

Ohio GOP candidates for U.S. Senate field questions on taxes, immigration

Amanda Garrett

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A candidate forum in Akron Thursday featuring three major Republican U.S. Senate candidates aiming to unseat Democrat incumbent Sherrod Brown seemed almost old-fashioned.

There were no Make America Great Again hats, no T-shirts, no banners waving and no protests.

This candidate forum, organized by the Greater Akron Chamber, was at Portage Country Club, where the business community gathered quietly in suits, blazers and heels to find out what Matt Dolan, Frank LaRose and Bernie Moreno would each do to help local business thrive.

Matthew Akers, associate director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron, moderated the hour-long discussion.

This forum focused on taxes, regulation, immigration, budget deficits and other issues.

Below are summaries of questions asked, along with candidates' summarized answers.

Why are you running for U.S. Senate?

"I want to make sure that we all know that the American Dream is alive for you and your kids and your grandkids because I'm a product of the American dream," said Dolan, a lawyer, state senator and chairman of the powerful Senate Finance Committee.

In Ohio, "we lower taxes, reduce regulations and streamline school choice, investing in areas we need to grow infrastructure," he said. "Those are the things that we can execute on (at a federal level)."

"I don't think it's hyperbole or exaggeration to say that I think each American generation has left this country a little bit better than they found it. And I'll be damned if my generation is going to be the first one to leave this country weaker, poorer and less secure," said LaRose, who now serves as Ohio's Secretary of State.

LaRose said the country faces a \$33 trillion deficit, a power struggle with China and an “invasion that’s occurring on our southern border...We have a lot of problems to solve. I’m a problem solver.”

“We have a lot of problems in Washington, D.C... we turn on the TV. It almost seems like how can a country of 340 million people have so many people in DC that are completely and utterly dysfunctional? It’s sad,” said Moreno, a wealthy Cleveland business owner.

He criticized lifelong politicians, saying they had no idea what it’s like to be accountable for a business.

“Now some of you may want professional politicians to go to D.C. and if that’s the case, that’s not who I am. I’m probably not the candidate for you,” said Moreno, noting his endorsements from Summit County GOP Chairman Bryan Williams, Ohio’s freshman U. S. Sen. J.D. Vance and former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

What are the three biggest issues facing the business community that Congress can and should address?

“It certainly helps to have a business person in Washington D.C. that actually has built businesses and somebody who understands exactly what businesses go through,” Moreno said. “So for me, it’s about making certain that we have work requirements on our social safety net programs, eliminating illegal immigration, getting rid of people who are here illegally, to relieve that burden, and making certain that our schools are freed from federal mandates.”

LaRose listed four: Workforce development, the cost of doing business, the regulatory environment and uncertainty.

“The cost of everything right now is through the roof. And it’s from the cost of health care to the cost of raw materials, the cost of energy and interest rates,” he said. “The Trump tax cuts are set to expire in 2025. That would be a massive tax increase. I for one would be working to make those tax cuts permanent. Governing by crisis and budgeting at the last minute has to increase uncertainty in American businesses.”

Most Republicans agree on the problems, Dolan said.

“Our interest rates are too high, inflation needs to come down and fiscal discipline in Washington is necessary,” he said. But manufacturers also need help, not only in workforce development, but buying new technology and equipment. He also wants to cut regulations and assure U.S. business has a level playing field against China.

Dolan said we should bring as much work back to the United States as possible and work with other markets in Asia where we can have “fair trade, free trade.”

What do you view as economic and workforce development opportunities and how would you work with stakeholders?

Dolan said “one size doesn’t fit all,” saying a single plan from Washington won’t fit every state.

“Where I can help as the U.S. senator is to expand some of the programs,” he said.

Dolan said one of his two sons left college after two years and decided to become a welder. Just buying the equipment to study welding cost \$660, “which might as well be \$660,000 for some people. And what are they gonna do? They’re gonna say, ‘I can’t afford it and I’m either gonna drop out of the workforce, or I’m gonna go take a lower paying job.’” As a senator, he said, he could work with states to address issues like that, maybe through expanding Pell grants.

“As a business owner, my answer is do less,” Moreno said. “If you have a business where you expect the government is going to make you successful, you have a really bad business.”

The best thing the federal government can do is create an environment where there are stable prices and interest rates. He said when Pell grants go up, so do tuition rates.

“The reality is we should be looking at that program and saying, why are we funding kids to go to these elite private schools (like) Harvard and Yale, etc. to side with terrorists,” he said.

Pro-Palestinian protests that have swept those campuses after Hamas terrorist attack in Israel.

“I think we should be revoking the Pell Grant eligibility of those schools and putting it for the schools that actually are teaching our kids and not indoctrinating them,” Moreno said.

LaRose said: “As it relates to economic development, we’re talking about the things that government does, it needs to do well. It needs to do infrastructure, it needs to do public safety. It needs to do national defense, and yes, keep a stable environment free of burdensome taxes and regulations, and then let the private sector do what they do best by getting the heck out of the way.”

Akron manufacturers can compete with anyone on “a level playing field...but in too many cases, the bad deals that have been negotiated over the years do not create a level playing field,” he said. “I can tell you that the China EPA (is) not nearly as stringent as ours.”

Many of our downtowns continue to struggle. What do you think should be done to help increase and maintain economic activity?

Downtown development should be a local priority, “not something where the federal government is involving itself,” LaRose said.

But, he said, too many big cities have public safety issues and elected leaders aren’t standing behind police, pointing to efforts to do away with qualified immunity, which shield police from litigation. “What a positively foolish idea.”

Dolan said people need opportunity wherever they live.

“I’m very proud of the opportunity we’ve been able to provide by giving school choice, giving people the opportunity to say I’m not going to have my son or daughter in a failing school system. We’re going to give them education, and they’re going to make their way out,” he said.

Dolan called out Democrat incumbent Sherrod Brown, saying Brown has accused police of “contributing to racism.”

“How do you think that’s gonna make people feel inside of the city?” he asked. “How do you think that’s gonna make business owners decide, ‘I want to invest in that city?’”

Moreno said in 1949, six of the 14 wealthiest cities in America were in Ohio, including Akron. Now Ohio is out of the competition.

“What’s happened is we’ve gutted our industrial manufacturing capabilities to ship that overseas. And in the process. The leaders in Washington, D.C., made a lot of money. They pillaged America for their own personal gain,” he said.

Moreno did not say which leaders made money or how he would bring business back.

What role do you think immigrant populations have in job recruitment and retainment?

“Let me just say this, you will not solve the immigration crisis in America unless we have an absolute zero tolerance policy around illegal immigration,” said Moreno, who legally immigrated to the U.S. as a child with his family.

“We have encouraged for decades, illegal immigration on one side and then said we're against it on the other side. Because by doing that, we have broken the legal immigration system.”

If people immigrate illegally, they must be deported, he said.

LaRose said “most Americans recognize, of course, we're a nation of immigrants.”

“Immigration has been a net positive for our nation over the years we need to have a merit-based immigration system that attracts the best and brightest to come here legally, work hard, assimilate into our culture, learn our language and be part of this big American Dream that all of our families have had the chance to live,” he said. But it has to start with border security, he said.

“We have a full-scale invasion occurring on our southern border,” he said.

LaRose said anyone who came here illegally during the Biden administration should never be eligible for US citizenship.

Dolan said when he goes to Washington, he will be “laser focused” on immigration.

Lawmakers get distracted by other issues, but Dolan said he would secure the border.

“And basically we're talking about someone who wants to do reconstructive surgery while the patient is bleeding out on the table,” he said. “We have got to secure the border.”

What can employers expect from you in terms of pursuing pro-business policies in Congress?

“The tax code that we have right now is this patchwork of things that have been sort of cobbled together over so long and it's so complex and cumbersome. It's full of loopholes,” LaRose said. “The problem here is that government has gotten too deep into the business of picking winners and losers.”

Government, he said, can never have the wisdom of the free market.

“I want to see a net reduction in taxation, but I want to see a simplification in the tax code as well so that it is simply easier to apply and to pay your taxes,” he said. LaRose added that on his first day in the Senate, he'd introduce a bill called the Reins Act that would limit existing regulation. He did not specify which regulations.

Dolan said he wants to reproduce what has been done in Ohio on a nationwide level.

“How many here enjoy the big business investment deduction? I can tell you just a few short years ago, I was fighting with Republicans to keep that in place,” he said. “Because I understand small businesses will reinvest their dollars into their employees into expansion into your equipment. That is what we want to accomplish.”

He said the corporate business tax rate needs to come down.

“We've all talked about regulatory relief,” he said. “I've talked about actually doing regulatory relief.”

Moreno said the problem in DC is “it's geared towards mega big corporations.”

“The reason that happens is because we send people down there who want to be there forever and they have to worry about currying favor to keep their jobs,” he said. “I'm telling you right now, two terms and I'm coming home.”

Two terms is 12 years.

How do you see yourself working across the aisle?

In Ohio government, Dolan said he had a record of bipartisan success, even when it comes to passing conservative budgets. “So the best way to deal with the other party is to be in the majority, right? ... So when you find similarities and the (other party) have similar goals, then they join.”

LaRose said, “If we're a party of ideas, we can bring people to our ideas, and that's what I view as the way to work across the aisle.”

Moreno said he rejects the premise of the question.

“I'm actually going to go to Washington, D.C., to do the things that I just said I was going to do,” he said.