

**Choppy waters. Historic Statehouse beef expected to grind progress to a halt**

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**Thomas Suddes**

Contributed Commentary



Imagine that, rather than retire from Congress, Sen. [Mitch McConnell](#), the Kentucky Republican, ran instead for the U.S. House of Representatives — and that McConnell was the Senate’s majority leader.

Then imagine that McConnell’s plan, if elected to the House, was to pry its gavel from the hand of Speaker Mike Johnson, a fellow Republican, and wrap McConnell’s fist around it.

And in the run up to that attempted coup, imagine what that does to congressional business, to House measures awaiting Senate action, and to Senate measures awaiting House action. From now until January: Deadlock.

There’d be no incentive for Johnson to pass bills backed by McConnell, and no incentive for McConnell to pass bills backed by Johnson, no matter how necessary those measures might be.

Welcome, Ohioans, to what the Statehouse potentially could look like for the next eight months, while Senate President Matt Huffman, a Lima Republican who will be elected (unopposed) to an Ohio House seat in November, works to unseat and replace – with himself – Republican House Speaker Jason Stephens, of Lawrence County's Kitts Hill.

If, in Statehouse history, there's ever been such an attempt by the majority leader of one legislative chamber to unseat the majority leader of the other legislative chamber, it's lost to memory.

### **Don't expect much to get done in the Statehouse this year**

But the potential consequences are clear: Statehouse gridlock, with enormous cross-currents among Capitol Square lobbyists, Ohio's permanent clique of political contributors, and inside Republican Gov. Mike DeWine's administration.

(In that connection, students of body language may enjoy watching Huffman and Stephens Wednesday, as they flank each other in the House's chamber for a joint House-Senate session to hear DeWine's annual state-of-the-state address.)

For anyone trying to get a bill passed amid such choppy waters, uncertainties abound.

What happens to a House bill, backed by Stephens, when it lands in Huffman's Senate? And what happens to a Senate bill, backed by Huffman, when it lands in Stephens's House?

The possibilities for logrolling – in return for a favor, you pass my bill, and I'll pass yours – are enormous. So are the ethical temptations.

### **Why there is such bad blood between Jason Stephens and Matt Huffman**

Reduced to essentials, Huffman's beef appears to be that he'd be a better leader of the House's Republicans – almost certain to retain their majority this November – than Stephens has been.

Rationale: Stephens was elected speaker with the votes of a 22-member minority of the House's Republican representatives, not a majority of the 67-member GOP caucus,

When the dust settled in January 2023, the House's 32 Democrats plus 22 of the House's 67 Republicans voted to make Stephens speaker rather than suburban Toledo Republican Rep. Derek Merrin, who had been the GOP caucus's informal initial choice in what amounted, in the end, to a straw vote.

In the January roll-call in which Stephens landed the speakership, 43 House Republicans (of the House's 67) voted for Merrin for speaker. (Two Republicans were absent.) Because Stephens was elected with the help of votes from House Democrats, he hasn't enjoyed the backing of a united GOP caucus. (It's hard to see how re-splitting the caucus, which Huffman's bid could do, might somehow also reunite it.)

### **Does Ohio General Assembly really need two chambers?**

The House GOP fracture has arguably led to the passage of fewer measures and to what can be seen as House-Senate deadlocks (Time was when GOP conservatives argued that the fewer bills the General Assembly passed, the better off Ohio would be.)

Still, the intra-Republican fight over the speakership doesn't advance the public interest in any discernible way.

As previously argued, the real solution to this and other consequences of a two-chambered (i.e., two-tollgate) legislature would be a unicameral (one-chamber) legislature like Nebraska's. In the 1930s, Ohio seriously considered it, and good-government groups backed the idea.

True, sticking with a 99-seat House, while scrapping the 33-seat Senate, wouldn't save much; the Senate's appropriation for the year ending June 30 is \$20.5 million.

The benefit is voter transparency: A unicameral legislature can cut through the two-chamber falderal that hides which General Assembly members wield trowels, and which wield daggers, in writing or blocking legislation in, or against, the public interest.

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