

U.S. Sen. Jon Husted strikes more populist tone as he sells himself to Trump's Ohio

By **Jeremy Pelzer**
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COLUMBUS, Ohio—When Jon Husted was appointed by Gov. Mike DeWine to the U.S. Senate in January, the question in many politicians' minds was whether he would mirror the politics of his former boss or those of President Donald Trump.

Like DeWine, Husted has a long history as an establishment conservative. But as a U.S. senator, he has begun to embrace the more populist bend of Trump's MAGA movement.

In public appearances, Husted repeatedly criticized large financial firms in a way that stands out for someone who has spent his 25-year political career focusing on helping businesses and economic-development projects.

So far, it appears to be working: initial speculation about someone running to Husted's right in next year's GOP primary has died down. [Trump issued an early endorsement of Husted](#) last month, and Ohio Republican Party leaders followed suit Friday with their own endorsement.

Husted, for his part, has said he's been focused on [putting his Senate office together and hiring a staff from scratch](#). At a recent GOP fundraising dinner near Chillicothe, Husted painted himself as a reluctant senator but one who's determined to use the office to make a difference.

"Sometimes people ask me, they're like, 'Are you having fun?' And I wouldn't call it fun," Husted told the crowd. "It's an honor, and it's an opportunity."

Husted's Senate work

Husted has mostly kept his head down since joining the Senate, which isn't unusual for a freshman senator – especially a late-arriving one who didn't get a permanent Senate office until mid-April.

But he's been a reliable vote for Trump's cabinet and other administration nominees, and his voting record so far has been in lockstep with other Senate Republicans.

Last week, the GOP-controlled Senate voted along party lines to pass Husted's first piece of legislation: a resolution to overturn [energy certification standards for appliances and commercial equipment](#) that were set during Democratic ex-President Joe Biden's administration.

Tom Sutton, a political science professor at Baldwin Wallace University, said Husted has been fortunate that he's learning the ropes of the Senate at a time when he hasn't had to deal with a lot of controversial legislation. Since Trump took office in January, [Congress has only passed six bills](#) (not including Husted's resolution), five of which the president has signed into law.

Where Husted will have to be more careful, Sutton said, is when the Senate votes on a new federal budget bill, which [currently seeks major spending cuts](#) to safety-net programs like Medicaid and food stamps. That will force Husted to balance his loyalty to Trump and his party with the effect such cuts will have on his constituents.

"I don't see him being someone who's going to get out in front of that and say these cuts are wrong and we need to stop them," Sutton said. "But I think he's going to try to really thread the needle and stay on the safe side of wherever that issue is."

Speaking at a Ross County Republican Party fundraising dinner on April 21, Husted downplayed fears about federal spending cuts, saying in many cases the government is returning to its spending levels before the COVID pandemic.

"I don't want to cut anybody's anything. Except for taxes, of course -- but, actually, I don't want to cut them. I just want to keep them the same," Husted said.

Trump's 2017 tax cuts are nearing their expiration, and congressional Republicans are looking for spending reductions to pay for a renewal.

However, Husted went on, he is very concerned that the federal debt has ballooned to nearly \$37 trillion, blaming it on a "generation of theft" in which the nation's leaders – from both parties – ramped up spending and handed the bill to future generations.

"What I don't want to do is to pretend like giving away a bunch of money today is somehow compassionate when it's really just giving the bill to (young people)," he said. "That's wrong. And I'm going to do my darnedest to try to fix that."

Public criticism of private equity

During the fundraising dinner, Husted also railed against private equity companies such as H.I.G. Capital, which a few days earlier sought to close a local paper mill after more than 200 years in operation, threatening about 800 jobs.

Other Republicans, including U.S. Sen. Bernie Moreno, have criticized H.I.G Capital for the move, which the firm paused after the uproar.

But Husted painted the issue as a wider problem, noting that other Ohio-based companies – [Frisch's](#), [Jo Ann Fabrics](#), and several nursing-home facilities – have also had to close locations since they were acquired by private equity companies.

“I’ve hit my wit’s end with these private equity companies,” Husted said. “They’re not real entrepreneurs. They’re pirates. And I say this with all love of capitalism and business, because capitalism and business are great. They create prosperity. They create efficiency. But that’s not what this is. This is piracy.”

Husted said the issue hits close to home for him. When he was in high school in Montpelier, Ohio, Husted’s father – along with two uncles and an aunt – lost their jobs when the local Mohawk Tools factory closed. As a result, Husted and his family had to move to a different city.

On one hand, it’s striking for Husted, who worked for the Dayton Chamber of Commerce in the 1990s before entering politics, to make such critiques of the wider system, rather than just castigating individual companies as bad apples.

But on the other hand, Sutton said, Husted is taking advantage of a “golden opportunity” politically, as when most Ohio voters think of private equity firms, they picture greedy, out-of-state, Wall Street executives.

“Who’s going stand up against (Husted) -- like 15 people who work for (private equity firms) in Cleveland?” Sutton asked dryly.

A delayed job offer

Husted said he never aspired to become a U.S. senator, noting at the fundraising dinner that until a few months ago, his years-long goal was to succeed the term-limited DeWine as Ohio governor in 2027.

Husted, who had been DeWine’s lieutenant governor since 2019, portrayed himself as being swept into the office by circumstances.

When then-U.S. Sen. JD Vance, a Cincinnati Republican, was elected vice president last November, [Husted's name was quickly brought up](#) as one of the people DeWine might choose to fill Vance's Senate seat, and rumors among Ohio politicians soon elevated him to the likely pick.

But as the weeks passed with no announcement, others sought to make their move for the appointment, including 2024 Republican presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy (who's now running for Ohio governor next year).

"Like, we just didn't talk about it that much," Husted said, referring to DeWine.

As Trump's inauguration approached, Husted said, he thought the governor was going to appoint somebody else to the U.S. Senate -- exactly who, he didn't say.

It wasn't until Jan. 23, Husted said, that DeWine finally told him his decision.

DeWine [publicly announced Husted's appointment that Friday](#). A day later, Husted and his family flew to Washington, D.C., for Trump's inauguration. Husted himself [was sworn in the following Tuesday](#).

"People think that a lot of these things, like, they're all worked out (beforehand)," Husted said. "No, it wasn't."

Safe, for now

Husted now faces a gauntlet of elections. Even if he wins the 2026 special election, he then has to run again in 2028 to win a full six-term term.

As Ohio is now a firmly red state, and no Democrats have yet entered the 2026 Senate race, Husted's biggest political exigency right now has been to win over conservative voters and prevent other Republicans from rising up to challenge him.

And, so far, it appears Husted has done that. And the longer he can do it, the less chance there is for a someone to topple him.

Mark Pukita, a conservative activist and 2022 Republican U.S. Senate candidate, said he was initially concerned that Husted would be an establishment Republican like DeWine or ex-U.S. Sen. Rob Portman, both of whom are far too moderate for Pukita's liking.

However, Pukita said he has been "pleasantly surprised" with Husted's first few months in the Senate.

"I'm surprised that he's pretty much voted the way that conservatives would want to see him vote on things," he said. "And kind of like the things he's talked about, policy wise, whether it be smaller government, reducing spending, reducing taxes, doing away with administrative bloat and regulations, that kind of thing."

In an interview, Husted said he's "in no hurry" with his 2026 campaign. While he acknowledged talking with Ohio Republican Party officials about a party endorsement, he said his campaigning for Senate is generally a matter of talking to the same people and groups – farmers, businessowners, union members, local officials -- that he's had relationships with for years as a state-level politician.

"I don't have to find support," Husted said. "I just have to keep the support I've always had."