerged victorious. In fact, he won every county in the state.

“It's one of the few places where I think Democrats actually have the enthusiasm advantage going into the election, which is not the case in many races across the country,” said Sarah Longwell, an anti-Trump Republican strategist who conducts regular focus groups.

In a Pennsylvania focus group she conducted before the May 17 primary, Longwell heard voters say things like, “He's a TV doctor, he should stay in his lane,” and “He's not even from here.”

Political insiders largely agree that economic arguments will decide this election, much more than celebrity image. Lake said that women have actually come to care less about celebrity candidates over the past decade. After all, the last celebrity they saw rise to high office was Donald Trump.



📷 American flags are shown on the shoes of a supporter of Mehmet Oz at a primary night election gathering in Newtown, Pa., Tuesday, May 17, 2022. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig) ASSOCIATED PRESS

Plus, it's so often a woman sitting at the well-worn proverbial kitchen table, figuring out how to make ends meet.

"I think to just reduce women voters to 'Oh, he's famous and he's on TV,' I think that that misunderstands and kind of undervalues women as voters," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics. "The economy is in trouble. [Voters are] having trouble filling up their gas tank every week. And they're not going to think, 'Well, but he was on TV, and I really like him.'"

Kathy Barnette, who finished third in the GOP Senate primary after an 11th-hour surge in the polls, shares that perspective. Less than half a mile down the road from Oz's inconspicuous headquarters, the sign for her old campaign office is

still clearly visible from the road.

Barnette isn't ready to officially endorse Oz. In a phone interview with *National Journal* in early June, she said the doctor reached out to her after the primary by phone and by text, but they hadn't yet spoken.

"I've been very busy," she said. But she added, "Although they lied on me, ridiculously, I'm grown; I'm not bitter. I believe our nation is in trouble. ... I want to see him succeed. I want to see him do well."



📷 Kathy Barnette, a Republican candidate for U.S. Senate in Pennsylvania, takes part in a forum in Newtown, Pa., Wednesday, May 11, 2022. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke) ASSOCIATED PRESS

Barnette said she wants to hear more about Oz hitting the campaign trail. She said she wants him to work hard to win over the 69 percent of Pennsylvania Republicans who voted for other candidates, and especially the quarter who voted for her, including many from Democratic-leaning demographics. Now that

he's in a general election and can move only so far right, she said she wants to see Oz focus on the economic problems that affect voters of all stripes, like gas prices and baby-food shortages.

"I would not lean into my celebrity status, I would lean into those issues," Barnette said. "There are a lot of issues that the Democratic Party just does not have solutions for."

That, she said, is the best way to appeal to all voters, including women.

"There are people who say that he has a very strong appeal to women voters, suburban women voters, because he's in their bedroom every night via TV," Barnette added. "That is so degrading."

Despite Oz's [instantly mocked suggestion](https://www.salon.com/2022/05/17/dr-oz-makes-creepy-closing-pitch-asks-to-imagine-themselves-lying-in-bed-with-him/) that voters think about being next to him as they go to bed at night, he could benefit from his reputation as a trustworthy, caring listener, words which his supporters use when they describe interactions with him this year. Havey, for instance, did not endorse a candidate in the primary. She is a longtime friend of Bartos but said she was impressed by the celebrity doctor on the campaign trail.

Oz, she said, was always the last person to leave the events he stopped by in her county. The connection became personal when he met Havey's twin sister at CPAC. Upon learning that their uncle had a major heart surgery coming up, she said, Oz called him from the conference, and he continued providing support through a somewhat complicated recovery.

"My family feels like we owe him a debt of gratitude," Havey said, tearing up. "He's not somebody we've known for years or anything."

Bartos shared a similar story. The day before Mother's Day, both men were at an event in Northwestern Pennsylvania. Bartos, who had recently had thyroid surgery, told Oz he was planning to drive himself back towards Philadelphia late that night.

“He went and got one of his team members. ... He said, ‘Jeff, you look like—,’ and it was a nonmedical term. He knew I'd had surgery. He knew I was exhausted. And he said, ‘Look, doctor's orders here, you are not driving yourself.’”

Bartos said Oz dispatched the staffer to drive him the six hours back home. They arrived at his house after 3 a.m.

“He didn't have to do that for anybody,” Bartos said. “He certainly didn't have to do that for an opponent.”

Lake said women in the Philadelphia suburbs will want a candidate like the man Havey and Bartos described—a good listener who demonstrates empathy. She just doesn't think it's Oz.

Although she said she is slightly concerned that being a doctor may help Oz win trust among the key demographic of older women voters, Lake predicted that both his style and substance will ultimately hurt his candidacy. She cited aggressive pro-Oz attack ads, the candidate's uncompromising antiabortion stance, and his association with National Republican Senatorial Committee Chair Rick Scott, who recently proposed major changes to Social Security and Medicare.

“They may flirt with Oz, but I think he's very unlikely to be able to hold them,” Lake said. “People are going to lift the green curtain and see the real Oz.”