

In Tight G.O.P. Primary in Ohio, Newt Gingrich Picks His Candidate

Three Ohio Republicans are competing in the Senate primary. Mr. Gingrich plans to back Bernie Moreno, a businessman who is a relative political newcomer.

By [Michael C. Bender](#)
New York Times

The Senate race in Ohio is one of the best chances for Republicans to capture a seat from Democrats next year. But first, the Republican Party has to survive a three-way primary without damaging its increasingly strong brand in the state.

Early polls suggest a tight race, but Bernie Moreno, a businessman making his second bid for the Senate, has started to compile the kind of political prizes that belie his status as a relative newcomer to electoral politics.

Since opening his campaign in April, Mr. Moreno has raised nearly \$3.5 million. That figure includes \$2.3 million that he brought in during his first three months as a candidate, when he outraised every other nonincumbent Republican Senate candidate in the country.

Mr. Moreno, known for his chain of car dealerships in the state, has pocketed endorsements from some high-profile Republicans, including former Speaker Newt Gingrich, who will announce his support on Tuesday, according to Moreno campaign officials.

“As a conservative, a political outsider and a successful business leader, Bernie knows what it will take to disrupt the establishment in Washington, D.C.,” Mr. Gingrich said in a statement.

In addition to Mr. Gingrich, Mr. Moreno has won support from Senator J.D. Vance of Ohio, Senator Marco Rubio of Florida and Charlie Kirk, the combative young conservative activist who is the founder of Turning Point USA, a right-wing student group.

The Republican Senate campaigns of his two rivals — Matt Dolan, a state senator, and Frank LaRose, the Ohio secretary of state — discounted the significance of Mr. Gingrich’s endorsement. Mr. Moreno’s out-of-state endorsements, they said, were aimed at giving the veneer of support from inside the state and masking his previous support for unpopular positions among Republican primary voters.

“He’s an ideological shape-shifter who will say or do anything to get elected,” Chris Maloney, a spokesman for Mr. Dolan, said. “Maybe that helped him sell cars, but it destroys trust with voters and it would make him a lousy Republican nominee.”

The three Ohio Republicans have increasingly taken aim at one another as the primary approaches. The state’s election, on March 19, means that early voting, which begins Feb. 21, opens in less than four months.

“Despite running once and spending a great deal of his own money, Bernie hasn’t registered with Ohio voters and I don’t see that changing — he’s a car salesman and that comes across,” said Rick Gorka, a spokesman for the LaRose campaign.

Last week, a Moreno campaign memo mocked Mr. LaRose’s fund-raising and attacked his Senate bid as immersed in “political ineptitude and negative press.”

The memo criticized Mr. LaRose for his role in a ballot initiative in August that failed to make it more difficult to amend the State Constitution. The defeat of the measure, known as Issue 1, was widely seen as a [victory for abortion-rights supporters](#) who are backing a constitutional amendment in November that would guarantee abortion rights in the state.

A [poll](#) this month from Emerson College showed all three Republican candidates within one or two percentage points of the incumbent, Senator Sherrod Brown, a Democrat seeking his fourth six-year term. That’s within the poll’s margin of error of 4.5 points.

The poll did not test the primary race, but it did show all three candidates in a strong position with pro-Trump voters in Ohio, said Spencer Kimball, the executive director for polling at Emerson College.

“It seems like it’s a fairly wide-open race between the three candidates,” Mr. Kimball said.

Reeves Oyster, a spokeswoman for the Ohio Democratic Party, said all three Republicans would be flawed candidates in a general election against Mr. Brown. Mr. LaRose and Mr. Moreno have both signaled support for a national ban on abortion, which other [Republican candidates have distanced themselves from](#) as the party struggles to defend the position.

“No matter who emerges from this primary, it is clear they won’t fight for Ohioans or the issues most important to their daily lives,” Ms. Oyster said.

In his first campaign last year, Mr. Moreno had an early fund-raising lead but struggled to maintain that momentum. He ultimately lent his campaign nearly \$4 million while raising another \$2.8 million. He ended his campaign about two months before former President Donald J. Trump endorsed Mr. Vance, the eventual winner, in the final days of the race.

Born in Colombia, Mr. Moreno immigrated to the United States with his parents as a child. He has been an active donor in Republican politics, but didn't run for office until last year — a turn that has forced him to rethink his positions on some high-profile issues.

While he previously supported a pathway to [citizenship](#) for many undocumented immigrants, he said at a candidate forum this month that all recent undocumented immigrants should be [deported](#).

He was also initially resistant to Mr. Trump's rise, referring to him as a "lunatic invading the party" in 2016. But he has since called Mr. Trump "one of the greatest presidents I've ever seen." Last year, he hired Kellyanne Conway, Mr. Trump's campaign manager in 2016, to advise his campaign. And this year, his campaign team includes Andy Surabian, another Trump adviser.

Mr. Moreno's daughter, Emily, was a Republican Party official in 2020 and recently married Representative Max Miller, a former Trump aide who won his first Ohio election last year.

Mr. Moreno has put \$3 million of his own money into his campaign and has about \$5 million on hand, according to the most recent campaign finance reports.

Mr. Dolan, who also ran for Senate in 2022 and [finished third](#), has given his campaign \$7 million this year and has about \$6.7 million on hand. His latest bid has been [endorsed](#) by more than 130 current and former Ohio officeholders.

Mr. LaRose, a former state senator, entered the race in July and raised \$1 million in his first 10 weeks as a candidate. A poll this month commissioned by the LaRose campaign showed Mr. LaRose leading a three-way primary with 32.2 percent, compared with 22.5 percent for Mr. Dolan and 10.4 percent for Mr. Moreno, according to an internal memo.