

Portman's Exit Signals Uncertainty for Senate GOP

By Burgess Everett, POLITICOPro, January 25, 2021

Ohio Republican [Rob Portman](#) will not seek a third Senate term in 2022, a blow to both Republicans' hopes of taking back the Senate and the chamber's dwindling number of centrists.

The two-term senator is one of the most effective legislators in the Senate, using his relationships gleaned from a long career in Washington to find compromise. But he cited legislative paralysis in the Senate as a major factor in his decision to retire at the end of next year.

"It has gotten harder and harder to break through the partisan gridlock and make progress on substantive policy, and that has contributed to my decision," he said in a statement.

Portman joins Sens. [Pat Toomey](#) (R-Pa.) and [Richard Burr](#) (R-N.C.) in retirement next year in key swing states. Democrats currently hold a narrow majority in an evenly split Senate due to Vice President Kamala Harris's tie-breaking vote.

Portman easily won reelection in 2016 alongside former President Donald Trump, but could not be a more different politician. A low-key GOP operator, Portman was never fully comfortable defending Trump's bombastic political attacks. [Portman said in an interview in November he was planning on running in 2022](#). But the GOP is now undergoing a major reckoning after Trump's attacks on the election inspired an attack on the Capitol by his supporters.

Particularly now that he is unbound from having to run in a GOP primary, Portman is a key vote to watch in the coming weeks as the Senate prepares for Trump's second impeachment trial. [Portman voted to acquit Trump last year but criticized his behavior](#) pressuring Ukraine to investigate political rivals as "not appropriate."

The mild-mannered GOP senator is a key part of Senate Minority Leader [Mitch McConnell](#)'s caucus. He attends McConnell's leadership meetings and is one of the party's best fundraisers. He's also a social moderate and was one of the first Republicans to endorse gay marriage.

"Both the Republican conference and the institution as a whole will be worse off when Rob departs," McConnell said in a statement.

His decision to retire will also focus Republican retention efforts on ensuring GOP Sens. [Ron Johnson](#) of Wisconsin, [Chuck Grassley](#) of Iowa and [Roy Blunt](#) of Missouri run for reelection. [Johnson and Grassley, 87, are undecided](#) and Blunt said he's doing all the things he needs to do to run.

Portman said he announced his decision to allow state Republicans time to prepare campaigns to succeed him in what will be a brutal Senate race. And an open GOP primary to succeed him will be key to the Republican Party's directions after Trump's defeat. Trump is popular in Ohio, but it is still a swing state in Senate races. Progressive Sen. [Sherrod Brown](#) (D-Ohio) won reelection in 2018 fairly easily.

The Republican primary could quickly become crowded and nasty, especially as the party works to rebuild itself and figure out the path forward in the wake of Trump's defeat. A number of Republicans could be in the mix. Rep. Jim Jordan, a close Trump ally, has previously been eyed as a potential statewide candidate.

Several Republicans also pointed to former Ohio treasurer Josh Mandel as a potential candidate. Mandel lost to Brown in 2012, and dropped out of the 2018 race against him because of family health issues, but still has \$4.3 million left over in his campaign account. J.D. Vance, the author of the book *Hillbilly Elegy*, considered running for Senate in 2018 and is a potential contender next year. Rep. [Steve Stivers](#), who ran his party's House campaign committee in 2018, is considering a run, according to a source familiar with his plans.

Lt. Gov. Jon Husted, a Republican, in a statement thanked Portman and said he would talk with his family, the outgoing senator and Gov. Mike DeWine "before discussing the future." Several Republicans also mentioned former Rep. Pat Tiberi (R-Ohio) as a contender given his fundraising prowess and campaign war chest.

Other statewide officials could be in the mix, including Secretary of State Frank LaRose. Jon Keeling, a spokesperson for LaRose, in a statement touted the success of the 2020 election in Ohio and noted that the filing deadline is a year away, saying LaRose's "focus right now is on finding ways to improve upon Ohio's success so we can continue to thrive as a national model long into the future."

On the Democratic side, there are several potential candidates, including Rep. [Tim Ryan](#), who has long considered statewide bids but declined in the past to run, and Nan Whaley, the mayor of Dayton. David Pepper, the former state party chair, is also a potential contender. The race against DeWine had been the focus of Democrats in Ohio for 2022, but the Senate seat being open could cause some reconsideration.

Ryan got out the gate quickly with a fundraising email about Portman's decision, calling Ohio the "center of the political map in 2022" and soliciting feedback on the news. Nina Turner, an ally of progressive Sen. [Bernie Sanders](#) (I-Vt.), said she will stick to her plans to run for a vacant House seat.

Despite announcing his retirement, Portman will be plenty busy his last two years, as the top Republican on the Senate Homeland Security Committee as well as a member in a bipartisan coalition working on the next coronavirus relief bill.

"Over the next two years, I look forward to being able to focus all my energy on legislation and the challenges our country faces rather than on fundraising and campaigning," Portman said. He predicted he would have won reelection but said he decided against spending another six years in the Senate — and Washington.

And Portman has now served at nearly every level of government. He served in the House, as former President George W. Bush's budget director and trade representative and two terms in the Senate. [He was also discussed as a potential presidential candidate in the past.](#)

Brown, who has served with Portman in the chamber for the past decade, thanked him for his public service in a statement.

"Rob and I have worked together on issues that matter to Ohioans, from protecting the health of Lake Erie, to better enforcing our trade laws, to helping Ohioans who are struggling with addiction," Brown said. "We've not always agreed with one another, but we've always been able to put our differences aside to do what's best for our state."