

New senators on the block: Can Bernie Moreno, Jon Husted make a difference for Ohio?

By Haley BeMiller
Columbus Dispatch

For the first time in over a century, two freshmen represent Ohio in the U.S. Senate.

Sens. Bernie Moreno and Jon Husted took the oath of office last month after a series of dominos fell to land them in the upper chamber of Congress, with no prior experience in Washington. Ohio now has two Republican senators for the first time since 2007.

When it comes to seniority – especially in a body that rewards long-term experience – Moreno and Husted brought Ohio back to square one. But the senators contend their policy expertise and a uniquely close relationship with Vice President JD Vance will help them wield influence in a closely divided Senate.

"What we perhaps lack in seniority is offset by our relationship with the vice president and president and the fact that we're in the majority," Husted said in an interview with the statehouse bureau. "We're not going to waste a moment of our time. We're going to fight for the things we know are important to the people of our state."

Will Moreno and Husted have a voice in the Senate?

Moreno, a former luxury car dealer and blockchain entrepreneur, touted an outsider image to defeat former Sen. Sherrod Brown in 2024 in the nation's costliest nonpresidential race on record. It's the same playbook Vance and President Donald Trump used to achieve success, and one that appeals to GOP voters looking for change.

Then there's Husted. Gov. Mike DeWine chose his former lieutenant governor to replace Vance in the Senate, a coveted appointment sought by several Republicans. While Husted has never served in Congress, he's a DeWine protégé who held numerous posts in state government.

DeWine said Husted fit his criteria for a U.S. senator: Someone who works hard, knows Ohio well and can win multiple elections. Husted will have to run to keep the seat in 2026 and, if he wins, could face a reelection bid in 2028.

"When you go to the United States Senate – whether you're the last person in the door or whether you've been there for 30 or 35 years – if you want to have influence and make a difference, you can make a difference," said DeWine, who served in the Senate for 12 years. "The great thing about being a United States senator is there's only 100 of them. Each state only gets two. There's plenty of work to do."

The Senate relies heavily on procedure, precedent and collegiality, said Casey Burgat, director of the legislative affairs program at George Washington University. It can take years to pass legislation or reach a top spot on committees, such as Brown's previous chairmanship of the Senate Banking Committee.

At the same time, Moreno and Husted have more power as members of the GOP majority: "They're going to be able to affect some change just by virtue of being one of 53 in a majority party that needs all the votes they can get," Burgat said.

Moreno knows seniority is part of the game, but he said freshmen like himself can show Senate leaders and their colleagues where they add value. For instance, the Colombian immigrant turned businessman believes he can help guide the conversation on border security, cryptocurrency, South American policy and the automotive industry.

"The one thing that makes the Senate unique ... is the system really allows any one senator to have just as much influence as any other senator," Moreno told reporters in November. "Certainly on different committees and seniority. But the place runs on unanimous consent, and one senator can stop the assembly line just as much as anybody else."

A Moreno spokesperson did not respond to multiple interview requests.

Ohio senators show loyalty to Trump

Already, Moreno has made immigration a top priority. He introduced legislation to restrict asylum for migrants and sanction countries that don't accept deportation flights. He also railed against the Biden administration's border policies during confirmation hearings for Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem.

Husted, for his part, said he'll work to make Trump's immigration policies a reality. But he plans to tackle issues he prioritized as lieutenant governor, such as securing a work requirement for Medicaid and protecting children on social media. Husted also said energy is too expensive, and he wants to make it easier for companies to build nuclear facilities while protecting fossil fuel plants.

It didn't take long for Moreno and Husted to make clear their loyalty to Trump. Moreno regularly appears on Fox News to advocate for the president's

agenda, and both men have so far voted to confirm Trump's cabinet nominees. That includes Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, a former Fox News host and veteran who was accused of sexual assault and excessive drinking.

Husted said senators must ask tough questions of Trump's nominees without engaging in the "politics of personal destruction."

"The only reason I'm a U.S. senator is because Donald Trump got elected and JD Vance got elected, and I'm going to support their nominees," Husted said. "As a former member of the executive branch in Ohio, I do think the leader of the executive branch deserves to have the team they want on the field."

Former Ohio Democratic Party chair Chris Redfern contends that fealty to Trump – not experience or seniority – will dictate how Moreno and Husted behave as senators and what their futures hold.

"It does not matter if Jon Husted has been in office for two days or Bernie Moreno for three weeks," said Redfern, who served in the Ohio House with Husted. "What matters exclusively is what Donald Trump thinks of you today. You've got to be careful. When you join the cult, at some point they want you to sip the Kool-Aid."