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HEALTH

In Senate race, gender sparks debate about abortion rights

First Lady Tammy Murphy said a man won't put a priority on codifying abortion rights

BY: **DANA DIFILIPPO** - FEBRUARY 8, 2024 7:11 AM



📷 First Lady Tammy Murphy and Rep. Andy Kim are tussling over abortion in their bid to win the Democratic nomination for U.S. Senate in June. (Courtesy of Erin Scott and Rich Hundley III/Governor's Office)

In primary contests where candidates often align on the issues, races can be won or lost on who crafts the more effective social identity. First Lady Tammy Murphy tried to do just that last weekend, when she said her gender makes her a better abortion rights crusader than Rep. Andy Kim.

“I don't think a man is going to put a priority on abortion and getting, codifying that at the federal level,” Murphy told Monmouth County Democrats at a U.S. Senate candidate forum on Saturday.

“That’s going to take a female who is worried about the next shoe dropping, and that’s me.”

But framing can be a tricky thing, as Murphy quickly learned when her comments rankled political observers on social media.

“Now who’s being sexist,” [grouched](#) one, alluding to the Murphy team’s [complaints](#) earlier in her campaign that she was the target of sexism.

It was a surprising approach for a candidate whose male spouse, Gov. Phil Murphy, so prioritizes abortion rights that [he codified them](#) in New Jersey and is [reviled](#) by antiabortion activists as “truly obsessed with abortion.”

Kim, a three-term Congressman who was first [to declare](#) his Senate bid, told the New Jersey Monitor he found Murphy’s comments “frustrating,” given how Democrats, regardless of gender, are “fighting tooth and nail” to protect abortion access.

“Is she criticizing Joe Biden? Is she criticizing Chuck Schumer? Is she criticizing her husband or saying that her husband’s not up to the task?” he said. “That just shows the fallacy of that argument.”

Murphy and Kim are in a four-person race to win the Democratic nomination to succeed Sen. Bob Menendez, who is [fighting federal corruption charges](#). The primary is June 4.

John Froomjian, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University, said Murphy’s tack has “the potential to offend.”

“Would she say Joe Biden is not sufficiently pro-choice because he’s a male?” Froomjian said. “It makes more sense to talk about gender broadly, in that it would be historic to send a woman to the Senate from New Jersey and that there aren’t as many as there should be in the U.S. Senate. But you could say the same thing for Asian Americans.”

Still, Murphy’s effort to differentiate herself from Kim on the abortion issue didn’t surprise political experts, who say Democrats rightly realize eroding abortion rights may mobilize voters to the polls.

“Abortion is the issue that probably every single Democrat in the country for every position will be running on. And if they’re not, they’re probably committing political malpractice,” Froomjian said.



📷 Tammy Murphy said the conversation around late-term abortions has become hijacked by “Republican fearmongering.” (Hal Brown for New Jersey Monitor)

Where they stand

All four candidates in the race – Kim, Murphy, Larry Hamm, and Patricia Campos-Medina – list abortion rights as a top priority.

For Kim and Murphy – the [front-runners in polling](#) and fundraising – it’s tough to find any major policy differences. Both have long championed abortion rights and eye restrictions around the nation with alarm.

On parental notification and consent laws other states have enacted, Kim said teens seeking an abortion might avoid alerting their family if they got pregnant through incest or have abusive parents – and teens don’t know how to navigate “backlogged and broken and deeply problematic” courts to bypass notification or consent laws.

“I don’t think that’s the place where the government needs to inject itself,” he said.

Both oppose restrictions on abortion later in pregnancy.

“This whole conversation about timing is absolutely part of Republican fearmongering that women actually want to have an abortion the day before childbirth. That is fundamentally inaccurate. People who get late-term abortions are those who are either personally going to die, or there’s going to be some medical


challenge,” Murphy said. “So this entire conversation should be taken off the table.”

Kim also objects to [criminalizing abortion providers](#) and allowing lawsuits against people who get or perform abortions, saying such measures reduce access because they can drive clinics to close.

“No health care professional wants to operate in those types of circumstances,” he said. “Things have gotten so toxic in our country when it comes to this issue that these types of restrictions have become weaponized in ways that have severe detrimental impact in terms of even having any facilities in their state that can actually be able to function.”

Both are such staunch supporters of abortion rights that [Kim got an F](#) on an antiabortion group’s “National Pro-Life Scorecard,” while LifeNews recently [declared](#): “Tammy Murphy’s Number One Goal is Killing Babies.”



 *Rep. Andy Kim Kim objects to criminalizing abortion providers and allowing lawsuits against people who get or perform abortions. (Photographer: Erin Scott/Bloomberg via Getty)*

Murphy’s GOP history

While Murphy says her gender makes her a better abortion defender, Kim said her past party affiliation should give Democratic voters pause. Murphy was a registered Republican for most of her life. She switched parties in 2014, three years before her husband was elected governor.

“We need to have candidates and political figures that are absolutely solid on women’s reproductive rights. I’m somebody that’s been a lifelong Democrat. I have never voted for a Republican. And the first lady is somebody that has donated money to multiple Republican anti-choice candidates over the years, including President George W. Bush, who appointed many of the Supreme Court justices, including Justice Alito, who has led the charge on this,” Kim said.

Murphy has been a longtime donor to both parties, giving about \$125,000 to Republican candidates and political action committees over the past 25 years, federal and state campaign finance records show.

While she donated \$2,000 to a political action committee that supported pro-choice Republican women in the early 2000s, she also gave \$2,000 in 2003 to the Bush-Cheney campaign. Bush nominated Samuel Alito in 2005 for the Supreme Court, and Alito eventually penned the 2022 [decision](#) known as Dobbs that overturned Roe v. Wade, the 1973 landmark case that codified abortion rights nationally.

Murphy dismissed criticism of her Republican past, saying she grew up in a “moderately Republican” household.

“At the end of the day, the Republican Party left me, and I am one of the proudest people who has been helping to build out the Democratic Party and all that we stand for across our state and beyond,” she said.

Gender cuts both ways

Wednesday, Murphy expanded on her comments about gender, saying women’s lived experience gives them a unique, weightier perspective on reproductive rights.

“As a female, as the mother of a daughter, I just feel that I’ve had children myself, and I have experienced birth complications. I understand this,” she said. “We need women. We just need more women in the conversation, period. When you bring women into the conversation and you can talk about lived experiences, that’s really important.”

Her focus on gender could prove persuasive to some voters and alienate others, said Dan Cassino, professor of government and politics at Fairleigh Dickinson University and director of the university’s poll.

“A primary election is largely about enthusiasm. You have to give voters some reason to come out and vote for you. And activating female voters is a powerful way to do that, especially because there are more female Democrats than male Democrats in the state and nationwide,” Cassino said.

But sexism persists among the electorate, Cassino said. He released a [new poll](#) Wednesday that showed sexism cost female Democratic candidates about six points in favorability statewide.

“Some voters are very responsive to threats to male dominance,” he said.

Notably, the National Organization for Women’s New Jersey chapter has urged its national leaders to endorse Kim, the New Jersey Globe [reported](#) Wednesday.

Filibuster at fault

However voters feel about gender, Kim said it has little to do with federal lawmakers’ inability to protect abortion rights nationally.

After Dobbs, Democrats set out to codify abortion rights nationally by trying to pass the [Women’s Health Protection Act](#).

The House, where bills need a simple majority to pass, has passed the proposal twice. But in the Senate, opponents have blocked the bill by filibuster, which requires a 60-vote supermajority to officially declare debate over and allow a floor vote. While Democrats and independents outnumber Republicans in the Senate, the act has fallen short of that 60-vote threshold.

Kim voted in favor of the bill both times it came up in the House. He regards filibuster reform, which good government watchdogs have long [championed](#), as the bill’s only hope of passage in such divisive times.

“We’ve seen it hit the roadblock in the Senate and unable to get the votes that we needed even when we had a Democratic majority,” he said. “That made it very crystal clear to me what’s holding this up and what we need to do to be able to get these protections.”

Murphy, meanwhile, isn’t as crystal clear on filibusters. In a recent New York magazine [profile](#), the reporter asked if she’d support abolishing the filibuster, and she responded: “I don’t know. I haven’t given it a lot of thought other than I hate it when I watch it.”

Kim said that shows she's not ready for the Senate.

“If you have declared your candidacy for Senate but you haven't thought about the filibuster very much, it shows that you haven't really thought through the mechanics of what it means to be able to do these jobs and what it means to be able to pass critically important pieces of legislation,” he said.

Murphy told the New Jersey Monitor Wednesday that she regards filibusters as “a very useful piece of the puzzle.”

“I think that the United States Senate is the most deliberative body in our country, and I believe that when a senator is speaking, if that senator is speaking and advancing the education of other senators, they should be allowed to do that, if it's on topic,” she said. “If it's not on topic, having Ted Cruz get up there and [read 'Green Eggs and Ham'](#) is an embarrassment.”



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