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Who Will Replace Rob Portman in the Senate?

By Matt A. Mayer

With Rob Portman's announcement that he will not seek a third term in the US Senate, the two questions of the hour are: can Democrats do what they did in Georgia to take the seat? And who will run for his seat?

The first is easy to answer: no. Ohio isn't Georgia, as it lacks a mega-city such as Atlanta where Democrats can run up huge numbers. With the population exodus out of Democratic strongholds Cleveland, Toledo and Akron-Canton over the last 20 years married to the conversion of blue-collar Democrats to Trump Republicans, winning statewide in Ohio for the first time would be very hard for Democrats. Plus, the Democratic bench in Ohio is wafer thin, with only Rep. Tim Ryan being possibly viable statewide.

On the second question, the list of potential Republican candidates is long. Former governor John Kasich wouldn't win a Republican primary for dogcatcher in Ohio given his fervent NeverTrump stance. But he has already announced he would not seek the seat, which saves him the ignominy of losing badly.

The top candidates include Rep. Jim Jordan, Lt. Gov. Jon Husted and Ohio Republican party chair Jane Timken. Strong Donald Trump ally Jordan will likely decide to stay in his safe seat knowing the odds are very good that Republicans will take the House in 2022 during Joe Biden's first midterm election, as history shows the party holding the White House typically loses seats. He'll then be a very powerful committee chair instead of a junior senator, where he can get payback on Democrats Adam Schiff and Eric Swalwell and do to the Biden administration what Democrats did to Trump for four years.

Husted has always had his eye on the governor's office. It took great restraint for him to cut the deal he did in 2018 to end his gubernatorial bid and join Mike DeWine's winning ticket. It was a smart move. He knows a little more patience may well result in him becoming governor in 2026. Ultimately, he wants to be the first Republican from Ohio to win the White House in over 100 years. History has shown that running for the presidency as a successful governor is a better pathway to that post than as a senator.

As for Timken, she has proved herself to be a prolific fundraiser and campaign surrogate. She is close to Ohio's political svengali Bob Paduchik who ran Portman's first US Senate run, plus Trump's Ohio campaigns in 2016 and 2020 where he secured eight-point victories. Paduchik also helped Timken take out indicted Kasich stooge Matt Borges as head of the Ohio Republican party. Timken also has been loyal to

Trump. Ohio has never had a female US senator so perhaps it is time Republicans ended the drought by following the successful formula used by House Republicans in 2020 that brought them within a handful of seats of ending Nancy Pelosi's speakership.

In the next tier are Reps. Steve Stivers, Bill Johnson and Brad Wenstrup, as well as secretary of state Frank LaRose and Dave Yost, the attorney general. The trio of congressmen will likely come to the same conclusion as Jordan, putting their faith in history so they can become committee chairs or subcommittee chairs in a Republican-led US House. Plus, unlike the House, the odds of retaking the US Senate given the seats Republicans have to defend in 2022 and 2024 are steeper.

At 64 years old, Yost has to decide whether battling Husted in a Republican primary for governor in 2026 is a better option than running for the Senate in 2022. He may want to be governor, but the clock is ticking on his political career. Plus, Yost's personality and style would be a good fit for the US Senate. His vulnerability in a primary is that he has been critical of Trump so might find it hard going should Trump endorse another candidate.

As for LaRose, he is still young enough that he can continue to play the musical chairs game statewide elected Republicans play — in which the ambitious switch roles until it is their turn to be governor. Spending so much time in Washington may not be a good fit for him right now, but his political future is bright.

The last tier consists of J.D. Vance and previous Senate candidates Josh Mandel and Jim Renacci. Vance is interesting in theory given his best-selling book, *Hillbilly Elegy*, which is now a Netflix movie. But he has never been vetted nor gone through the rigors of a political campaign. He also seems happy with his life running a venture-capital fund and getting paid to give speeches.

Mandel and Renacci both ran and lost Senate races in red Ohio. I'm not sure there is much backing for people who already have Senate losses on their résumés. Moreover, Mandel has been out of the political loop since he left office and went through a divorce in which the records are sealed. Those records will be of high interest to opponents and the media should he run. Renacci has a history of high turnover among campaign staff (full disclosure: me included) and didn't show himself to be a strong fundraiser in his last race.

If Republicans wanted to keep Portman's seat and satisfy both the Trump and establishment wings of the party, they would get behind Timken. Not only would she hold the seat, she also would start the vital process of bringing suburban Republicans back into the fold. Her overall strength would allow the National Republican Senatorial Committee to conserve resources for the tough races it will face in 2022.

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