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## **Abigail Spanberger gave Democrats’ response to Trump. But she didn’t have the stage to herself**

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Democratic leadership’s choice to have Virginia Gov. Abigail Spanberger deliver the State of the Union rebuttal was a strategic move to keep the party’s focus on affordability. But she was just one Democrat jockeying to pave the way forward for the party.

Various Democratic factions hosting numerous competing events Tuesday night diverged on the best way to challenge President Donald Trump. Throughout the speeches, universal calls to bring down costs and crack down on ICE mixed in with more forceful and sometimes vulgar rebukes of his administration — laying bare the ideological and stylistic divides that are driving the party’s identity crisis.

Spanberger — a one-time battleground House Democrat who joined Congress during the party’s last wave election — was the headliner, calling from Williamsburg, Virginia, for Trump to focus on the needs of American families while also condemning the president for doing “what he always does: he lied, he scapegoated, and he distracted.”

But she was far from alone, with a group of Democratic-aligned organizations holding their own State of the Union events in an effort to harness rising furor against Trump.

Dozens of lawmakers spoke across several counter-programming events, including a rally hosted by MoveOn and the left-leaning media outlet MeidasTouch [on the National Mall](#), or at another in downtown D.C. hosted by the anti-Trump activist networks Defiance and the Portland Frog Brigade along with the Courier Newsroom.

On the Mall, Rep. Summer Lee (D-Pa.) called to impeach Attorney General Pam Bondi over the Epstein files and Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) accused Trump of “rigging” the midterms by pushing voting restrictions to “save his authoritarian control and turn the

presidency into a kingship.” Rep. Becca Balint (D-Vt.) called herself a “bareknuckled brawler with a heart” and declared “that’s what we need right now.”

The dueling rallies, both timed to overlap with Trump’s speech, were accompanied by a Working Families Party rebuttal also delivered by Lee.

Some party strategists said the events — which also hosted high-profile Democrats like Robert De Niro, Joy Reid and New York congressional candidate George Conway — splintered the party’s response in a high-profile moment.

“A uniform response is much better than a cacophony of responses,” said Matt Bennett, an executive with the center-left think tank Third Way. “One narrative is better than many, and Spanberger is very talented at articulating a message that resonates broadly.”

Dueling State of the Union responses are not a new phenomenon. While the party out of power typically greenlights an English- and Spanish-language rebuttal — Sen. Alex Padilla (D-Calif.) gave Democrats’ response in Spanish this year, vowing his party would lower costs, make voting more accessible and rein in ICE — different wings have long looked to get in on the action, from Tea Party Republicans during Barack Obama’s presidency to the progressive groups on Tuesday night.

But the lack of a unified response on Tuesday comes as the Democratic Party still searches — and fights over — the best way to beat Trump, even as party members agree overall that centering the Trump administration’s struggles to boost the economy gives them the best chance in November.

Democrats were already divided in their approach to Trump’s address to Congress. Dozens of members across both chambers skipped the speech to protest the president while others said they were attending out of constitutional duty — a schism that stretched [all the way up through party leadership](#).

Despite calls from Democratic leadership to refrain from protests inside the House chamber, Rep. Al Green (D-Texas) was [escorted out of the room](#) minutes into Trump’s speech after brandishing a sign reading “Black people aren’t apes,” a likely reference to a [racist video Trump reposted](#) earlier in the month.

Progressive Reps. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.) and Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.) also [heckled Trump at multiple points](#) during Trump’s speech, including in response to Trump touting his aggressive immigration enforcement.

At multiple moments during his speech, Trump appeared to relish opportunities to draw Democrats in attendance into heated exchanges.

“You people are crazy,” he said at one point, prompting some Democrats in the room to heckle him in return.

Spanberger’s aides were cognizant of the volume of competing Democratic rebuttals and built a “war room” team to boost the governor’s response on social media. And while her team insisted that she isn’t competing with other counter-programming events, her aides believed heading into Tuesday evening that Spanberger’s successful affordability-focused campaign last year gave her credibility on how to best respond to Trump.

Spanberger, [whose campaign last year](#) is viewed by some party strategists as a blueprint for Democrats to score victories in November, focused on her proposals to lower costs for Virginians, while also criticizing the president for aggressive immigration policies and blaming rising costs on Trump’s tariffs.

“Americans deserve to know that their leaders are focused on addressing the problems that keep them up at night, problems that dictate where you live, whether you can afford to start a business, or whether you have to skip a prescription in order to buy groceries,” she said in her live rebuttal. “Is the president working to make life more affordable for you and your family? We all know the answer is no.”

Several of the lawmakers who spoke at competing events echoed that affordability template, including some Democrats with possible presidential ambitions, like Sen. Ruben Gallego (D-Ariz.) and Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.).

Gallego, who warned in his speech that Trump was making Americans “sicker and poorer,” told POLITICO beforehand that “it’s fine that we have different people talking, provided the message is all the same: [that Democrats] are here to fight for everyday Americans.”

Some of those behind Democrats’ various response events Tuesday said they aimed to better capture the degree of frustration voters feel towards Trump.

“These are not the times for an institutionalist to say, ‘Well, let’s just give him his moment, and if you want to protest, protest by sitting there silently.’ That’s bullshit,” said Miles Taylor, a co-founder of Defiance and former Trump administration official-

turned-Trump critic. “And I think that Hakeem Jeffries knows that his caucus feels like that doesn’t meet the moment, which is why so many of them are literally just not showing up.”

Taylor added that the plethora of Democratic responses also reflected the current political media environment, where both voters and candidates can easily find forums that align with their preferences.

Lee, who railed against Trump’s “authoritarianism” and cast his speech as an “obituary for the country working people built” in her Working Families Party rebuttal, said Democrats are at a “crossroads” and won’t win control of Congress “by electing more of the same” — which she cast as those who “speak boldly but deliver cautiously or sometimes even vote with MAGA.”

In an interview on Monday, Lee said it was critical for Democrats to promote a bigger tent after progressives scored major wins of their own in recent elections, from [Zohran Mamdani being elected mayor of New York City](#) to [Analilia Mejia’s victory this month](#) in the Democratic primary to replace moderate now-Gov. Mikie Sherrill in New Jersey.

Progressives “are always accepting of moderate places being represented well,” Lee said. But “it feels like there’s a wing of this party fighting back more against us trying to represent our own communities just as hard as somebody who is trying to represent their community in a swing district.”