Ebola Blame Game Takes The Stage At Midterm Election Debates

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RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:

There are just a few weeks until November's midterm elections, and candidates from both parties are trying to figure out if and how Ebola fits into their campaign messages. NPR's Juana Summers reports.

JUANA SUMMERS, BYLINE: The political arguments about Ebola can be roughly divided into three groups. Democrats argue that budget-cutting Republicans have deprived the government of the resources it needs to keep Americans safe from the threat of Ebola. Here's Democratic Senator Mark Udall of Colorado.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

SENATOR MARK UDALL: What I can tell you what I'm not going to do - and that's what Congressman Gardner did - which was vote for close to $300 million in cuts to the Centers for Disease Control budget, which funds emergency response teams.

SUMMERS: His opponent Cory Gardner offers argument number two. Republicans tie the issue to larger questions about President Obama and his competency. They specifically point to priorities at the CDC.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

REPRESENTATIVE CORY GARDNER: Jazzercise programs, massage therapy and urban gardens - how about we use money responsibly to make sure that we are protecting the American people instead of spending it wastefully under this administration?

SUMMERS: Third - some Republicans link the Ebola crisis to border security. Here's how Thom Tillis put it in a debate with incumbent Democrat Kay Hagan

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

THOM TILLIS: Ladies and gentlemen, we've got an Ebola outbreak. We have bad actors that can come across the border. We need to seal the border and secure it.

SUMMERS: Exchanges like these are playing out in Senate debates across the country, but so far the issue is barely a ripple in TV ads. One exception is the liberal group the Agenda Project Action Fund. They launched this ad last week.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

SENATOR MITCH MCCONNELL: Washington actually can cut spending

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: The CDC says its discretionary funding has been cut by $585 million since 2010.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #1: Cut - less government cut.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #2: Cut.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #3: Proceed with caution.
UNIDENTIFIED MAN #4: Cut.

SUMMERS: The video shows images of dead and dying West Africans. As it ends, it says Republican cuts kill, vote - as you can hear the sound of breathing through a respirator. It's not being broadcast widely, but it's an example of just how far campaigns could go to cash in on the politics at the moment. Republican strategist Ford O'Connell.

O'CONNELL: It's a terrible thing to say, but fear is a heck of a motivator for voters.

SUMMERS: Even though the elections are just a few weeks away, O'Connell says it's almost impossible for a candidate to break into the news cycle unless they're talking about one of two things - ISIS or Ebola. O'Connell says that's already proven successful for some candidates. Just take a look at Scott Brown in New Hampshire, who's attacked his Democratic opponent, Jeanne Shaheen, on both issues.

O'CONNELL: Jeanne Shaheen's lead was cut in half, and really if you look at it, what's going on here is that Republicans are making a national security-leadership argument, if you will, and Democrats are making a governing agenda-budgets argument here.

SUMMERS: For a campaign that's been in search of substance, Ebola offers a debate about issues fundamental to both parties. Iona College's Jeanne Zaino cautions that issues this cycle have changed rapidly.

JEANNE ZAINO: You know, if you think back a year ago, we were talking about Obamacare being the key issue of the election. Then there was some talk about perhaps it would be Benghazi, and then it moved to immigration. And now we seem to have moved very quickly to Ebola. So we see this kind of fast-moving train. I don't think we know where it's going to take us at this point.

SUMMERS: And there are 19 days left until that train gets to its station. Juana Summers, NPR News, Washington.

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