How Bernie Moreno won Ohio GOP Senate primary: 4 takeaways from his big win

By **Haley BeMiller**
Columbus Dispatch

The lineup is set for Ohio's high-stakes U.S. Senate race.

Businessman Bernie Moreno won the Republican nomination on Tuesday and will face Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown this fall. What started as a quiet primary ended in turmoil as different factions of the GOP tried to push their chosen candidate over the finish line.

Moreno defeated state Sen. Matt Dolan, R-Chagrin Falls, and Secretary of State Frank LaRose with more than 50% of the vote, according to unofficial results.

Now, Republicans say they'll unite to tackle an even loftier mission: Unseating Brown. The three-term senator is one of the most vulnerable Democrats in the country, and Republicans want to flip Ohio in their quest for control of the Senate. At the same time, they acknowledge the challenge: Brown is a skilled retail politician who's appealed to working class voters in past elections.

Here's are the key takeaways from Tuesday's primary.

Trump remains kingmaker for Ohio Republicans

Moreno was largely unknown in Ohio outside of the Cleveland area, where he based his car dealership and blockchain businesses. He briefly ran in the 2022 Senate primary to replace former Sen. Rob Portman, but he dropped out before the deadline to make the ballot.

By contrast, Sen. J.D. Vance had some name recognition when Trump backed him in 2022.

That made Trump's endorsement of Moreno in December a bit of a gamble. At that point, Moreno was polling last in a primary that hadn't gotten much attention. Trump did it anyway.

Despite the nod, Moreno struggled for weeks to break away from the pack and get through to undecided voters. His allies panicked when Dolan surged in the polls and pulled out all the stops to push Moreno to victory. That included a visit from the former president, who hurled insults at Dolan and rallied his supporters for Moreno.

In the end, Moreno's win – coupled with another rebuke of traditional Republicans – allows Trump to continue claiming influence over GOP races.

Dolan falls short for second time

Dolan turned heads when he won the support of Gov. Mike DeWine, a careful politician who doesn't often wade into primaries. The endorsement, coupled with his poll numbers, gave the impression that Dolan could give Moreno a run for his money. On Tuesday, he landed in second place with one-third of the vote.

The outcome was reminiscent of 2022, when Dolan experienced late momentum and had observers wondering if he could defy Trump. Instead, he trailed Vance and former state treasurer Josh Mandel in that primary.

Speaking to reporters Tuesday, Dolan attributed the results to poor turnout. But Republican strategist Luke Thompson, who ran a PAC to support Vance in 2022, said press and political pundits underestimated Moreno.

"He won every county in Ohio tonight because he's lived the American Dream," Thompson said. "He gets, concretely, the aspirations of working Ohioans. He's had his head under the hood. He's worked for what he has. And that down-to-earth practicality speaks to normal people."

Primary deals blow to LaRose's political prospects

LaRose's entry into the Senate race was a given after he spent years railing against Brown. He shed the perception of a traditional, even moderate Republican and began trying to appease Trump-aligned voters. That included increasingly heated rhetoric about voter fraud, even while he defended Ohio's election system as secure and reliable.

In reality, LaRose's recent political woes began before Tuesday. He made himself the face of two ballot issues last year that didn't go as Republicans hoped: The August proposal to make it harder to amend the constitution, and the November abortion rights measure. Still, he dismissed speculation that those could affect his Senate bid.

Plus, LaRose brought some advantages to the primary: He's a Green Beret, and he was the only candidate who's held statewide office. His campaign argued that would boost his chances on Tuesday and bring some undecided voters into the fold. Ultimately, it wasn't enough. LaRose received less than 17% of the vote.

"I knew that this was going to be difficult right from the beginning, but I'm not somebody that ever backs down from a job," LaRose said Tuesday.

It's unclear where LaRose goes from here.

It pays to be wealthy

Another problem for LaRose was money – and it wasn't an issue for his opponents.

Both Moreno and Dolan are independently wealthy, and they used that to keep their message on the airwaves through election day. Dolan funneled $10 million into his Senate bid, while Moreno loaned his campaign $4.5 million. LaRose invested $250,000 in the fall, but it wasn't enough to keep up with two multimillionaires.

Money will continue to play a big part in Ohio's Senate race. Moreno must quickly recover from a bruising primary and leverage GOP support if he wants to match Brown's fundraising numbers. Meanwhile, National Republican and Democratic groups plan to pour tens of millions of dollars into Ohio this fall.

USA TODAY Network Ohio Bureau reporter Jessie Balmert contributed.