

# [***Ohio's GOP primary is a test for Trump that could shape Senate control this fall***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BKD-WVK1-DY7V-G002-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Ohio's Republican [*Senate primary*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/16/politics/trump-ohio-senate-primary/index.html) on Tuesday - this year's first test of Donald Trump's clout in a contested Senate race - will help determine a key question this fall: What is the fate of Sen. Sherrod Brown and the Democratic majority?

"Are we ready to win and retire Sherrod Brown from Ohio ***politics***?" state Sen. Matt Dolan, one of three Republican rivals locked in the bitter primary, asked supporters Monday night in Columbus.

Yet for all of the GOP's focus on trying to defeat Brown in November, there was far more conversation about Trump and a weekend rally near Dayton that reverberated on the eve of the election. The former president's [*warnings about a "bloodbath"*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/16/politics/trump-bloodbath-auto-industry-election/index.html) for the auto industry largely overshadowed the reason for his Buckeye State rally, which was to pull his preferred candidate, businessman Bernie Moreno, over the finish line.

Trump's involvement in this race is noteworthy because national Republicans - who decided to play in primaries this year, in part to avoid the kinds of candidates who emerged as flawed general election nominees in 2022 - have stayed out of this one. Despite already having clinched the GOP presidential nomination last week, Trump has a lot on the line in Ohio on Tuesday.

Heading into Election Day, an ad airing from the Moreno campaign underscored just how much the former president has been omnipresent in their messaging. "MAGA alert: President Trump wants you to vote for outsider businessman Bernie Moreno," [*the ad says*](https://host2.adimpact.com/admo/viewer/63d371e4-d103-40ba-b306-1b765a1f88fa). "Trump endorsed Bernie Moreno for Senate."

But Democrats are also trying to use the former president's popularity in this red state to their advantage. An outside group affiliated with Senate Democrats' top super PAC waded into the already expensive primary last week, [*launching ads*](https://host2.adimpact.com/admo/viewer/8027f65c-b515-46e4-9288-962c1fe6fd4b) that highlight Moreno's support from Trump to prop him up over Dolan and Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose. "Donald Trump needs Bernie Moreno. Ohio doesn't," [*the ad says*](https://host2.adimpact.com/admo/viewer/8027f65c-b515-46e4-9288-962c1fe6fd4b).

To win reelection, Brown needs a good chunk of Trump's voters in a state that the former president twice carried by 8 points. The three-term incumbent is [*one of two Democrats*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/01/politics/senate-race-rankings-january-2024/index.html) running for reelection this year in states Trump carried - the other is Montana Sen. Jon Tester. Republicans need to flip only one or two seats - depending on who wins the White House - to control the Senate, and they've already effectively picked up one, with West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin [*not running for reelection*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/09/politics/joe-manchin-wont-run-for-reelection/index.html). That raises the stakes for Brown to hold on in a state that has trended red in recent years.

On the eve of the GOP primary, the senator sought to tie his Republican opponents together and said he had no preference for whom he would rather run against.

"I'll let the rich guys fight it out," he told reporters Monday in Dayton. "They're spending their inheritance in this race. We know one thing - that they are all pretty much the same."

Moreno's and Dolan's willingness to pour their personal fortunes into their campaigns already has helped make this race among the most expensive contests of the 2024 cycle. At over $40 million as of Monday, Ohio's Senate race trails only the US presidential race, the 2023 Kentucky governor's race and the 2024 California Senate race in total ad spending so far.

An expensive and heated race that's divided the Ohio GOP

Gov. Mike DeWine and former Sen. Rob Portman's recent backing of Dolan - the only one of the three candidates who has not explicitly endorsed Trump - has highlighted how this race is dividing the GOP between its Trump and establishment wings - and the different styles they bring to the race.

At a crowded sports bar in the German Village neighborhood of Columbus on Monday night, Dolan sought to tie Brown to President Joe Biden, signaling that his argument for the fall would build upon challenging the administration's record on inflation and immigration. Dolan mentioned Trump only in passing, telling supporters that he could outperform him in the suburbs.

"We have to recognize that civility in ***politics*** is not a weakness," Dolan said, taking a not-so-veiled swipe at the former president's conduct. "We need to judge strength not on how loud we are, but by how much we get done for the American people."

DeWine implored Republicans to carefully consider their choice in the bitterly fought race. He said foreign policy should be a critical issue in the fall campaign, and he drew sharp distinctions with Trump and his soft touch on Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"We have to win in November," DeWine said. "The person who clearly has the best shot of winning in the fall is Matt Dolan - I think our common sense tells us that."

But the governor's backing could cut both ways for Dolan, Ohio Republican strategists told CNN. It could drive turnout among older and higher-educated Republicans Dolan is primed to do well with, but it could also turn off some voters like Eric Lange.

"Not a big fan of DeWine, so when I heard he endorsed (Dolan) that made me not want to endorse him even more," the 40-year-old factory worker from Piqua said outside Trump's Saturday rally.

Trump attacked Dolan during his remarks, playing up the split in the party by trying to tie him to GOP Sen. Mitt Romney, the 2012 GOP presidential nominee, and blasting him as a RINO, or "Republican in Name Only," whose family changed the name of the Cleveland Indians to the Cleveland Guardians.

Despite Moreno's own history of criticizing Trump - he once called him a "fake Republican," as CNN's [*KFile previously reported*](https://www.cnn.com/kfile-bernie-moreno-ohio-criticized-trump-deleted-posts/index.html) - several Trump supporters told CNN ahead of his rally that they planned to support Moreno largely because of the former president's endorsement.

"If (Trump's) put the finger on that guy, then that's the guy for me," said Anna Saylor, a 64-year-old from Hamilton.

LaRose, who lacks the personal wealth of his opponents but has argued that his experience as the only statewide elected official in the race makes him best positioned to defeat Brown, dismissed the impact of both Trump and DeWine.

"Endorsements are not the thing that most people make their decision based on," he told reporters following a campaign stop in Sandusky over the weekend. "And it feels like one of my opponents in particular is trying to hide behind endorsements because he's got a pretty liberal record that he doesn't really want to explain. And that's Moreno."

Taking the fight to the fall

Lange, the factory worker from Piqua, admitted he holds concerns about Moreno's electability in a matchup against Brown - fueled in part by [*Democrats' success in passing Issue 1*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/07/politics/ohio-issue-1-abortion-rights/index.html) last year, which enshrined abortion rights in the state constitution.

Brown declined to say Monday whether he believed Moreno would be the easiest to face in the fall, as several Democratic strategists in Ohio have argued. He conceded his race for a fourth term is the most challenging contest of a career in elected office that spans nearly half a century.

"Sure," Brown said, "it may be my toughest race."

Ohio voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 before backing Trump by 8 points in both 2016 and 2020. Brown, who's known as a progressive populist, is the last Democrat to hold nonjudicial statewide office in the Buckeye State. He won his last race, against a weak challenger without national party backing, by 7 points in 2018.

Brown on Monday signaled the issues he intended to play offense on as a Democratic candidate running for reelection in the increasingly Republican-leaning state.

"They all are for a national abortion ban. They have never supported organized labor. They're all three against the minimum wage," Brown said of his GOP opponents. "We'll be ready for whoever it is."

CNN's David Wright contributed to this report.

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