

# Ohio Republicans Staged Their Own House Speaker Drama



**CROSS  
COUNTRY**  
By Jack  
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As the national media focused on Kevin McCarthy's contentious election as U.S. House speaker, a similar political drama was playing out in Columbus, Ohio—even though Republicans hold a 67-32 supermajority in Ohio's House. At a party meeting shortly after November's election, GOP state representatives chose Rep. Derek Merrin as their nominee for speaker. As the legislative session was set to begin earlier this month, however, a breakaway faction of 22 GOP lawmakers joined with the chamber's Democrats to elect a different Republican, Rep. Jason Stephens, speaker.

Explanations of what happened and why differ. Rep. Allison Russo, the leader of the House's Democratic minority, told the Columbus Dispatch that Democrats sensed division and wanted a speaker who "would work with us on the issues we could agree on." But in an interview this week Mr. Merrin was decidedly less sanguine. "Every Republican voter in Ohio has been betrayed," he said, accusing the dissidents of caring more about "power" than about conservative issues. "Tens of millions of dollars were invested in making Ohio a Republican state, a Republican-led state," but thanks to Mr. Stephens and his faction, "now the Democrats are the

ones who are really in control."

That's how the central committee of the Ohio GOP sees it. On Jan. 6 the committee passed a resolution censuring the Republicans who voted for Mr. Stephens. The resolution claims that their vote "dishonors" the Republican Party and "misrepresents the voice of Ohio Republican voters" who wanted "to defeat the dangerous and perverse Democratic Party Caucus agenda, not to empower it." Rep.

## A breakaway bloc of GOP legislators joined with Democrats to give Rep. Jason Stephens the gavel.

Jon Cross, one of the Republicans who supported Mr. Stephens, professed confusion. He told the Columbus Dispatch that he didn't understand how Republicans could be censured by the Republican Party for voting for a Republican. "Sounds like the dip—s are running the insane asylum."

The dust is settling, but the acrimony is likely to linger. GOP Rep. Bill Seitz, a Stephens supporter, lays blame for the party crackup squarely at Mr. Merrin's feet. He and his team did "very little outreach" to other Republicans after winning the caucus vote, Mr. Seitz claims, and awarded leadership slots only

to Merrin supporters. Mr. Seitz calls the idea that lawmakers in the breakaway bloc aren't conservative "complete bull hockey." He notes that he's a member of the American Legislative Exchange Council's board of directors. Mr. Stephens, he says, was endorsed for speaker by the Conservative Political Action Conference.

Rep. Brian Stewart, a Merrin supporter, said that endorsement came out of the blue on the day of the caucus vote: "I don't think CPAC had heard of Jason Stephens prior to that afternoon."

The coming legislative session is likely to see big votes on school choice, tax reform and redistricting. Perhaps the most contentious debate will be over House Joint Resolution 6, which, if passed, will ask Ohioans to raise the threshold for amending the state constitution via ballot initiative to 60%. Currently all that's needed is a simple majority. Democrats oppose the change because they think it will make it harder to enshrine abortion rights in the state constitution.

To make May's ballot, the Legislature must approve the resolution by Feb. 1. Failure to do so will increase suspicions among Merrin-allied Republicans that Mr. Stephens struck a deal with Democrats to sideline the issue. Mr. Stewart says it's an open secret that Mr. Stephens promised Democrats to block the resolution in exchange for their support. He claims Mr. Stephens twice promised him

never to seek Democratic votes to become speaker, worrying that it could "tear the caucus apart" after a similar episode four years earlier, "and then he did it anyway."

Democrats—and Mr. Seitz—deny a deal was struck, but things are far from resolved. Mr. Merrin, calling himself "leader of the House Republicans," promises not to "stand by and let a progressive agenda be marched through the Ohio House." Mr. Stephens pledges to "respect and work with" all members, but it's hard to see how. He commands a minority of the coalition that elected him speaker. Imagine the chaos in

Congress if the Republicans who opposed Mr. McCarthy had cut a deal with Democrats to elect one of themselves speaker.

In a country where power is divided both horizontally, between branches of government, and vertically, between the national government and the states, Washington isn't the only place where political drama happens. Often, it isn't even the most interesting place.

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## Notable & Quotable: Sinema

*Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (I, Ariz.) speaking on a Jan. 17 panel at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland:*

Jan. 6 . . . created, I think, concern and fear for every patriotic American across the country. But in the resulting two years, the Democratic Party shared a narrative that said we would not have any more free and fair elections in this country if the United States Congress didn't eliminate the filibuster and pass a massive voting-rights package. As we all know, the filibuster was not eliminated. Joe [Manchin] and I were not interested in sacrificing that important guardrail

for the institution. That massive voting-rights bill was not passed through Congress. And then we had a free and fair election all across the country.

As has been noted, the outcome of that election was different than many people expected. Most election deniers lost across the country. Individuals of both political parties, some extreme, some moderate, won. So we had a free and fair election. One could posit that the push by one political party to eliminate an important guardrail in an institution in our country may have been premature or overreaching in order to get the short-term victories they wanted.