

# Ohio's Republican U.S. Senate candidates clash in election season's first candidate forum

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MEDINA, Ohio – A Saturday candidate forum featuring Ohio's three major Republican U.S. Senate candidates highlighted key tensions within the GOP over what America's role should be in world affairs.

The topic is as salient as ever following the recent outbreak of war involving a U.S. ally – Israel – for the second time in the past two years.

The hour-long event at a country club in Medina was a key milestone in the race, marking the first time Cleveland businessman Bernie Moreno, Secretary of State Frank LaRose and state Sen. Matt Dolan had participated in a forum together. Several more are scheduled this month, including one on Oct. 26 in Akron hosted by the city's chamber of commerce and an Oct. 28 event hosted by the Cuyahoga, Geauga and Lake County Republican parties.

The three Republicans are competing for a chance to face off in the 2024 general election with incumbent U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, a Democrat whose seat has been rated among those that are vulnerable in a closely divided Senate.

The GOP candidates forum also featured a heated exchange over illegal immigration that illustrates Moreno's singular pursuit of the GOP's hard-right base, and led Dolan and LaRose to essentially accuse him pandering for votes by staking out an unrealistic position.

Here are a few highlights from the event.

## **Ukraine and Israel**

The Oct. 8 attack by Hamas targeting Israeli civilians has led to an outpouring of sympathy for Israel and bipartisan condemnation from many U.S. leaders. It also threatens that the U.S. will get pulled into a costly proxy war far from its borders, potentially involving Iran, which supports Hamas.

In that way, it superficially resembles the murky immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Back then, JD Vance was the lone voice among that year's crop of Republican Senate candidates [opposing U.S. support for Ukraine](#). The position was politically

uncomfortable for Vance after the invasion. But it didn't stop him from winning the race a few months later and polling now shows [a significant recent drop in support among Republican voters for funding Ukraine's defense](#).

Moreno, whom Vance has endorsed, is the biggest Ukrainian skeptic in this year's batch. Dolan meanwhile is arguing to continue the GOP's traditional support for its international allies and LaRose is trying to split the difference.

Making his case to a skeptical audience on Saturday, Dolan said the two situations are similar, and that defending Ukraine is in the U.S.'s national interest given Ukraine's role as a major global grain producer.

"You saw what happened in Israel with the terrorist group, Hamas," Dolan said. "That's what's happening right now in Ukraine."

"You deserve someone who is consistent in thought," Dolan said later. "I am not going to appease Putin. And I am not going to appease Hamas or Iran. So yes, the United States is going to defend its allies."

Moreno unequivocally called for an immediate end to U.S. funding for Ukraine. He also laid out what the U.S. should do to help Israel, including expediting military aid that Israel already has paid for, as well as "giving them space" to defeat Hamas while calling out anti-Israel sentiment from the left.

But, Moreno didn't say the U.S. needs to increase its involvement.

"We don't need to give Israel more money," Moreno told reporters afterward.

LaRose's position on Saturday was that the U.S. should not give "another penny" to Ukraine until its southern border is secure – a stance adopted by GOP hardliners during the recent budgetary debate in Washington that nearly led to a government shutdown. If the U.S. does continue funding Ukraine, LaRose said it should increase oversight of how its money is spent. And for Israel, LaRose said the U.S. needs to continue financing the country's "Iron Dome" missile defense system while putting pressure on Iran.

But LaRose also described a foreign policy worldview that was more like Dolan's.

"It's very important for the Ukrainian freedom fighters to win. This isolationist idea that we can hide on our own continent is not what you do when you're the world's sole superpower," LaRose said.

Meanwhile, U.S. leaders [sent a second aircraft to the eastern Mediterranean Sea on Saturday](#), part of a buildup of American military assets in the region.

## What's "amnesty"?

The most memorable and heated exchange of the night highlighted how far each candidate is willing to go to paint themselves as tough on illegal immigration, the signature issue that helped propel ex-President Donald Trump to the White House in 2016.

All three candidates said Democratic President Joe Biden had failed at securing the southern border. But they divided after that.

Dolan called other discussions, including those involving undocumented immigrants currently inside the U.S., a distraction from that core issue.

LaRose and Moreno meanwhile both said the U.S., as part of a solution, should deport all undocumented immigrants who came here during the Biden administration.

But the event's moderator, WTAM's David "Bloomdaddy" Bloomquist, then further pressed the candidates on whether they would support rounding up and deporting every undocumented immigrant in the country – a number he pegged at 16 million, although estimates generally are closer to 11 million -a process he said could include going door to door and raiding homes.

"These are the guys who want to do that," Dolan said. "I'm saying secure the border."

"False. I didn't say that," LaRose interjected. "It's not realistic to take 20 million consumers out of the economy, 20 million workers out of the economy. What I said is that if you came here illegally, you will never get United States citizenship. And you will never get government benefits."

Moreno, a Colombian immigrant who moved to the U.S. as a child, as recently as 2016 argued that people who immigrated here illegally [should be encouraged to "come out of the shadows" and allowed some form of legal status.](#)

But on Saturday, Moreno said people who jumped the line can't be rewarded by being allowed to remain in the U.S. And he responded to LaRose by saying: "So, again, they're for amnesty. I'm not."

"How is that amnesty?" LaRose said.

"Because you can't on one hand say, there's only one path to America, the legal path. The path I took," Moreno said to applause. "You can't say that. And then on the other hand say, if you did, you ran out the clock, so I guess you're OK."

Dolan butted in: "This is the same talk we've had for years. Secure the border. He wants to talk about all these other shiny objects. And what keeps happening? More and more people keep coming in over the border and all these drugs keep coming in the country."

An annoyed LaRose said afterwards that Moreno had mischaracterized him. Kicking 20 million people out of the country would crash the economy, he said.

“Bernie’s got these slick talking points that are cooked up by consultants and focus-group tested and whatever else to get applause lines,” LaRose said.

## **Outside disruptor vs. experienced hand**

A more fundamental question for voters is whether they think they will be better represented in the U.S. Senate by a political outsider or someone with experience in elected office. The discussion has parallels to Trump’s election in 2016.

Moreno said his approach in Washington, D.C. [will be like his business career](#), in which he built a highly successful network of car retailers by buying and turning around struggling dealerships, and later, launched a company that aims to automate the auto-titling process.

“Government has never ever approached this and said how do we do more with less. It’s always how do we do less with more and more and more,” Moreno said. “That’s what’s got to stop. That’s why you need an outsider who’s actually somebody from the business world in D.C.”

Dolan and LaRose each painted Moreno as all flash and no substance, and someone with no demonstrated track record.

“Do you want someone who can give you slick talk or do you want somebody who’s a battle-tested conservative? Somebody who’s proven,” LaRose said, a talking point that alludes to his political career and his military service as a decorated U.S. Army ranger.

“There is way too much theater. These are difficult decisions to be made,” Dolan said. “If all you’re trying to do is gain political points, get applause at events like this, we’re going to continue seeing this country getting destroyed.”