

May 22 Columbus Dispatch Front Page Story: “Senate President, The Man Who Runs Ohio”

The Dispatch features a story that begins on the front page and continues for two full pages about how the Senate President is postured to be the most politically powerful person in Ohio.

Having a veto-proof Senate-majority is key to his autocratic behavior.

His life’s mission to entitle every student to a private school voucher and thus to privatize public education, is a serious problem for public school boards, administrators and personnel, advocates, and students. After he is term-limited as Senate President, he could return to the House of Representatives and become Speaker of the House. (The political party composition of his House and Senate districts guarantees him a seat in the Legislature for life.)

MEET MATT HUFFMAN

The man who really runs Ohio

Anna Staver Columbus Dispatch | USA TODAY NETWORK

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Nothing becomes law in Ohio unless Matt Huffman says so.

The Lima Republican, who most people couldn’t pick out of a lineup, decides whether bills on abortion, marijuana, education and gun control ever get a vote in the state Senate.

And with enough GOP votes to override the governor, he can move election days, limit the powers of state officials and draw districts for 147 state and federal lawmakers.

“People don’t understand how powerful Statehouse leaders are ...,” former Ohio Democratic Party Chair David Pepper said. “(Huffman) exerts control over the governor, over other statewide officials, and most people don’t know who he is.”

From Lima with love

Ohio’s Senate president came into this world on April Fool’s Day 1960, the fifth of what would become nine children in a traditional Catholic family.

“You grow up with six brothers and two sisters and you soon realize that it’s impossible to get away with anything,” Huffman said. “There’s always a sibling ready to hold you responsible...It creates a sometimes uncomfortable but honest way of life.”

His older sister taught him to read. He helped his younger siblings with their work. Everyone had chores. A place. A role to play.

And the same is true today in the state Senate.

Huffman “deputizes” Republican senators as experts on issues like sports betting or legalizing the use of fireworks. They write the bills, handle the amendments and defend their decisions at private meetings. It’s the way former House Speaker Bill Batchelder did things when Huffman was his No. 2.

“You have to rely on their knowledge and trust those people,” Huffman said. “You cannot keep the support of a group of people who are not elected by you if you are a dictator.”

He even suspects it’s made him a better husband. “Or maybe vice versa.”

Bully pulpit

If you take a tour of Huffman’s hometown, you’re introduced to everything that matters to him. The law office he built out of a dilapidated apartment building. The courthouse where his dad served as Allen County prosecutor. The Catholic schools he and his children attended.

Even the Kewpee Burger where his nephew now works, and where, he is certain, Dave Thomas took some inspiration for Wendy’s.

“Best burgers in Ohio,” he said. Maybe even in the entire U.S.

Huffman is a guy who knows what he believes. So don’t mistake the Senate president’s delegation strategy as moderation. He lets the people on his team take the lead, but the folks on the other side of the aisle don’t have much say.

There are eight Democratic and 25 Republican state senators. That’s a supermajority, and the same dynamic exists in the Ohio House where the divide is 64 to 35.

“We can kind of do what we want,” Huffman said.

And while he listens to his caucus on most bills, the Senate president has the final word on what happens with priority issues like abortion.

Huffman was “steeped in the prolife” culture growing up.

His mother helped found one of Ohio’s first crisis pregnancy centers after the Roe v. Wade decision legalized abortion in 1973. His father litigated a case against a local theater showing “obscene” movies all the way to the Supreme Court.

“Part of the pro-life culture is the belief that these are people and not just unborn fetuses,” Huffman said.

He won't move legislation to increase abortion access in Ohio, and recreational marijuana will never get a vote while he's in charge.

"I don't want anybody to misunderstand my position: I'm not going to bring it to the Senate floor," Huffman told reporters in February. "If these people want to put it on the ballot, have at it."

Both he and his predecessor made it clear that the gun control reforms Gov. Mike DeWine wanted in the wake of the Dayton mass shooting were nonstarters.

"I think that's real leadership when you come out of the gate and say that," former Senate President Larry Obhof said.

Being outspoken on controversial issues gives senators in swing suburban districts cover. It protects them in elections. It helps Senate presidents maintain and even grow their caucus.

"Sometimes you just need to say, 'Wait a minute, the buck stops here,' " Obhof said. "This was my decision. I said no, and I'm not going to have 17 of my members getting attacked for the next year."

But what happens when the guy who disagrees is the governor?

Mr. President

Same answer.

Huffman didn't like the way DeWine handled parts of the COVID-19 pandemic. He wanted lawmakers, like him, to have more say over whether schools closed and businesses shuttered.

Conservative Republicans agreed with him, but they quickly divided over how much control they deserved. Should DeWine get to institute statewide health orders for a month? A week? How would they override him? Should they create a committee to make these choices or put it to everyone for a vote?

Things got messy. And they almost fell apart.

The first attempt to strip DeWine of his executive powers failed in December 2020.

But then Huffman assumed control of the Senate in January 2021 and made Senate Bill 22 his top priority. DeWine vetoed it, and the lawmakers overrode him. The bill became law less than seven months after Huffman became president.

"If it wasn't for Matt Huffman, that bill wouldn't be law today," U.S. Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Urbana, said. "They wouldn't have been able to do it without his leadership."

Huffman popped onto Jordan's political radar in 2000 when the Lima City Council president endorsed Jordan in his own run for state Senate.

"I remember there was one night where I called him and said, 'Look, Matt, you don't have to stick with me. All these leaders in our state, they're all for the other guy. I would understand if you didn't want to stay with me,' " Jordan said. "And he said, 'I believe the same things you do. I'm with you till the end.' It was the kind of message I needed to hear."

Jordan never forgot it, and their two families became friends. He even encouraged Huffman to run for the Statehouse in 2006.

"He's a natural leader, and he cares about his community ...," Jordan said.

"He's the kind of guy you're glad is in public life, public service because he's in it for the right reasons."

Democrats like Pepper don't see it that way.

They call Huffman a bully. Huffman forced the resignation of two State Board of Education members, not because they lacked the qualifications to serve, but because they refused to repeal an anti-racist resolution.

"I was asked by DeWine to resign because I was told Sen. Matt Huffman had the votes to keep me from being confirmed," Laura Kohler wrote in an opinion piece for The Columbus Dispatch. "Appointed board members serve at the pleasure of the governor. Not resigning was not an option."

Mapmaker in chief

Pepper's biggest beef with the Senate president is the way he's taken charge of the Ohio Redistricting Commission – a seven-member group that includes two Democrats, DeWine, Secretary of State Frank LaRose and Auditor Keith Faber.

"You've seen this guy who most people couldn't pick out of a lineup boss around Mike DeWine and Frank La-Rose," Pepper said. "It's frankly staggering to watch."

The commission was supposed to finish drawing lines for the state House and Senate districts in 2021. But nearly six months later, the Ohio Supreme Court has rejected one congressional map and four sets of Statehouse maps as unconstitutional.

Staggering, maybe, but not surprising.

“Nothing – and I mean absolutely nothing – Republicans have done throughout this process have been above board,” Ohio Democratic Party Chair Liz Walters told reporters in March.

For example, the commission hired two independent mapmakers and paid them \$450 per hour to draw Statehouse maps. Democrats and redistricting advocacy groups breathed a collective sigh of relief. They thought things were finally moving in their direction.

“At the very last minute, Matt Huffman pulled a bait and switch on every voter in our state and presented another set of GOP gerrymandered maps that they had clearly been working on in secret all along,” Walters said.

Huffman doesn’t think he’s gerrymandered anything. The independent mapmakers weren’t finished by the court’s deadline, so he used another map.

He also has a theory that proportional representation could mean Republicans deserve 81% of the Statehouse seats because that’s the percentage of statewide elections they’ve won in the last decade.

Ohio’s highest court ordered the commission to go with a 55% to 45% split.

But none of that may matter in the end.

A panel of three federal judges ordered the state to use an unconstitutional set of Statehouse maps for 2022 if they can’t reach a deal by the end of May. The Republican chief justice who keeps siding 4-3 with the Democrats on Ohio’s highest court will retire at the end of this year.

It’s entirely possible, Pepper said, that Huffman will get the maps he wants in 2023. “If you don’t take the keys away from this guy, we’re going to keep doing this.”

The Big Three

Traditionally, the Statehouse is run by “the big three.” That’s the governor, the senate president and the House speaker.

“Obviously, you have two co-equal chambers, but there’s been a lot of turmoil in the other chamber,” Obhof said.

Two of the last three Ohio House speakers lost their gavels because they were under federal investigation for corruption. Larry Householder was even expelled from the legislature altogether. The first lawmaker to be voted out by his peers in more than 150 years.

He was replaced by House Speaker Bob Cupp, who also lives in Lima.

Cupp is a former Ohio Supreme Court justice and a former Eagle Scout. He's described as soft-spoken, cautious and a man who sits in the speaker's chair because of his "unimpeachable character," not his tenacity.

He's also got a harder job, Huffman said.

State senators often start their careers in the House. By the time they get to the other chamber, they know how committees work, how laws get passed, and most importantly, how to compromise.

"You don't know how to be a legislator when you get elected...," Huffman said. "The Senate is so much easier in terms of creating policy."

But what about DeWine?

Governors have a lot of political power. They're elected by the entire state instead of just one district, and people are much more likely to know who they are.

"It's probably unusual to see a governor as weak as DeWine is when it comes to dealing with the legislature," Former Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland, a Democrat, said. "I think Gov. DeWine has ways that he could pressure these folks but he's not willing to do it. I think it's because he's afraid of his right flank."

DeWine had two primary challengers for the Republican nomination in May. Neither of them came within 20 points of the governor, but DeWine also didn't clear 50%.

The majority of his party wanted someone else.

Democrats, like Pepper, suspect Republicans used that vulnerability to pass a controversial gun law eliminating concealed carry permits in the weeks before ballots went out.

"It's pathetic," Pepper said. "I don't understand how a sitting governor with the standing and legacy of Mike DeWine continues to let Matt Huffman order him around."

DeWine spokesman Dan Tierney doesn't see it that way, though.

He said the governor has "a very productive working relationship with Senate President Matt Huffman," and has collaborated with lawmakers on an "extensive" list of legislative accomplishments such as clean water, wraparound services for children and the Intel development.

"DeWine often notes that a governor is able to enact much of his agenda through budget bills and appropriations," Tierney said.

Legacy making

Huffman has a little more than two years left in the Ohio Senate before term limits push him out, and he hopes to be remembered for his work on school choice.

He's called the "school voucher guy" around Columbus and has spent most of his political career lobbying to expand both the performance and income-based EdChoice scholarships. "Lima Central Catholic was a middleclass school" when Huffman and his eight siblings attended. But as he got older, private schools became unaffordable for "a lot of people my age."

"The middle class was pretty much shut out of alternatives in education," Huffman said.

He wanted them to have options. He wanted to give their kids the education he enjoyed.

"Fundraising for Catholic schools is also a great way to prepare you for a life in politics," Huffman joked while standing in the new gym of St. Rose School in Lima. He grew up playing basketball in their old facility, which wasn't nearly as nice.

Eighty percent of the school's students take vouchers, said Rev. David Ross, who also plays a weekly game of gin rummy with Huffman. "Lots of kids see this as their only way out."

It's a world view Senate Minority Leader Kenny Yuko, D-Richmond Heights, can respect.

"Do we agree on politics? No," Yuko said. "But he's a man of strong convictions."

Yuko grew up in a Catholic family too. He even considered the priesthood. But his Dad worked a union job while his mom door knocked for President Kennedy.

Not every Catholic agrees on every issue, but "he's a family man. He loves his wife, loves his kids. For me, that's important," Yuko said. When Yuko's son died, Huffman bought lunch in Cleveland for all the senators who came to pay their respects.

Huffman can also take a joke. The Cleveland Democrat once pretended to end negotiations over a meatball sub.

"I said, 'I'm out of here. I can't sit at the table with Matt Huffman,'" Yuko said. "Matt's looking at me. His people are looking at me. I said, 'He clearly did not come here to negotiate in good faith.'" Any true Lima native who was serious about cutting a deal, Yuko continued, would have brought meatball subs from one particular Italian restaurant.

Huffman looked a little perplexed and told him, "Kenny, they've been out of business for 20 years."

Yuko laughed and thought that would be the end of it, but a delivery guy knocked on his door with a styrofoam cooler a week or so later. Huffman tracked down the grandson of the deceased restaurant owner and paid him to cook a batch.

“He played along,” Yuko said. “And then really played the ace up his sleeve.”

If he wasn't in politics, Cupp thought Huffman had the talent to be a stand-up comedian.

“He's quick-witted and has a humorous streak,” Cupp said. “He can do these one-liners.”

At the opening of the Honda's Halo wind tunnel in March, Huffman said he did know “who came up with the idea to have politicians dedicate a wind tunnel.”

He impersonates former governors and once introduced Gov. John Kasich by imitating his voice. But Huffman's sense of humor has landed him in hot water.

During a goodbye party for a GOP staffer, Huffman reportedly cracked a joke with a veiled reference to a four-letter word for a female body part.

Yuko called it vulgar and inappropriate. Democratic women told reporters it made them feel like “zero tolerance” didn't mean anything because Huffman and others never faced consequences beyond having to apologize.

Huffman won re-election to Senate District 12 in 2020 with 79% of the vote.

“The only election that matters to him is his primary,” Pepper said. “That lack of accountability. That's the heart of how Huffman rises.”

No regrets

Thing is, Huffman believes in government. And in its ability to fix things.

He was a freshman at Notre Dame when his older brother sped through a turn near their childhood home, struck a telephone pole and died.

“It was his fault,” Huffman said. “But it was a bad curve. There were four other people who ran into it.”

When he drives past that pole today, it's protected by rumble strips and safety barriers. They make him think about how many people haven't hit that telephone pole. How many lives that government intervention saved. But he tries not to dwell on how his life could have been if they acted sooner.

“It’s fine to think about regrets if they are making your life better,” Huffman said. “But just to think about what would have been, it’s not helping you any.”

He doesn’t believe in doing things, even the politically expedient things, “without purpose.”

“I don’t mind making people vote on things they don’t want to, but not if it isn’t going to accomplish anything,” he said. “I’m not about punching someone in the mouth.”

He also believes in grace. His brother’s mistake cost him his life but others still have a chance at redemption.

“There are rough edges on people, and we shouldn’t have people suffer all their years for mistakes they have made,” Huffman said. “Things that were not crimes when I was growing up are now misdemeanors, and misdemeanors are now felonies...Some people are not redeemable, but there has to be a chance.”

When asked whether all this work would be easier as a governor, Huffman laughed. He has no interest in statewide office.

“This is a much more rewarding job than any other,” Huffman said.

Others aren’t so sure. “I think he would be an outstanding governor,” Jordan said. “If he would run, I would be strongly supportive.”

Huffman could also return to the Ohio House in 2025. Many politicians skirt the state’s term limit laws by hopping back and forth. But that’s a harder move to make once you’ve been the guy in charge.

“I liked being the No. 2 guy in the House,” Huffman said, looking out from his law office’s second-story porch. “But there’s only one No. 1.”

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