

Will Lt. Gov. Jim Tressel run for Ohio governor in 2026? All eyes on former OSU coach

Former OSU football coach Jim Tressel, now Ohio's lieutenant governor, said he wouldn't rule out a run for governor in 2026

By Jessie Balmert
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It took less than a week for former Ohio State football coach Jim Tressel to transform from a retired university president known for his dominant record against rival Michigan into a possible contender for Ohio governor in 2026.

Whether newly instated Lt. Gov. Tressel will run for the state's highest office next year is impossible to know right now. If you ask Tressel, he'd say he's taking this new job day-by-day with a "singleness of focus" on serving as Gov. Mike DeWine's No. 2.

But Tressel also told the Youngstown Vindicator that he wouldn't rule out a run for governor. And the triumphant music that played in the Ohio Statehouse rotunda as former players greeted Tressel to cheers of "OH-IO" before his Friday swearing-in ceremony did little to tamp down that speculation.

Neither did former Lt. Gov. Bruce Johnson's parting line during the event: "Frankly, if he ever does run and gets the votes of all his neighbors, he's going to win."

For those skeptical of the 2026 Republican field to replace term-limited DeWine, Tressel starts to look like an intriguing, almost singular, alternative.

The GOP race for Ohio governor has already seen multiple twists and turns – even though the primary is still 15 months away. DeWine's chosen successor, Lt. Gov. Jon Husted, took a U.S. Senate appointment to replace Vice President JD Vance. Another possible gubernatorial contender, Ohio Treasurer Robert Sprague, instead chose to run for Ohio secretary of state and back wealthy entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy for governor.

Ramaswamy, who hasn't officially announced a bid, has already scored the endorsement of several U.S. senators and has a commanding lead in early, internal polls. Meanwhile, Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost, a top vote-getter in recent statewide elections, launched a campaign focused on his experience and knowledge of the state.

DeWine said he recruited Tressel to be his second-in-command, not his successor. "At no time did I say to him: 'Do you want to run for governor?' We just didn't talk about it."

But Tressel's entrance into the political scene has shaken up conversation about the governor's race – and perhaps the GOP primary itself.

"Clearly, there's a lot more attention on the governor's race right now," said Shannon Burns, president of the Strongsville GOP, about the possibility of a three-way race. "I was just at a county party meeting a couple of nights ago and that's what everyone was talking about."

Why Tressel would run

Few things unite the state of Ohio like Buckeye football, and Tressel is one of its best-known coaches. While many bemoaned the conservative playcalling of "Tressel ball," the sweater vest-wearing coach won the 2002 national championship and left with a 9-1 record against rival Michigan.

"I always felt like he should be president of the United States," current Ohio State head football coach Ryan Day told WBNS about Tressel's new job. "I think he'll do great for the state of Ohio."

Tressel resigned in 2011 under the cloud of an NCAA investigation into impermissible benefits players received, including free tattoos. But in an era of players being paid their name, image and likeness, the scandal appears less disastrous in hindsight.

Tressel would draw quite the contrast with 39-year-old Ramaswamy, a former presidential candidate who has built an anti-woke brand online and in the national media.

Ramaswamy's X (formerly Twitter) account shares his thoughts on the Federal Reserve (dramatically slash its staffing), pothole vigilantes (real patriots take matters into their own hands) and an endorsement of President Donald Trump's sweeping changes (More winning, less whining.) Tressel's account shares inspirational quotes to a fraction of Ramaswamy's 3.6 million audience.

Who would have the edge in the all-important Trump endorsement for governor?

Ramaswamy, who lives in Upper Arlington and grew up in the Cincinnati area, ran for president in 2024 before dropping out and throwing support behind Trump. Trump picked Ramaswamy to co-lead the Department of Government Efficiency with billionaire Elon Musk and later encouraged Ramaswamy to take the U.S. Senate appointment. Despite reports that Ramaswamy's DOGE departure wasn't amicable, he had a prominent spot at Trump's inauguration.

But Trump also loves football and winners. The Republican president threw his support behind Alabama Sen. Tommy Tuberville, a former football coach at Auburn University, Texas Tech and the University of Cincinnati. Trump recently became the first sitting president to ever attend the Super Bowl and frequently cites Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan's wrestling career. Tressel's football fame wouldn't hurt his odds with Trump.

Why Jim Tressel wouldn't run

If Tressel wants to run for governor, he would have to raise millions and campaign across the state. His experience as Youngstown State University president and his status as leader of Ohio State's national championship team would help make those connections. But politics is a different contact sport than football, Republican strategists said.

Tressel has turned down the call of public service before. His name was floated for the U.S. Senate in 2018 after Republican Josh Mandel dropped out of the race and Tressel was approached when U.S. Rep. Bill Johnson announced he would leave Congress in 2024.

"We all know Mr. Tressel as a terrific football coach, but the skillsets he needs to bring to the table in his new job are a lot different than blocking and tackling in the Horseshoe," said Mike Gonidakis, president of Ohio Right to Life. "Does he have a likelihood of winning against a Yost or Ramaswamy? I think it'd be less than 50%."

Add to that: the post of lieutenant governor hasn't been the best stepping stone to governor in recent years. Husted switched to the Senate race. Former Gov. John Kasich's second-in-command Mary Taylor lost in a Republican primary to DeWine. None of former Gov. Bob Taft's three lieutenants ran for the top spot.

DeWine and former Gov. George Voinovich both served as lieutenant governors but didn't win the top job immediately after. The second-in-commands are frequently tied to the policies of their bosses, which might hurt Tressel in a GOP primary, Burns said.

"The base is going to have questions about where does he stand, and how closely does he align with DeWine's policies," Burns said. "If the answer is that he aligns closely with DeWine, that could be a liability for him."

Tressel's policy positions and politics remain a question mark for many Republicans. He is a conservative who supported a state takeover at Youngstown City Schools and backs Lifewise Christian Academy, which teaches off-site Bible lessons to public school students. He led Youngstown State University through financial struggles.

In the end, Tressel might simply run out of time to mount a credible bid. Tressel has said repeatedly that lieutenant governor will be a steep learning curve, even for someone who ran a university for years.

"There's times I think I have no chance," Tressel said of DeWine's deep knowledge of state government. "I've never seen someone know more about so many things."

Gonidakis said he expects Tressel will outperform expectations as lieutenant governor, "but in order to do that, he has to focus on that job."