

Inside Elections

with

Nathan L. Gonzales

Nonpartisan Analysis

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Ohio Senate: Can Husted Hold On?

By Jacob Rubashkin

Ohio may have fallen out of the conversation as a presidential bellwether state. But it remains a critical piece of the Senate battleground, and the outcome of its 2026 race could determine majority control next year.

Sen. Jon Husted, appointed by Gov. Mike DeWine following the election of JD Vance as vice president, has been thrust onto the biggest stage of his political career. A lifelong Ohioan who dreamed of becoming governor, Husted now must contend with a midterm environment and unpopular Republican president, while also introducing himself to voters who weren't familiar with him as lieutenant governor or secretary of state, and squaring off against a former senator mounting a comeback bid after losing his seat last cycle.

That man, Sherrod Brown, is looking to do the improbable and return to the Senate after suffering a loss in 2024's most expensive Senate race. With Democrats looking to flip four seats on a challenging Senate map, the recruitment of candidates such as Brown into tough states has hoisted the party into contention. But the historical trend in the Buckeye State holds little comfort for Democrats hoping for an upset.

The Lay of the Land

No longer a swing state by any definition, Ohio has established itself as firmly GOP territory over the past decade. Republicans have won every statewide race since Brown's last victory in 2018, a win streak extended in 2024 with Donald Trump's 11-point trouncing of Vice President Kamala Harris and Brown's 4-point loss to Bernie Moreno.

Trump also carried the state in 2020 and 2016, by 8-point margins, and his share of the vote increased each cycle. According to *Inside Elections*, Republicans have a 10-point Baseline advantage.

A non-incumbent Democrat has not won a Senate race since Brown's first victory in 2006, over now-Gov. Mike DeWine. More recently, JD Vance defeated Democratic Rep. Tim Ryan by 7 points, 53-47 percent for an open seat in 2022.

The root cause of Democratic collapse is the party's struggles with white voters without college degrees, no longer a majority but still the largest demographic in the electorate. Since 2012, Democrats have lost significant ground outside of the state's three major urban centers: Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati. Losses have been the largest along, but not confined to, the Ohio River Valley in the eastern part of the state. While Democrats have gained ground in "the three C's" thanks to improved margins among college-educated voters, the state doesn't have enough of those voters to keep the state competitive at the presidential level.

Continued on page 7

2026 Senate Ratings

Toss-up (3)

MI Open (Peters, D) Ossoff (D-Ga.)
NC Open (Tillis, R)

Tilt Democratic (1)

NH Open (Shaheen, D)

Lean Democratic

Likely Democratic (1)

MN Open (Smith, DFL)

Solid Democratic (9)

IL Open (Durbin, D)
Booker (D-N.J.)
Coons (D-Del.)
Hickenlooper (D-Colo.)
Lujan (D-N.M.)
Markey (D-Mass.)
Merkley (D-Ore.)
Reed (D-R.I.)
Warner (D-Va.)

Tilt Republican (1)

Collins (R-Maine)

Lean Republican (2)

Husted (R-Ohio)
Sullivan (R-Ak.)

Likely Republican (3)

IA Open (Ernst, R)
MT Open (Daines, R)
Cornyn (R-Texas)

Solid Republican (15)

AL Open (Tuberville, R)
KY Open (McConnell, R)
OK Open (Armstrong, R)
WY Open (Lummis, R)
Capito (R-W.V.)
Cassidy (R-Lou.)
Cotton (R-Ark.)
Graham (R-S.C.)
Hagerty (R-Tenn.)
Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.)
Marshall (R-Kan.)
Moody (R-Fl.)
Ricketts (R-Neb.)
Risch (R-Idaho)
Rounds (R-S.D.)

Takeovers in *Italics*, # moved benefiting Democrats, * moved benefiting Republicans

CALENDAR

April 7	Georgia's 14th District Special Runoff
April 16	New Jersey's 11th District Special General Election
May 5	Indiana, Ohio Primaries
May 12	Nebraska, Wyoming Primaries

Report Shorts

Colorado’s 3rd District. Just weeks after rescinding his endorsement of GOP Rep. Jeff Hurd and backing a more conservative primary challenger, President Donald Trump announced that the challenger, Hope Scheppelman, would drop out of the race and join his administration. Trump re-endorsed Hurd, who sits at the very edge of the House battleground. Likely Republican.

Iowa Governor. State Auditor Rob Sand, the presumptive Democratic nominee, is running a strong campaign focused on the general election. He’s a capable fundraiser from a wealthy family and a press darling thanks to his penchant for hunting and quoting Bible verses. Republicans have a crowded primary to sort through that’s no more clear than when unpopular Gov. Kim Reynolds announced she wouldn’t seek another term. Rep. Randy Feenstra seems to be the candidate to beat but he hasn’t gotten past the perception he was too distant from Trump during the 2024 presidential primaries. Special elections continue to break against Iowa Republicans as well. Move from Likely Republican to Lean Republican.

Ohio Governor. Polls show a competitive contest between Republican entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy and former state health director Amy Acton, the presumptive Democratic nominee. Ramaswamy is personally wealthy and already advertising on TV, but he has struggled at times to find his place within the GOP. He hasn’t always been on the firmest footing with the base, and his history of incendiary comments, especially during his 2024 presidential campaign, could come back to haunt him among more moderate general election voters. Acton has her own hurdles too. She came to prominence during the Covid-19 pandemic, which still carries a negative resonance for voters, and she’s never run a campaign before. But with the political winds are her back, even a state with as pronounced a GOP lean as Ohio starts to look competitive. Move from Solid Republican to Likely Republican.

Oklahoma Senate. GOP Gov. Kevin Stitt appointed oil executive Alan Armstrong to serve out the remainder of GOP Sen. Markwayne Mullin’s term. Mullin was recently confirmed as President Donald Trump’s new secretary of Homeland Security. Armstrong is

2026 Governor Ratings	
Toss-up (4D)	
KS Open (Kelly, D)	WI Open (Evers, D)
MI Open (Whitmer, D)	Hobbs (D-Ariz.)
Tilt Democratic	Tilt Republican (2R)
	GA Open (Kemp, R)
	Lombardo (R-Nev.)
Lean Democratic	Lean Republican (1R)
	IA Open (Reynolds, R)#
Likely Democratic (5D)	Likely Republican (1R)
ME Open (Mills, D)	OH Open (DeWine, R)#
NM Open (Lujan-Grisham, D)	
MN Open (Walz, DFL)	
Hochul (D-N.Y.)	
Shapiro (D-Penn.)	
Solid Democratic (9D)	Solid Republican (14R)
CA Open (Newsom, D)	AK Open (Dunleavy, R)
CO Open (Polis, D)	AL Open (Ivey, R)
Green (D-Hawaii)	FL Open (DeSantis, R)
Healey (D-Mass.)	OK Open (Stitt, R)
Kotek (D-Ore.)	SC Open (McMaster, R)
Lamont (D-Ct.)	TN Open (Lee, R)
McKee (D-R.I.)	WY Open (Gordon, R)
Moore (D-Md.)	Abbott (R-Texas)
Pritzker (D-Ill.)	Ayotte (R-N.H.)
	Huckabee Sanders (R-Ark.)
	Little (R-Idaho)
	Pillen (R-Neb.)
	Rhoden (R-S.D.)
	Scott (R-Vt.)
Takeovers in Italics, # moved benefiting Democrats, * moved benefiting Republicans	

prohibited from seeking a full-term, so Oklahoma is effectively an open seat. GOP Rep. Kevin Hern quickly jumped into the race and has garnered significant initial support, including an endorsement from Trump. Reps. Stephanie Bice and Tom Cole have explicitly said they are not running. The candidate filing deadline is April 3 with a June 16 primary. Solid Republican. IE

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Alaska Senate: Democrats Reach Into The Red

By Jacob Rubashkin

The first Alaska Native to represent the Last Frontier in Congress could be the final piece for a Democratic Senate majority this fall.

Former Rep. Mary Peltola's decision to run for Senate rather than governor — a race she might have dominated wire to wire — puts this race in contention for Democrats, who now have a proven fundraiser who's shown she can win an elusive state with a cross-partisan coalition.

GOP Sen. Dan Sullivan, who fended off a well-funded challenger in 2020, is less of a household name than his headline-grabbing colleague Lisa Murkowski. That will have to change as he faces his first midterm election as an incumbent, and first with a Republican in the White House.

With Democrats looking for four pickups across the country, a flip in Alaska could seal the deal for the unlikely but increasingly possible outcome of full change in congressional control this November.

The Lay of the Land

Vast, sparsely populated, and a thousand miles removed from the continental United States, Alaska defies many of the partisan labels placed on states in the "lower 48."

Alaska tends to vote Republican at the federal level. Donald Trump carried the state by 13 points in 2024, 54-41 percent, by 10 points in 2020, and by 15 points in 2016. Mitt Romney won it by 14 points in 2012. Republicans have a 9.4-point Inside Elections' Baseline advantage.

The state was once even more Republican. In 2008, John McCain and his running mate, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, dominated by 22 points. George W. Bush carried the state by 26 points in 2004 and 31 points in 2000.

But the state can be fiercely independent and heterodox. Independent Ross Perot won 28 percent of the vote in 1992; Ralph Nader won 11 percent in 2000.

And in 2008, even as McCain won handily at the top of the ticket, Alaska voters ousted GOP Sen. Ted Stevens, an icon and 40-year incumbent who just days before the election was convicted of making false statements. He lost to Anchorage Mayor Mark Begich, 48-47 percent.

Just 23 percent of voters are registered Republican, 12 percent are Democratic, and the remainder are unaffiliated. For 16 of the last 20 years, at least one chamber of the state legislature has been controlled by a unity caucus of Democrats and moderate Republicans. Alaskans voted for an independent for governor in 2014, and the state's senior senator, Murkowski, has won her last three elections with an evolving coalition of voters that now features more Democrats than members of her own party.

Nearly 40 percent of the state's population lives in Anchorage, which leans slightly Democratic. Surrounding Anchorage are the Kenai Peninsula and the Mat-Su Valley, home to another 20 percent of the population and heavily Republican. Fairbanks, the second-largest city in the state, is more competitive but also Republican-leaning. Juneau, the state capital, is smaller but votes Democratic.

The more rural areas east of Anchorage are whiter and trend more Republican. But the more rural areas in the western part of the state are predominantly Alaska Native and tend to vote Democratic.

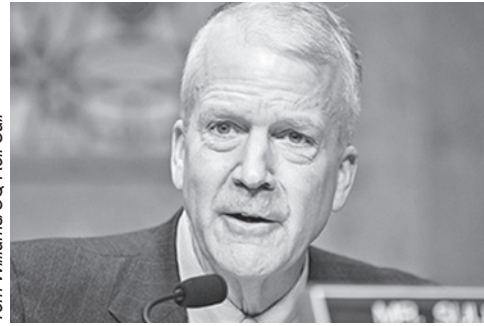
The Republican Incumbent

Sullivan, 61, is in his second term representing Alaska in the Senate. Born in the Cleveland suburbs to a wealthy family, Sullivan graduated from Harvard in 1987 and earned a dual law degree and master's in foreign

service from Georgetown in 1993. At Georgetown, Sullivan met his future wife, Julie Fate, whose parents were both Alaska movers and shakers with deep connections to the Republican and Alaska Native communities.

Sullivan enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1993 and served on active duty until 1997, when he moved to Alaska to practice law.

A 2002 stint as a White House Fellow led to stints at the National Economic Council and National Security Council, and in 2006 President George W. Bush appointed him to be the assistant secretary of state for economic and business affairs. After the Bush administration ended, Sullivan was appointed to be Alaska's state attorney general by Gov. Sarah Palin and served in that role for a year, until Gov. Sean Parnell



Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

Dan Sullivan

made him the state's commissioner of natural resources. He briefly returned to active duty in the Marines during his tenure, serving in Afghanistan.

In 2013, Sullivan launched his campaign for the GOP Senate nomination against

first-term Sen. Begich. In the GOP primary, he faced Lt. Gov. Mead Treadwell and 2010 Senate nominee Joe Miller. Endorsed by both the Chamber of Commerce and the Club for Growth, and perhaps benefitting from some unearned name recognition thanks to then-Anchorage Mayor Dan Sullivan (no relation), Sullivan outpaced Miller, 40-32 percent.

In the closely watched general election, Sullivan narrowly defeated Begich, 48-46 percent, in one of the narrowest victories that year.

In 2020, Democrats lined up behind an independent candidate, surgeon Al Gross, rather than fielding their own nominee against Sullivan. Though the race was on the periphery of the battleground, Gross was a prolific fundraiser and spent \$20 million on his campaign; a crush of outside spending also hit the race in the closing weeks of the race. But despite polls showing a close contest, Sullivan ultimately won by a wide, 13-point margin.

In the Senate, Sullivan sits on the Armed Services, Commerce, Environment and Public Works, and Veterans' Affairs committees.

His campaign team includes FP1 for TV ads and Arena for digital and direct mail. Hans Kaiser of Peak Insights is the pollster.

The Democratic Challenger

Peltola, 52, made history in 2022 as the first Alaska Native elected to Congress, when she won a special election to succeed the late 49-year incumbent Don Young. Born in Anchorage to a Yup'ik mother, Peltola grew up in rural communities on Alaska's western shores, and took courses at the University of Northern Colorado and various University of Alaska campuses in the 1990s, before challenging Democratic state Rep. Ivan Ivan in 1996 for a Bethel-area seat. She lost the primary by 56 votes but won a rematch in 1998 by a wide margin.

Peltola served five terms in the state House, often winning unopposed, and left the legislature in 2009 after the birth of her fourth

Continued on page 5

Continued from page 4

child. She found work as a community development manager for a mining company and served one term on the Bethel Town Council, from 2013-2015. She also worked as a lobbyist for the state and was the executive director of the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission.

After Young's death in 2022, Peltola was one of nearly 50 candidates to seek his seat in the special election. Six prominent Democrats filed to run, as did Gross, the independent 2020 Senate candidate. In the all-party primary, Peltola finished in fourth place with 10 percent, outpacing the other Democrats thanks to her strong performance in her old state House district.

Ahead of her were former Gov. Palin and entrepreneur Nick Begich III (both Republicans, the latter also the nephew of Sullivan's predecessor Mark Begich) and

Gross. But Gross dropped out after the primary, leaving Peltola and the two Republicans. In the special general election, conducted using ranked choice voting, Peltola won 40 percent of the vote to Palin's 31 percent and Begich's 29 percent. When Begich's votes were reallocated to their second choices, they pushed Peltola over the majority threshold against Palin, 51-49 percent. The upset win made her the first Democrat to win statewide in Alaska in 14 years.

Later that fall, Peltola again faced Palin and Begich, this time for a full term. Peltola nearly won a majority outright, and again outpaced Palin in the ranked-choice tabulation, 55-45 percent.

Peltola's luck ran out in 2024. Despite a strong majority showing in that year's primary, Republicans learned from the 2022 cycle and consolidated behind Begich, running for a third time, after the primary. That made him the only Republican on the general election ballot, and he beat Peltola, 51-49 percent, in the final tabulation.

In Congress, Peltola served on the Natural Resources and Transportation and Infrastructure committees. She was also a co-chair of the Blue Dog Caucus, along with Maine Rep. Jared Golden and Washington Rep. Marie Gluesenkamp Perez.

Her campaign team includes media consultant Martha McKenna of McKenna Media, direct mail consultant Michelle Gajewski of AMHC Direct, and pollster Molly Murphy of Impact Research.



Mary Peltola

Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

The Primary and General Elections

Alaska's unique open primary system means that all candidates will appear on the same August 18 primary ballot, and the top four vote-getters will advance to the general election. Those candidates will then compete in a ranked-choice election, where the votes from the worst-performing candidate are redistributed to voters' second choices until one candidate has tallied a majority.

Sullivan and Peltola are the only two notable candidates running. But Alaska has no petition requirement and a nominal filing fee, so the primary ballot could be crowded. The presence of other Republicans or Democrats on the ballot could complicate either Sullivan or Peltola's ability to secure a majority of the vote in the ranked-choice calculation. In 2024, Republicans worked to make sure Begich was the only Republican on the ballot in the general election, pushing two other GOP candidates out of the race. National Democrats tried unsuccessfully to prevent Eric Hafner, a perennial candidate in prison in New York, from appearing on the ballot as a Democrat. He ultimately won 1 percent of the vote after Republicans attempted to promote him as a more progressive alternative to Peltola, and just one-third of his votes accrued to Peltola in the ranked-choice tabulation. This year may see similar maneuvers by both parties.

How It Plays Out

Both parties are preparing for the most expensive election in Alaska history. The 2020 Senate race saw \$55 million in spending from the candidates (\$29 million) and outside groups (\$26 million), but party strategists estimate the 2026 contest will be far larger. One national Republican strategist said \$75 million. Another in-state Republican guessed higher, saying the "expectation continues to be that this will be an unimaginable \$100 million race."

Sullivan, who spent just \$10 million in his 2020 bid, had already raised \$7 million through the end of 2025 and had \$5.8 million in the bank on Dec. 31.

Peltola raised \$13.4 million for her 2024 re-election campaign, the third-most of any competitive House candidate that year, and says she pulled in \$1.5 million in her first 24 hours as a Senate candidate. Filings reflecting the first three months of the year are due in mid-April.

Alaska is a cheap state to advertise in, with just one major broadcast TV market, so voters can expect a flood of mail, radio, and digital advertising in addition to traditional television ads.

The state has already seen the beginnings of both parties' arguments.

Peltola is working to position herself as an advocate for Alaska over political interests, adopting the (somewhat Trumpian) slogan of "Alaska First" and the late Don Young's refrain of "To Hell with politics." Her allies have been hitting Sullivan as "Yes-Man Dan," painting him as a sycophant more interested in voting lockstep with Trump than sticking up for Alaska. Democrats continue to point to his vote for the GOP's One Big Beautiful Bill reconciliation package, which contained cuts to Medicaid and food assistance, as well as his vote against stopping the Canada tariffs and his support for cutting public radio funding.

As they are doing across the country, Democrats are also focused on affordability, and believe Alaska's reliance on imported goods will make high prices an even more salient issue. Gas prices in Alaska run a dollar higher than in the lower 48, and grocery prices rank the highest in the country.

Sullivan and his allies plan to push back on those hits with evidence the senator has brought home big wins for Alaska, including in the OBBB Act, which set in motion multiple oil and gas lease sales across Alaska

Continued on page 6

Inside Elections Podcast

Episode 67: Nathan, Jacob and Mary Ellen McIntire of Roll Call break down the fight for the House majority including rating changes in a dozen races.

Episode 66: Nathan, Jacob and Shia Kapos of Politico's Illinois Playbook previewed the Illinois races including top Democratic primaries where the new nominee will be a likely Member of Congress.

Episode 65: Nathan, Jacob and Gabby Birenbaum of the Texas Tribune looked ahead to the Texas primaries where a handful of incumbents struggled to win their primaries.

Continued from page 5
that had stalled out during the Biden administration. The bill also created a new rural health fund with a formula that prioritizes Alaskans over every other state and will disburse \$272 million this year.

The senator will have to educate voters on those achievements. He keeps a lower profile than Murkowski, which has preserved his standing with the GOP base but means he's also less associated with the Alaska-specific provisions of major legislation.

On health care, for instance, Sullivan will need to convince voters that the rural funds and Alaska carveouts outweigh the unpopularity of the overall reconciliation bill.

As one Republican acknowledged, "it's a nuanced issue and not the kind of thing that can be explained in a 15-second digital ad or 30-second TV ad."

But the senator will have some incumbency advantages, and his allies expect he'll get a boost from bringing cabinet secretaries such as Interior Sec. Doug Burgum and Energy Sec. Chris Wright to the state to highlight the new natural resource development opportunities and the economic boost it should bring to the state.

Peltola is a formidable opponent who begins the race with positive name ID in polling from both parties. Democrats believe she begins the race ahead of Sullivan and two Democratic pollsters released surveys in January showing her ahead by 2 points, though no public polling has shown her hitting the 50 percent threshold necessary to win.

But her 2024 loss provides a playbook for Republicans, who point to the fact that she was still well-liked even in defeat. GOP groups will continue to paint her as ineffective and too liberal for Alaska, with a focus on her votes against GOP-led bills on trans kids and border security, and more generally tying her to Biden, Harris, and high government spending.

Of course, the political environment should be better for Democrats than in 2024, when Peltola lost by just 2 points and outperformed the top of the ticket by 11 percent. But Sullivan, an incumbent with wins to point to and good relationships with the GOP establishment and Alaska

Native communities, is a more compelling candidate than Begich, who had never held office and faced skepticism from GOP leadership who preferred Lt. Gov. Nancy Dahlstrom.

In that race, Peltola ran ahead of Harris everywhere, but her advantages were most pronounced in the Northern Slope and western Alaska, where she dominated among Alaska Native voters and outran the top of the ticket by close to 30 points. Her showing in the most conservative and most liberal areas of the state, such as the Mat-Su and Juneau, while still impressive, were less dramatic. This cycle, Peltola will again look to win as many rural voters as possible while also zeroing in on the swing voters in the Fairbanks region.

She'll also look to put pressure on Sullivan among Alaska's fishing communities. Pelotla highlights fish at every opportunity — she's currently running a "Fish Madness" bracket — and may try to harness the anti-trawling energy building throughout the state. Her allies point to donations Sullivan has taken from big fishing corporations, while his backers note the recent unanimous passage of Sullivan's FISH Act, which would sanction Russian and Chinese trawl fleets.

The Bottom Line

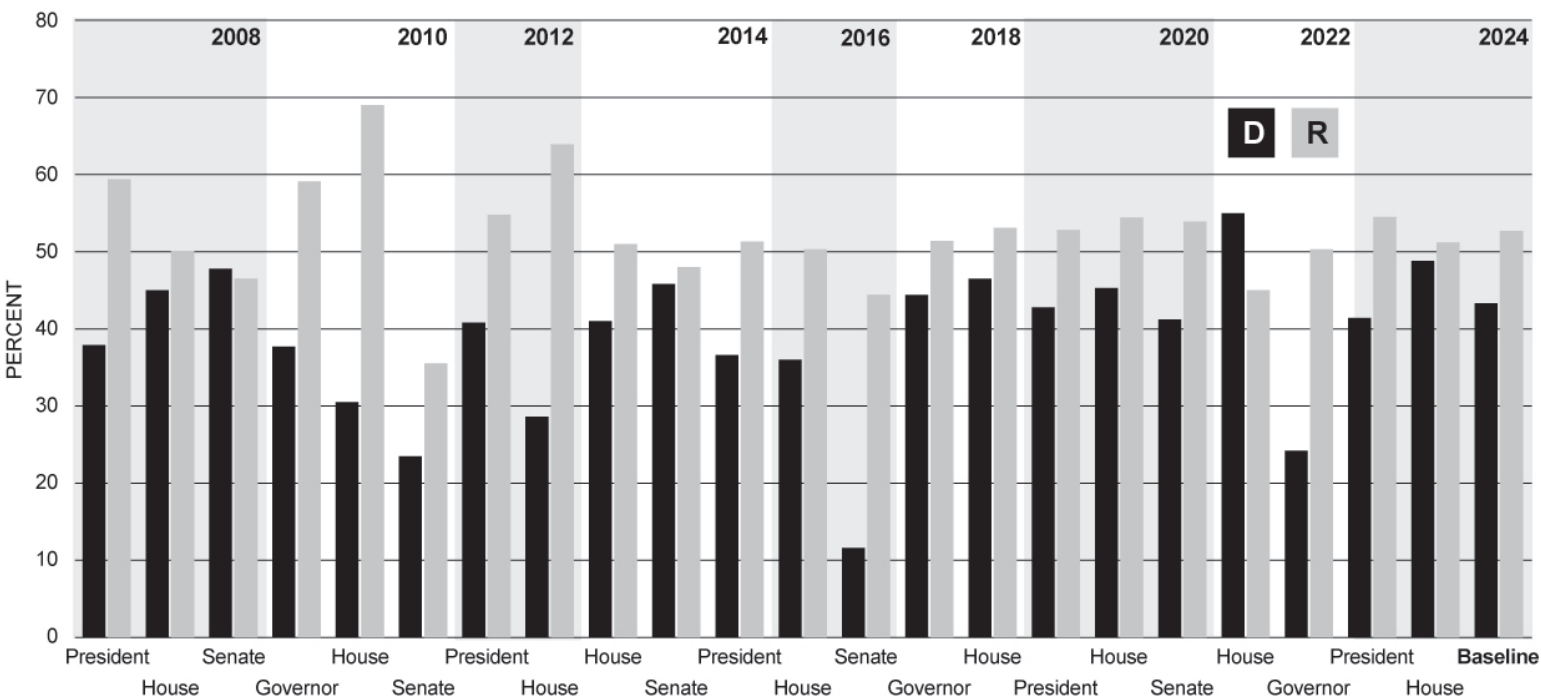
Democrats need a net gain of four seats to retake the Senate, and at the moment Alaska looks like the fourth seat on their list, after Maine, North Carolina, and Ohio.

That puts a massive spotlight on the Last Frontier, which could be the tipping point state for Senate control, and means we may not know which party has a majority for weeks after Election Day, as ballots from the more remote regions of the state come in and the ranked-choice tabulation is conducted.

Peltola's entry gives Democrats a real opportunity to flip the seat, but Sullivan has won tough races before and won't be an easy out, especially given the Republican lean of the state. An improved national environment should help Peltola, but this will be the most expensive and intense race either candidate has been a part of.



Statewide Election Results for Alaska



Continued from page 1

The Republican Incumbent

Husted, 58, grew up in Northwest Ohio but got his political start in Dayton, where he earned an undergraduate degree and master's in communications from the University of Dayton in 1989 and 1992, respectively.

A defensive back on Dayton's Division III national championship football team, Husted nearly pursued a career coaching football but chose instead to take a job as an administrative assistant with a county commissioner before moving on to the local Chamber of Commerce, where he worked from 1997 to 2000.

That year, he ran for an open state House seat, winning the GOP primary unopposed and the general election by 12 points, 50-38 percent.

He won two more elections with 64 and 65 percent of the vote, in 2002 and 2004, before winning unopposed in 2006.

From 2005 to 2009, Husted served as the state House Speaker, where he developed a reputation as a "moderate-conservative," wrote the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in 2009. Husted pushed through a large tax cut and expansion of school vouchers, but also blocked a bill that would ban same-sex couples from adopting.

In 2008, Husted ran for an open state Senate seat, winning 61-39 percent, but quickly began eyeing statewide office and launched his campaign for secretary of state the following year.

Husted faced Sandra O'Brien in the 2010 GOP primary; while he had support from much of the Ohio political establishment, O'Brien looked to tap into the Tea Party sentiment that crested that year. Husted won, 67-33 percent. In the general election, Husted rode the GOP wave to a 12-point win.

In 2014, Husted was re-elected by 25 points over Democrat Nina Turner as Democrats collapsed up and down the statewide ticket.

Four years later, Husted briefly ran for governor but dropped out midway through the GOP primary to accept a spot as eventual winner DeWine's running mate. The pair won an easy re-election in 2022 and Husted seemed destined to run for governor in 2026. But then Trump selected Sen. JD Vance as his running mate, and when Trump won the presidential election, DeWine tapped Husted to fill out the remainder of Vance's term. That move cleared the way for Trump ally Vivek Ramaswamy to run essentially unopposed for the GOP gubernatorial nomination, and avoided a clash between DeWine and Trump.

In the Senate, Husted sits on the Environment and Public Works, Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, and Small Business and Entrepreneurship committees. His chief of staff, Rebecca Angelson, is former White House Chief of Staff Andy Card's niece.

Husted's campaign team includes media firm SCRP and digital firm Targeted Victory. The pollster is UpOne Insights.

The Democratic Challenger

Brown, 73, is a fixture in Ohio politics who served three terms as a senator before losing re-election in 2024.

The Mansfield, Ohio native graduated from Yale in 1974 and began his first campaign for office while he was still a student, against an incumbent GOP state representative who he defeated 54-46 percent. He won three re-elections, in 1976, 1978, and 1980, before seeking statewide office in 1982: secretary of state, the same job Husted would hold several decades later. Brown won a competitive primary, 34-27 percent, over future Rep. Dennis Kucinich, and won the general election, 54-42 percent.

Easily re-elected in 1986, Brown would suffer his first political loss in 1990, when future Gov. Bob Taft defeated him for re-election, 53-47 percent. Undeterred, Brown moved north to run in the open 13th District, a suburban Cleveland seat that he easily won, 53-35 percent. Brown faced his only difficult re-election two years later, when he eked out a 49-46 percent win during the GOP wave. For the next decade, he never won less than 60 percent of the vote.

In 2006, Brown challenged incumbent DeWine, then the state's senior senator. As Democrats romped nationwide and in Ohio with an unpopular Republican president in the White House, Brown defeated DeWine by 12 points, 56-44 percent.

In the Senate, Brown developed a reputation as one of the chamber's more liberal members, albeit with a populist and protectionist streak. He defeated state Treasurer Josh Mandel, 51-45 percent in 2012, and won a third term against underfunded Rep. Jim Renacci in 2018, 53-47 percent.

But Brown's luck ran out in 2024 when he faced Moreno, a wealthy Republican car dealer and entrepreneur in the most expensive race of the cycle. Despite raising more than \$100 million, Trump's win at the top of the ticket and a massive GOP

outside spending effort were too much for Brown to overcome.

In the Senate, Brown had been the chairman of the Banking Committee, and had sat on the Finance, Agriculture, and Veterans' Affairs committees.

Brown's campaign team includes media firm MPWR, direct mail firm Mission Control, and digital by Wavelength. The pollster is GBAO.

How It Plays Out

With no primaries on either side of the aisle, both parties are already looking toward the general election.

Considering Brown is one of the most well-known figures in the state, Husted begins with lower name ID and will need to define himself before Brown can leverage his financial advantage to define the Republican on less favorable terms.

Already, Democrats have seized on Husted's connection to the FirstEnergy scandal that rocked the state's political establishment and sent former state House Speaker Larry Householder and state party chair Matt Borges to prison. Husted, who hasn't been accused of criminal conduct, supported the bailout bill at the center of the bribery scandal; he also met and communicated with the two FirstEnergy executives now on trial for their alleged role in the scheme. Husted recently testified in their defense. In addition to making a corruption

Continued on page 8



Jon Husted

Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call



Sherrod Brown

Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

Continued from page 7

case against the senator, Democrats will also look to connect the issue with rising energy costs.

GOP strategists say that the FirstEnergy attacks have been tried before against DeWine and failed to stick, that Husted is connected only tangentially, and that voters associate the criminal activity primarily with Householder and the others criminally charged.

For his part, Republicans want to introduce Husted as an Ohio values-driven conservative with a record of creating jobs, funding career technical programs, and shepherding tax cuts and school choice legislation through the state House as speaker.

A national strategist was more blunt: “A generic Republican is all you need and a generic Republican is what you have in Jon Husted.”

One thing Republicans are excited to differentiate Husted on is his support from organized labor. At least four unions that backed Brown in 2024 have endorsed Husted in 2026: the Northwest Ohio Building and Construction Trades Council, the Boilermakers, and two operating engineers chapters in Northeast Ohio. Brown still retains support from plenty of other unions, but Republicans see the flips as evidence that Democrats continue to lose ground among the working class voters who remain decisive in the Ohio electorate.

Husted’s allies are also increasingly leaning into a generational contrast between the senator, 58, who even Democrats say resembles a “Ken doll,” and Brown, 15 years his senior and long known for his more rumpled appearance.

Republicans see 2024 as instructive on how to hit Brown, who faced hundreds of millions of dollars in attack ads saying his voting record was far more liberal than his persona while in Ohio. “Sherrod sure had me fooled,” said one 2024 ad from the GOP super PAC Senate Leadership Fund that charged Brown with voting for trans kids in sports and surgery for minors, and aired more than 3,000 times around the state.

“Thirty-one years in Washington has made Sherrod Brown too liberal for Ohio” said another ad, focused on immigration that featured old clips from Brown’s first Senate run.

One major wildcard is the potential involvement of cryptocurrency interests, which spent \$40 million against Brown in 2024 and who NRSC Chairman Tim Scott has credited with Brown’s defeat. Since 2024, the Democrat has softened his rhetoric about cryptocurrency, saying it’s “part of the economy,” but the prospect of significant outside spending still hangs over the race.

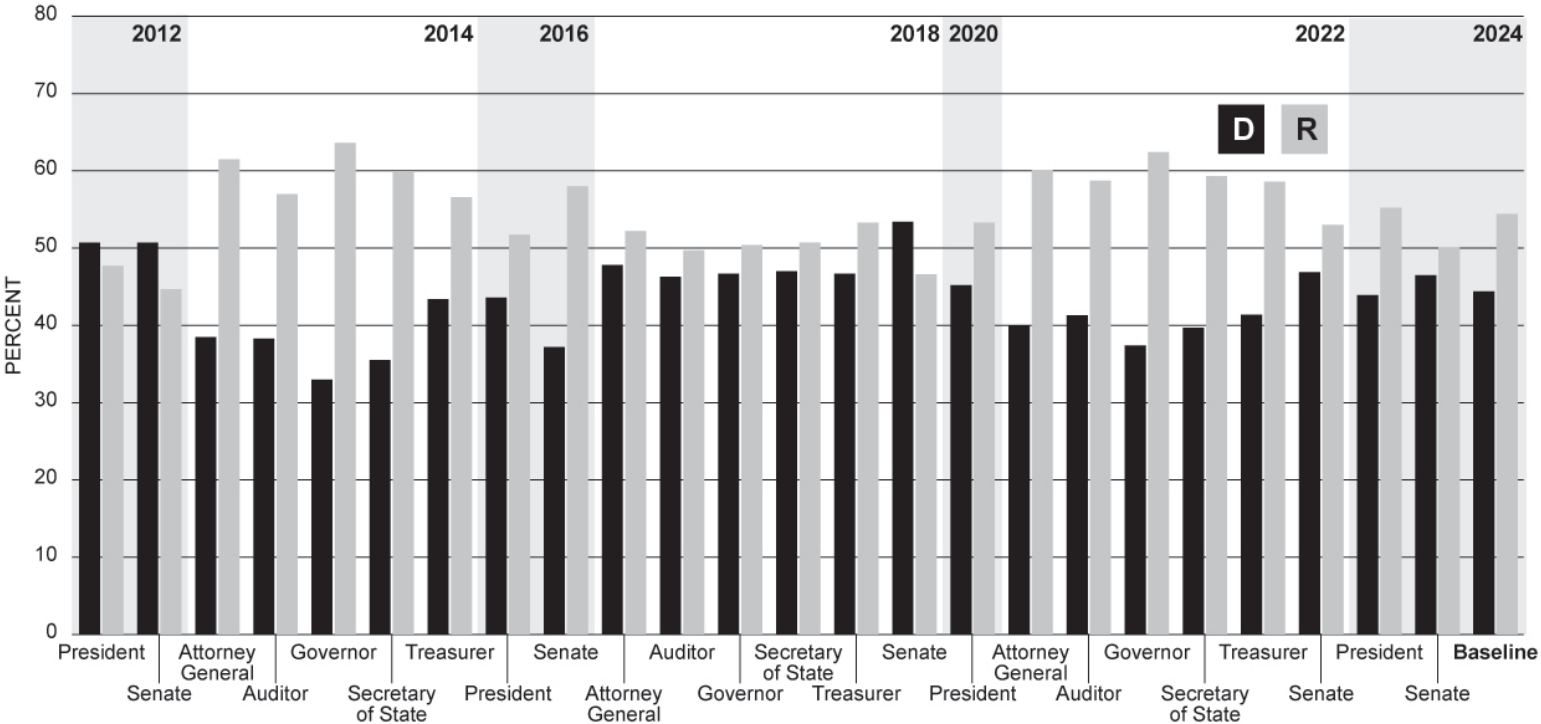
Overall, though, Democrats believe that the hits against Brown will prove less effective this time, now that it’s Trump in the White House struggling to earn voters’ approval, and Republicans in charge in Washington, DC. A drop in Trump’s approval is critical to Brown’s path, say the Democrat’s allies. The most-aired GOP attack ad of the 2024 cycle declared “A vote for Sherrod Brown is a vote against Donald Trump,” and Moreno spent years working to tie himself to Trump. Husted is similarly holding the administration close, especially Vance, who he nominated to be vice president at the 2024 RNC and who will likely play a major role on the campaign trail. But if swing voters have soured on Trump and are less willing to support Republicans, and if lower propensity voters are less motivated to show up due to dissatisfaction or disaffection, that could make life difficult for Husted if he is too closely aligned with leadership in Washington.

“They’ll be able to prove Sherrod is old and been in DC a long time,” said one Democratic operative, “but they won’t be able to convince people that Sherrod is the reason why they have problems now.”

It remains to be seen how well Brown adapts to his role as a challenger, one he hasn’t had to occupy since his 2006 race but which may be critical to his success. On the fundraising front, being out of office hasn’t slowed Brown down — he ended 2025 with \$9.9 million in the

Continued on page 9

Statewide Election Results for Ohio



Continued from page 8

bank, more than Husted's \$5.9 million — though it's not obvious if he'll match the \$100 million of 2024.

In fact, it's been Husted whose campaign had attracted some concern last year for its slow start ahead of a competitive race, though Ohio and national strategists say the Republican has kicked into high gear since the beginning of the new year.

One factor outside both candidates' control is the concurrent gubernatorial race, which looks to be a competitive contest between billionaire entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy and former state health director Amy Acton. Ramaswamy, though an ally of Trump, has adjusted his approach to campaigning after his firebrand run for president in 2024 failed to take off, deleting social media and writing a *New York Times* op-ed calling out right-wing racism. It remains to be seen how that pivot will play, but currently polling shows the race in a dead heat. If neither the new-look Ramaswamy or the DeWine-adjacent Husted can effectively motivate Trump voters to turn out in the fall, the electoral math gets more complicated for both.

The Bottom Line

Democrats need a net gain of four seats to retake control of the Senate, and Ohio is one of the top four targets. Convincing Brown to run for a two-year term after a high-profile loss, rather than run for governor in a race he might have been favored to win outright, was a major achievement by national Democratic leadership and helped put the Senate majority in play. But the underlying partisanship of Ohio is still a massive barrier to any Democrat running statewide, and to Democratic hopes of retaking the Senate.

The last time Brown — or any Democrat — won Ohio was in 2018, with a favorable political environment, competitive gubernatorial race, and lackluster GOP opponent. Brown will probably have at least two of those three going for him. The question mark is what kind of candidate Husted will develop into. The former lieutenant governor faces the biggest test of his political career this year, potentially with the Senate majority on the line. A win here for the GOP likely closes the door on a Democratic majority, with Republicans in better positions in Iowa and Texas than Ohio.

IE

When Do “Whale” Donors Keep Campaigns Afloat?

By Bradley Wascher

When Elon Musk dove in to support Kentucky Senate candidate Nate Morris' campaign in January, he certainly made a splash: \$10 million — made out to a pro-Morris super PAC — is more money than most first-time candidates have going for them.

The cash infusion could be enough to boost Morris into contention for the GOP nomination to succeed Sen. Mitch McConnell. But Morris, a Lexington businessman, wouldn't be the first person to get excited about a “whale” donor only to discover the seaweed may be greener in another candidate's lake.

Before Musk's involvement, Morris trailed the field on two fronts. Early primary polls have found him behind both frontrunners — 6th District Rep. Andy Barr and former state Attorney General Daniel Cameron — by double digits.

And while Morris' money from Musk will make this long-shot candidate the best financed in the field in terms of total dollars, money spent by a super PAC is typically less effective than money spent by a campaign itself — and Morris is still third in “hard dollar” fundraising.

According to FEC filings through December, Morris brought in less from itemized and unitemized contributions than either Barr or Cameron. This excludes self-funding, as Morris also put over \$4 million toward his own campaign.

Musk isn't the only source of outside money in the race — and Morris isn't the only recipient. So far, Keep America Great PAC has spent \$4.8 million supporting Barr and opposing Morris, while the Club for Growth has spent \$4.5 million against Barr. Morris has also seen approximately \$4 million from Fight for Kentucky beyond Musk's expenditure. But outside groups pay more for television ads because stations do not have to offer them the required, lower candidate rate, so the money doesn't go as far.

Anemic individual contributions are a symptom of Morris' core challenge: making his case against two proven contenders. According to Inside Elections Vote Above Replacement, Barr finished 9 points ahead of the Republican Baseline in his two most recent races. Cameron earned a 1.1 VAR in 2019 but underperformed by over 10 points in 2023

against the uniquely dominant Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear.

Ten million bucks can help buy name recognition. And in 2024, when Musk spent hundreds of millions of dollars backing Trump and other Republicans, the party won. But based on recent history, these splashy, eight-figure expenditures don't always make the biggest waves in congressional races, especially by primary day.

[Editor's note: This article was shortened for the print edition. Please go to InsideElections.com for the full article, more graphs, and context about how Vice President J.D. Vance was elected to the Senate.]

Spouting Off Too Much

Cash distribution is still the biggest red flag for Morris. His overall situation more closely resembles that of another — far less successful — whale attractor.

In 2022, researcher Carrick Flynn sought the Democratic nomination for Oregon's 6th Congressional District. Flynn benefitted from more than \$10 million from a super PAC affiliated with the now-disgraced crypto founder Sam Bankman-Fried.

It was the most outside spending by any single group in House primary history. But despite the high-rolling effort, Flynn finished in a distant second place.

The winner of the 2022 Democratic primary in Oregon's 6th District — now-Rep. Andrea Salinas — was backed by less money in a more balanced arrangement.

Like Vance and Mandel in Ohio, a vital share of Salinas' support was in the form of money she raised from others, with an influx of outside spending (including over \$1 million in the final few weeks from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus BOLD PAC). This meant around two-thirds of her total support in the primary came from independent expenditures.

The difference is that Salinas won despite finishing far behind Flynn in the cash dash, whereas Vance only narrowly outran Dolan in funds by the end.

Continued on page 10

Continued from page 9

One reason: Flynn’s boatload of bankroll from Bankman-Fried probably saw diminishing returns. Ten million dollars was a lot to burn in a congressional primary during a midterm year, when just 71,000 votes were cast.

The risk of oversaturation is smaller in statewide races. For example, Thiel’s \$15 million toward Vance could have been spent in any of the 12 media markets covering Ohio. Likewise, Kentucky contains 10 media markets. Oregon’s 6th District is served by just one.

Bankman-Fried waded into a handful of other primaries in 2022, but these excursions were considerably less expensive.

His super PAC, Protect Our Future, contributed between \$1 million and \$2 million to five other Democratic House primary candidates in safe districts that cycle — and four of them won, eventually heading to Congress. But in each of those races, Bankman-Fried’s money was one piece of a larger financial picture: alongside Protect Our Future’s investment, every candidate received at least a million dollars in outside support from a separate source. The one SBF-backed candidate who lost a primary, Adam Hollier in Michigan’s 13th District, was undone by opponent Shri Thanedar’s gargantuan self-funding, which carried Thanedar to a plurality win with just 27 percent in a fractured field.

The lesson: Bankman-Fried’s money worked best when it amplified candidates who already had diverse financial support. Flynn was the exception because Protect Our Future’s spending wasn’t a supplement, it was the whole whale.

Win or lose, disproportionate billionaire expenditures will place Morris alongside Flynn in the history books. Without Musk, the self-funding Kentucky businessman might have had a trajectory closer to the third-place candidate in the Oregon Democratic primary: virtually all \$2.7 million in support of Cody Reynolds’ campaign came from his own wallet.

To the pro-Morris’ effort’s credit, their finances are slightly more diverse than that. Conservative mega-donors Jeff Yass and Richard

Uihlein have each spent more than \$1 million on pro-Morris ads through various super PACs.

As of late March, outside money accounted for around 60 percent of all pro-Morris financial support. Ninety-one percent of the pro-Flynn final funds, for comparison, came from independent expenditures.

The Bottom Line

Whale donations can only take a candidate so far, and it remains a sign of health for a campaign to have multiple different sources of funding and support.

The difference between Vance in Ohio and Flynn in Oregon was composition, not amount. Vance’s financial support included a meaningful base of organic contributions, whereas Flynn was almost entirely backed by Bankman-Fried. Even the crypto mogul’s other investments that cycle pointed the same way: the most successful primary candidates drew in additional sources of support. Indeed, Salinas — like Vance — was boosted by outside money, while also raking in “typical” contributions.

For Morris in Kentucky, the takeaway is mixed.

He now has an extra \$10 million behind his campaign. But splashy outside spending does not relieve a drought of direct contributions, and self-funding isn’t always a direct alternative.

By contrast, the two frontrunners in the GOP primary, Barr and Cameron, have neither contributed their own money nor seen skyscraper-sized outside spending on their behalf.

So far, the strategy is paying off better for the congressman. At the end of 2025, Barr had raised nearly four times as much from donors as Cameron had, with Morris right on the former state attorney general’s tail.

Polls fielded after Musk’s announcement continue to find Morris stuck in bronze medal position.

In early February, Morris’ campaign released a survey showing the candidate within striking distance of second place, just 3 points behind Barr and double digits behind Cameron. But the next few days brought two polls from independent sources: Emerson College saw Morris seven points behind second place, while Quantus Insights had him short by 10. A March poll from a pro-Barr super PAC had a similar result: Cameron and Barr hovering around 30 percent, Morris behind with just 13 percent.

One barrier has been name recognition. According to Morris’ poll, 26 percent of Kentucky GOP voters had never heard of him — way down from 49 percent five months earlier — and an additional 27 percent had heard of Morris without holding an opinion. In that span, his net favorability rating (favorable minus unfavorable) improved from -3 to +11.

The primary is on May 19, meaning Morris still has nearly two months to raise and spend — though so do Barr and Cameron. Trump’s endorsement would boost any of the three candidates, and the dark horse Morris styles himself as an America First outsider.

All told, if Musk’s bet on Morris does flop, the world’s wealthiest man would at least prove his spot in the ignominious pod of washed campaign whales.

In 2025, Musk funneled nearly \$20 million toward conservative Brad Schimel as he lost a Wisconsin state Supreme Court election by 10 points. And in 2022, hedge fund manager Ken Griffin spent \$50 million backing Aurora Mayor Richard Irvin in his bid for the GOP nomination for governor in Illinois — an investment good for 15 percent, or a distant tie for second.

Sometimes whales make waves. Other times they’re just a drop in the bucket.

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Supportive Spending by Source: Kentucky Senate Republican Primary

Outside spending as of February 23; self-funds and fundraising as of December 31

