



Week of March 18, 2024

Speaker race comes into focus as Huffman narrows Stephens' dwindling lead

Control of the Ohio House of Representatives currently remains in the hands of incumbent Speaker **Jason Stephens**, but challenger **Matt Huffman** notched key victories in Tuesday's primary election, appearing to chip away at Stephens' control of the lower chamber as they battle this year for the position to be assumed in 2025.

Four Republican allies of Stephens, including a member of his leadership team, lost their primary election to Huffman-supported challenger candidates. Rep. **Jon Cross**, who is the assistant majority floor leader, was defeated by **Ty Matthews**. Rep. **Sara Carruthers** was defeated by **Diane Mullins**, Rep. **Gail Pavliga** was defeated by **Heidi Workman**, and Rep. **Brett Hillyer** was defeated by **Jodi Salvo**. These defeats, combined with the departures of Stephens supporters due to term limits and running for other elected offices, whittle the original "Blue 22" Stephens loyalists down to 13.

The number of Stephens supporters in the House is greater than 13, however. Stephens appointed allies to fill open seats left vacant by lawmakers who resigned mid-term. For example, Rep. **Brian Baldrige**, who did not vote for Stephens, resigned to lead the Department of Agriculture and was replaced with ally Rep. **Justin Pizzulli**. And after Rep. **Kris Jordan** passed away, Stephens appointed ally Rep. **Brian Lorenz** to his seat. Stephens also doled out coveted leadership and committee chair positions to those who did not vote him for speaker, including Reps. **Jim Hoops** and **Sharon Ray**, who both now serve on Stephens' leadership team and will likely return for another term in 2025. If House Democrats can maintain their current 32 seats, Stephens would need only 18 seats to secure the 50-required votes to become speaker.

Meanwhile, Huffman, like Stephens, will spend the remainder of the year attempting to secure the allegiance of existing House Republicans and the roughly 20 Republican newcomer candidates in open races this November who are likely to be elected due to solidly Republican districts. Many candidates in these open races have already supported Huffman or received support from him or pro-Huffman political action committees. This would indicate that Huffman may already have a majority support of the House Republican Caucus – the main point of contention among House Republicans this session.

After Tuesday's election, Stephens seemed to declare victory. "The shadowy out-of-state dark money groups who outspent us 2 to 1 learned a valuable lesson last night: the Ohio Statehouse is not for sale," said Stephens. "We look forward to getting back to doing the work for the people of Ohio and continuing to pass good conservative legislation that benefits all Ohioans."

Huffman supporter and Stephens opponent Rep. **Brian Stewart** postured a counter-interpretation on social media, "Jason Stephens can't count to 50 votes anymore *today* let alone for the next term." Rep. **Ron Ferguson**, also a constant Stephens critic, said "50 votes are no longer there. Next goal November." Huffman, who has yet to officially announce a run for speaker, did not offer any comment on the results of the race, other than to say whoever earns the gavel should have majority support of the party that controls the chamber.

The House and Senate are expected to return to work the week of April 8.

Heard around the Statehouse

“We have to have a lot of firming up conversations, but I certainly am committed to making sure, whether it’s me or anyone else, that whoever is elected speaker is elected by a majority of the [Republican] caucus.” - Senate President **Matt Huffman**, hinting about a potential run for speaker and voicing concern with Speaker **Jason Stephens** having been elected speaker with only one-third of his fellow Republicans’ support.

“I think if you are going to be elected (speaker without a majority of Republicans), then it's difficult to say I'm also the leader of the Republican caucus.” - **Huffman**, again speaking on Stephens’ election.

“I absolutely will be speaking to Democrats. I absolutely will be – a few of those folks have contacted me first thing Wednesday morning.” - **Huffman**, who added that he believes a majority Republican support is an absolute requirement to be speaker.