



Ohio GOP Candidates Contend for Chance to Unseat Longest Serving Congresswoman

Description

US : Marcy Kaptur, the longest-serving woman in either chamber of Congress, is unopposed in the Ohio 9th Congressional District's Democrat primary.

Candidates on the other side of the aisle have transformed their primary into a race that symbolizes the rollercoasters of Cedar Point, a storied amusement park in the district along Lake Erie's shore.

Ms. Kaptur, 77, is closely aligned with President Joe Biden. She won her first term in the U.S. House in 1982 when President Ronald Reagan was midway through his first term.

Craig Riedel, a former Ohio state legislator endorsed by House Republican Conference Chair and Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-N.Y.) before she withdrew her backing over disparaging remarks he made about former President Donald Trump, is one candidate.

State Rep. Derek Merrin, a late entry in the race who is endorsed by Speaker of the House Mike Johnson (R-La.), is also running, as is Steve Lankenau, a former mayor of Napoleon, Ohio.

All three candidates had trailed J.R. Majewski in the polls until the Air Force veteran dropped out of the race earlier this month after uttering an inflammatory comment about Special Olympics participants.

Mr. Majewski ran for the same office in 2022 and won the GOP primary. He was leading Ms. Kaptur in some general election polls until the Associated Press published a story claiming that he was not truthful about his military service.

For a decade leading to the 2022 election, the 9th District covered 140 miles of Lake Erie's coastline, including the Democrat strongholds of Toledo in northwest Ohio, and Cleveland in the state's northeast corner.

Ms. Kaptur breezed to election victories, consistently securing more than 60 percent of the vote.

After redistricting before the 2022 election, the 9th District includes Ohio's rural northwestern corner.

Voters there are more conservative, while Cleveland is no longer in the district.

Republicans were hopeful that Mr. Majewski would unseat Ms. Kaptur in November 2022. An ardent supporter of President Trump, Mr. Majewski attended the Jan. 6, 2021 rally at the U.S. Capitol.

He built a career managing nuclear power plants and gained national media attention when he painted a Trump 2020 sign in the yard of his Port Clinton home near the Lake Erie shoreline.

In the 2022 Ohio 9th District Republican primary, Mr. Majewski defeated three candidates, including Mr. Riedel.

He received an endorsement from President Trump, as momentum for his campaign kept growing until September of that year when the Associated Press reported he misrepresented his Air Force service, including his claim of being a combat veteran who served a tour in Afghanistan under “tough” circumstances.

Mr. Majewski vehemently denied the allegations, but the National Republican Campaign Committee canceled TV ads it had reserved to support his campaign, and Ms. Kaptur’s campaign was outspoken about the report.

He lost to Ms. Kaptur in the general election by 13 percentage points.

Last year, Mr. Majewski announced he would run for the seat again in the 2024 Republican primary but dropped out weeks later, citing his mother’s health.

President Trump ‘Arrogant’

Many conservative Republicans, including Ohio U.S. Rep. Jim Jordan, decided to support Mr. Riedel. The race took a steep turn last December when audio surfaced of Mr. Riedel calling President Trump “arrogant” and vowing not to endorse him.

Turning Point USA founder and executive director Charlie Kirk obtained the audio and posted it on X, formerly Twitter. In the recorded conversation he had with conservative donor Alan Jacoby, Mr. Riedel said: “Look, Donald Trump, he’s a different person than me.

“I don’t like the way he communicates. I think he is arrogant. I don’t like the way he calls people names. I just don’t think that’s very becoming of a president.”

Mr. Riedel added that he was not interested in an endorsement from the former president. He said that “we need to go in a different direction” and expressed sympathy for Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who received frequent criticism from President Trump.

After the audio was circulated across social media, Mr. Riedel released a statement backing President Trump and blamed the audio on Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) and a “social media trickster.”

“It’s very simple. I endorse Donald Trump for president,” Mr. Riedel wrote in his statement, praising the former president for securing the southern border, fighting inflation, and “taking on out foreign adversaries like China” among other compliments.

“Matt Gaetz and a social media trickster pulled a stunt yesterday to try and convince President Trump to get involved in my congressional primary for proven loser J.R. Majewski.

“Yesterday, a so-called donor called me, making numerous anti-Trump statements. I was clear then, and let me clear now: I am focused on winning this primary by defeating proven loser J.R. Majewski and then defeating Marcy Kaptur in the general election,” Mr. Riedel added.

Ms. Stefanik rescinded her endorsement of Mr. Riedel after the remarks went public. She joined Sen. J.D. Vance (R-Ohio) in backing Mr. Majewski.

Mr. Gaetz, Gen. Michael Lynn, and Ohio entrepreneur and 2024 Republican presidential primary candidate Vivek Ramaswamy were other conservatives who announced their support for Mr. Majewski, who led in multiple polls.

Majewski Stirs More Trouble

The GOP primary veered around another curve last month when Mr. Majewski appeared on a podcast and said: “No matter how hard you try, arguing on the internet is like being in the Special Olympics. No matter how good you perform, you’re still [expletive] retarded at the end of the day.”

The comments were chastised by statewide and national Democrats and drew calls from Republicans for him to withdraw from the race.

Initially, Mr. Majewski apologized and said he would remain a candidate.

“Today I had the humbling opportunity to learn and grow through my mistakes and try to become better,” Mr. Majewski wrote on X. “I would like to thank the compassionate athletes, volunteers, and staff at Special Olympics of Ohio for inviting my wife and I to their Winter Games.

“The Special Olympics programs offer leadership skills, health awareness, and social growth that transcends beyond their athletes.

“I will be forever grateful for this experience, the power of knowledge, and the gift of forgiveness,” he continued.

The Lucas County Republican Party, which endorsed Mr. Merrin in January, censured Mr. Majewski. Lucas County is anchored by county seat, Toledo, the largest city in the 9th Congressional District.

Speaker of the House Mike Johnson (R-La.) and House GOP campaign chief Richard Hudson (R-N.C.) notified President Trump and his campaign team of Mr. Majewski’s comments at the Presidents’ Day summit at Mar-a-Lago, according to Politico.

Citing fear that he would spoil the party's chances to unseat Ms. Kaptur, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Hudson asked President Trump to neutralize Mr. Majewski, Politico reported.

Around the same time, Ohio Truth PAC launched TV ads accusing Majewski of "stolen valor" referencing the 2022 report that he misrepresented his military service.

On March 6, the Lucas County Board of Elections said Mr. Majewski submitted his withdrawal letter. This followed his announcement the previous weekend that he was suspending his campaign.

In a March 2 post on X, Mr. Majewski wrote: "While I know I would win, and have a great shot in the general election now that my record was cleared, it is inevitable that the Deep State will do whatever it takes to fight against me.

"Even going as far as attacking my family and once again accusing me of stolen valor."

He said he would devote his energy to "the one man I know will crush the deep state. That man is President Donald J. Trump."

Mr. Majewski also said that President Trump "did not ask me to get out of this race."

A Lucas County Board of Elections spokesperson said that Mr. Majewski will still appear on the ballot but votes for him will not be counted.

National Republicans Hopeful

Mike Marinella, a spokesman for the National Republican Congressional Committee, lauded Mr. Majewski for stepping down.

"J.R. Majewski's decision puts the team first, allowing Republicans to unite and focus on defeating Marcy Kaptur. Now, Marcy Kaptur's retirement notice is in the mail," he said in a statement.

Mr. Lankenau, 61, has a Master's degree from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and served as mayor of Napoleon, a small town in the district.

He doesn't have the name recognition, financial backing, and high-profile endorsements of Mr. Riedel and Mr. Merrin, but he believes he appeals to Republicans and independents.

"The other candidates bring drama and chaos. I can only speak for myself. I simply offer honesty, integrity, and respect for all people," Mr. Lankenau told the Associated Press.

National and Ohio Republicans view Mr. Riedel and Mr. Merrin as candidates who are more electable than Mr. Majewski in the general election.

Since Mr. Majewski had support from many prominent conservatives and withdrew from the race in the final weeks, pundits are uncertain which remaining candidate will emerge.

Mr. Majewski's presence on the ballot could draw votes away from the other candidates.

Mr. Merrin entered the race last December just before the filing deadline. Along with support from Speaker Johnson, Mr. Merrin has financial backing from the Congressional Leadership Fund.

A term-limited state representative who entered politics when he was elected mayor of Waterville when he was 21, Mr. Merrin gained statewide attention last year when he led an intra-party revolt after losing the state House Speaker race to Rep. Jason Stephens.

The Ohio Republican Caucus named Mr. Merrin House Speaker, but weeks later Mr. Stephens prevailed in the official vote, gaining more support from Democrats than his own party.

All 32 House Democrats voted for Mr. Stephens in a move House Minority Leader Allison Russo said was made to inspire unity.

After filing to seek the Ohio 9th Congressional District Republican nomination, Mr. Merrin said in a statement: "I've never been afraid to face down slings and arrows from the Left or challenge my own party."

"I cannot sit back and hand away this seat to Marcy Kaptur, jeopardizing the future of our country.

"I look forward to crisscrossing the district over the coming months as we push forward to bring Marcy Kaptur back home and restore strong, conservative leadership to Washington," he added.

Mr. Riedel touts his business background and previous political experience as reasons why he is the candidate best suited to oppose Ms. Kaptur.

After earning a civil engineering degree from Ohio State University, Mr. Riedel worked for a steel company for 27 years.

"My background is all private business. Most recently I was a state representative in northwest Ohio where I served the 82nd House District for three terms for six years," he told a Toledo TV station.

"No one can match my background in this race. None of the other candidates can claim that they've worked in the private sector for the combination of 27 years, having been a conservative fighter in the Ohio General Assembly for six years," he added.

By Jeff Louderback

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