

The Ohio Voters

Sen. Sherrod Brown Can't Afford to Lose

By Salena Zito

Youngstown, Ohio

Tom Maraffa is the type of voter Sen. Sherrod Brown needs to win in November. Mr. Maraffa, 71, is a Youngstown State University emeritus professor of geography, a registered independent and a committed supporter of labor. As a longtime resident of the Mahoning Valley, he has spent most of his days with working-class Ohioans—friends, family and students.

Mr. Maraffa didn't vote for Donald Trump—"not in 2016, 2020, nor will I this year." He also leans strongly against Mr. Brown, a Democrat seeking a fourth term. One reason: He believes the senator responded inadequately to last year's toxic train derailment in East Palestine, half an hour south of here.

"He, as a Democrat, had the ability to push Biden and [Transportation Secretary Pete] Buttigieg to be more visible," Mr. Maraffa said. "Either he didn't push them hard enough to do something or, equally as bad, they didn't respond to him if he did."

On March 19 Mr. Brown won re-nomination in an uncontested primary. He will face Cleveland businessman Bernie Moreno, who defeated Secretary of State Frank LaRose and state Sen. Matt Dolan in the Republican primary. Mr. Trump backed Mr. Moreno—and so did the Democrats, who saw him as a man Mr. Brown could beat. They put their money where their mouth was, spending \$2.7 million in ads boosting Mr. Moreno.

Youngstown is the seat of Mahoning County, which, along with nearby Trumbull, Stark and Columbiana counties for nearly a century have been the epicenter of the New Deal union vote for Democrats. The region has supported Mr. Brown, former Gov. Ted Strickland (elected for a single term in 2006), Barack Obama twice and former Rep. Tim Ryan for 20 years. Voters here work with their hands, or at least their forefathers did. The four-county region is littered with old mills and factories, scarred brownfields among the rolling hills.

With job losses in the 1970s and '80s came a mass exodus that halved the population and left a battered landscape with fewer churches, schools, homes, barber-shops and mom-and-pop groceries, a smaller tax base, and far less hope.

Paul Sracic, a Youngstown State political-science professor, said the region is more critical than any other to the Senate race and adds: "I think Brown's in trouble." Mr. Sracic dismisses the glee that some Democrats expressed when Mr. Moreno won: "First of all, he's a good candidate. Trump has backed bad candidates at other places—Herschel Walker, people like that—who really had no business running for office, who didn't have the skills to do this. Moreno does."

In 2006 then-Rep. Brown stood outside the Mahoning County Democratic headquarters in Boardman and delivered a populist oratory that would have made William Jennings Bryan proud—railing about "the struggle for economic and social justice" and the decadeslong "battle between the privileged and

the rest of us." He said he was "one of us" and would bring "real change" to Washington. In November he defeated Sen. Mike DeWine (now the governor) as his party took a Senate majority.

Mr. Brown's own upbringing wasn't exactly hardscrabble. The son of a Mansfield, Ohio, physician, he

The Mahoning Valley was a Democratic stronghold for almost a century. Then Donald Trump came along.

earned a bachelor's degree from Yale in Russian studies and volunteered for George McGovern's 1972 presidential campaign before returning to the Buckeye State to begin his half-century-long career in politics. His message has always been aimed at working-class voters, and he has almost always won, making up for his lack of appeal to suburban Republicans with strong showings in places like the Mahoning Valley.

Political forecasters rate the race a toss-up, and there's reason to think Mr. Brown has lost his edge. Mr. Maraffa said that while union leaders support the senator, "the rank and file vote very differently. . . . Mahoning has gone from voting overwhelmingly for Barack Obama in both 2008 and 2012 to the earthquake that happened here in 2016."

That's when Hillary Clinton received only 49.5% of the Mahoning County vote, edging out Mr. Trump's 46.9%. Four years earlier Mr. Obama crushed Mitt Romney, 63.4% to 35.1%. In 2020 Mr. Trump won Mahoning, as well as Trumbull, Stark and Columbiana—and Mr. Ryan won the narrowest of his 10 House victories. Two years later Mr. Ryan ran for an open Senate seat and lost the entire valley to Republican J.D. Vance. Mr. Brown did win in 2018, but his Republican challenger ran a lackluster campaign and Democrats had a very good election nationwide.

Voters throughout the valley who have voted for Mr. Brown before but have also moved toward Mr.

Trump for president look dimly on Mr. Brown's lockstep with Mr. Biden on climate mandates and student-loan forgiveness. "Many non-college-educated people with real-world skills know someone is going to be paying that bill, and it is more than likely them," Mr. Maraffa said. He added that, as a geographer, he thinks "place" is crucial to politics: "East Palestine is a place issue. The college loan forgiveness is a placeless issue. And Brown's embrace of that is kind of an embrace of something that the national Democratic Party embraces, regardless of how his constituents in Ohio feel about it."

Mr. Sracic noted that Mr. Brown is unlikely to win the votes of "old-guard Republican suburban-county voters who are lukewarm on Trump but have voted against Brown for decades." That's why the senator "needs the votes here to win."

Ms. Zito is a reporter for the Washington Examiner and a co-author of "The Great Revolt: Inside the Populist Coalition Reshaping American Politics."