

Ohio Sen. Sherrod Brown faces a tough election in 2024. And the stakes couldn't be higher

After 3 terms, Republicans see an opportunity to oust Brown in what 'could very well be Brown's toughest race'

Haley BeMiller

Columbus Dispatch

Sen. Sherrod Brown's speech to graduates of a Columbus trade program read like a love letter to union workers.

Addressing the latest class of the Central Ohio Building Futures Program, he told the group they'd get more than a job with good wages and benefits. They were about to be part of American history.

"You're looking out for the whole union movement, and you're looking out for the whole community," Brown said during the August ceremony. "Having a union means progress for all of us. When you love this country, you fight for the people and make it work."

That's the Brown Ohioans have come to know during his 16 years in the U.S. Senate, someone who anchors his policy agenda around the working class. To him, that meant going after an Obama-backed trade agreement and advocating legislation to help companies combat unfair trade policies.

In his current term – number three in the Senate – Brown has championed pension reform and the CHIPS Act that helped secure Intel's \$20 billion development in central Ohio.

Once upon a time, this ingratiated Brown to some Ohio Republicans who were sick of establishment politicians and wanted Washington to protect their jobs. Then former President Donald Trump came along, tapping into that working-class frustration and eroding Democratic support in key areas of the state like the Mahoning Valley.

Now, Brown is up for reelection in a redder Ohio and one of three Democratic senators defending seats in states that Trump won. The state's top Democrat shrugged off the political analysts who say he faces an uphill climb, saying he's going to keep doing what he's doing.

"This campaign's no different from any other," Brown said in an interview with the USA TODAY Network Ohio Bureau. "The opponents are different. The attacks are different. The money they spend is always more than I have. That's just the way it works. In the end, politics is about whose side you're on. Campaigns are about whose side you're on. The reason I win is that voters in Ohio know that I'm on their side."

But Republicans say Brown's time is up.

'Brown's toughest race'

Trump won Ohio by 8 percentage points both times he appeared on the ballot, and during the 2020 election, voters bucked the Buckeye tradition of choosing the next president. Republicans dominated statewide races last year, including the fight over former Sen. Rob Portman's seat.

Because of this, political observers have dubbed the 2024 Ohio Senate race a tossup.

"It's not the quintessential swing state that it was at all anymore," said Jessica Taylor, Senate and governors editor for the Cook Political Report. "It could very well be Brown's toughest race."

Republicans contend Brown benefited in the 2006, 2012 and 2018 elections from easier political climates and weak opponents. This time around, they believe he'll be unable to separate himself from President Joe Biden, whose popularity is lagging in Ohio and across the country. Brown votes with Biden's policies 98% of the time, according to FiveThirtyEight.

"There's no denying he has some political strengths, but I go back to the idea that this will be a referendum on the Biden presidency," Ohio Republican Party Chair Alex Triantafilou said. "That will be very challenging for him. And frankly, he knows it."

Before the general election can begin in earnest, Ohio Republicans need to choose their fighter. Vying for the nomination are Secretary of State Frank LaRose, Cleveland businessman Bernie Moreno and state Sen. Matt Dolan, R-Chagrin Falls. While the GOP is struggling with messy primaries in other battleground states, such as Montana, the party believes it has three solid options in Ohio.

Still, even Republicans admit Brown is a skilled retail politician who does constituent services well. And they're not pretending 2024 will be easy.

"I'm not going to understate the challenge," Sen. J.D. Vance, R-Ohio, said during a recent call with the Republican National Committee. "Sherrod has been a very effective messenger. That's why he's been around in Ohio state politics. Whoever ultimately comes out of this ... they've got to be able to make a connection with voters that they care about them, that they're going to serve them."

Supporters credit Brown for union support, pension reform

To Ohio AFL-CIO President Tim Burga, Brown's alignment with the Biden administration isn't so bad. Burga said the CHIPS Act, bipartisan infrastructure deal and Inflation Reduction Act helped communities that were left behind and promoted the importance of American workers making products in America.

Last month, both Brown and Biden appeared on the picket line in Michigan to show support for striking auto workers.

"A lot of the angst that has created the Trump support in Ohio are on issues of outsourcing our jobs and bad trade deals," Burga said. "Sherrod Brown has been the number one champion talking about fair trade deals and leveling the playing field to keep our industrial economy going here. Ohioans know that."

Brown said he's not harping on how the top of the ticket could affect his chances next year. Instead, he's focused on the work, whether it's making insulin more affordable or ensuring railroad companies don't get off scot-free after disasters like the one in East Palestine. Part of the American Rescue Plan included Brown's Butch Lewis Act, which restored pension benefits for Ohio workers who had theirs cut.

Over the summer, a man stood up at an event in Wooster and thanked Brown for saving his pension. Those moments make the job worth it, Brown said.

"All of my retiree families who are still married to the Republican Party, I want you to remember one thing: When the Bush Lewis Act was voted on, not one Republican voted to save our pension," said Rita Lewis, Butch Lewis' widow. "What I need to tell them is Sen. Brown, all this time, he had our backs. ... He needs us. We owe him."

What Brown's reelection bid means for Ohio Democrats

The stakes are high for Brown's reelection bid: The outcome will likely help determine which party controls the U.S. Senate for the next two years.

It could also signal what the future holds for Democrats in Ohio.

Gov. Mike DeWine easily defeated former Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley when he ran for reelection in 2022. In the Senate race, former U.S. Rep. Tim Ryan lost to Vance despite attempts to court Trump voters and appeal to what he called the "exhausted majority."

Ohioans have elected fewer and fewer Democrats statewide since 2006, when Ted Strickland won the governor's race and the party won nearly all statewide offices. Brown also defeated then-Sen. DeWine for his first Senate term that year.

Because of that, it's an open question how deep the Democrats' bench is beyond Brown. A loss for him next year could shut them out of statewide office entirely, said Kyle Kondik, managing editor for Sabato's Crystal Ball at the University of Virginia.

"When you haven't had really any statewide success outside of Sherrod Brown, it does leave one to wonder who's the next in line to run," Kondik said. "Even if Sherrod Brown wins in 2024, would he be able to do it again in 2030? There's going to have to be a replacement nominee for him at some point."

Brown declined to discuss Ryan's 2022 loss to Vance, but he attributed many of the party's problems to gerrymandered congressional and

legislative districts that favor Republicans. Still, the longtime senator believes he has a formula for success in 2024 – and it's not because he thinks he's anything special.

"I'm going win because of the work we've done in this office," Brown said. "Again, it's whose side you're on. It's pretty clear that my opponent, whoever it will be, will be the candidate of Wall Street and the candidate of the drug companies and the candidate of the big railroads. They'll talk differently. But in the end, people know I fight against those interest groups that that affect their lives."