

Ohio Democrats' leadership battle comes amid debate over party's future

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COLUMBUS, Ohio—Liz Walters' departure as Ohio Democratic Party chair, [announced earlier this week](#), comes at a watershed moment for the party as it tries to reverse the party's increasing irrelevance in a state that's turned solidly Republican.

Ohio Democratic Party leaders, who are slated to elect a new chair in the coming weeks, will have to decide whether to pick someone who will continue Walters' focus on strengthening the party from the inside, or someone who taps more into [rising feelings among rank-and-file Democrats](#) that party leaders aren't doing enough to combat President Donald Trump.

The jockeying over who will become Walters' successor might also serve as a test of how much clout ex-U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, who's been the state's most prominent Democrat, still has over his party now that he's out of office.

Brown's failed reelection bid in November was the latest in a long string of body blows to Ohio Democrats. Republicans have largely dominated the state since 2010 and now hold all but one statewide elected office. Democrats now will be choosing their fourth state party chair since they last won a gubernatorial election in 2006.

Walters' announcement on Monday that she was leaving to head a Washington, D.C.-based political data firm came without much prior notice.

But already, several candidates have emerged, including Cuyahoga County Democratic Party Chair David Brock, ex-state Rep. Kathleen Clyde of Portage County, state Sen. Bill DeMora of Columbus, and Tamie Wilson of Delaware County, a two-time Democratic opponent of Republican U.S. Rep. Jim Jordan.

It's not yet clear which of them – if any – will be chosen by the Ohio Democratic Party Executive Committee, which is currently set to vote June 10 on a new chair.

The chair of the Ohio Democratic Party has a lot of roles, including selling major donors on contributing money to the state party and its slate of candidates, resolving disputes and complaints among party members and leaders, recruiting candidates, and attracting favorable media coverage.

"You have to be, in a true sense, a Renaissance person to be able to do the job the way that it needs done," said Joe Rugola, executive director of the Ohio Association of Public School Employees and a powerful member of the party's executive committee.

"You have to be great with people. You've got to be an excellent CEO, a good businessperson. You have to be an excellent motivator, a teacher, a recruiter. ...There is not an endless list of people who could satisfy those requirements."

Walters' resignation came as Democrats are trying to regain relevance in Ohio, which over the past 15 years has moved from the nation's quintessential swing state to one where Republicans have near-total control over state government.

Brown's loss last November left only one Democrat – Ohio Supreme Court Justice Jennifer Brunner – holding any statewide office. And while there are several up-and-coming Democrats holding office in major cities -- such as Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb -- there's a general (and understandable) reluctance for such rising stars to risk their political futures on running for statewide offices that Democrats haven't won in the last 20 years.

However, some see an opportunity for the party to bounce back during next year's midterms.

Not only does the party holding the White House traditionally suffer at the polls, their thinking goes, but voters will sour on Trump and other Republicans over the president's tariffs and other controversial policies.

But, both in Ohio and around the nation, Democrats have rebelled against the party establishment, saying they are fed up with losing and want leaders who more aggressively push back against Trump and offer a more compelling platform to voters.

DeMora, a brash veteran party insider and fixer, indicated in an interview that he would be such a leader if he is elected chair.

"Right now, people want to see someone fighting for them, and I think that's who I am. I'm a street fighter," DeMora said. "I'm not gonna completely change all the good things Liz (Walters) has done. I'm just a different person."

At the same time, installing a vocal pugilist as Ohio Democratic Party chair could also steal the spotlight from the party's candidates -- whoever they may be. So far, Democrats have fielded just a few 2026 entrants, while the Republican primary slate has quickly filled out. It remains to be seen whether the 152-member Ohio Democratic Party Executive Committee, composed of some of the state party's most stalwart supporters, will get behind such a shift.

They could instead choose someone who more closely adheres to Walters' approach as chair, which was to hold activists at arm's length and focus instead on the more practical -- and often thankless -- parts of a party chair's job, such as shoring up the party's finances and modernizing the party's voter file.

"What I'm looking for is someone that can continue to build on what I think is the brilliant work that Liz Walters did, in spite of the obstacles that that she had to overcome," said Rugola, adding it was too early to say how the race for chair was taking shape.

Brown, who [helped Walters become chair in 2021](#), is now backing Clyde, who was a [rising star in the Democratic Party](#) until she lost races for Ohio secretary of state in 2018 and Portage County commissioner in 2020.

In a social-media post, the former senator praised Clyde's experience and "commitment to fielding strong candidates up and down the ballot and in every corner of the state."

The question now is whether Brown's backing of Clyde will prove to be as decisive as it was for Walters. It also raises the question of what Brown's own plans are: Democrats have been waiting for months for him to decide whether he will run for governor or U.S. Senate in 2026.

"If Sherrod Brown is running for governor, then Sherrod Brown deserves the chairman or chairwoman of his own choosing," said former state party chair Chris Redfern, who's backing DeMora for the job. "But if he is not running for governor, it doesn't matter whose finger is on the scale."

Clyde herself issued [a statement](#) that she is "considering the different ways I can continue to serve."

Brock said Tuesday that he was considering a run for chair and would make a decision in the next day or two. The Plain Dealer/cleveland.com reached out to him again Thursday to ask whether he has made a decision.

Wilson, a party outsider, [announced her candidacy on social media Thursday](#). Wilson said she was “not here to tear anything down,” though her campaign platform included a vow to “bring back the energy, unity, and momentum we’ve been missing.”

David Pepper, another former state party chair, said the timing of Walters’ departure is fortuitous, as it allows her successor to get acclimated now instead of during the height of the 2026 campaign next summer, when Walters’ term expires. (The new party chair would still have to run next year to remain in office).

A fresh face, Pepper said, gets more leeway to make adjustments and can focus on the next election rather than answering critiques about the last one.

“You can be the greatest chair in the world -- if you do not win, you will have 1,000 arrows in your back,” Pepper said. “And, so rather than laying out a vision for ‘26, you spend half your time explaining away the prior year.”