

## Ohio Sen. Matt Huffman

From redistricting reform to changes in education laws, majority floor leader relishes challenge of finding solutions to biggest policy challenges

by Laura Tomaka ([ltomaka@csg.org](mailto:ltomaka@csg.org))

As a child, Matt Huffman campaigned for his father, a local county prosecutor in Ohio, and shook hands with a future president (Richard Nixon, in 1968, while holding up “Huffman for Prosecutor” signs with his eight siblings). By age 31, he was serving on the City Council in his hometown of Lima.

But as much as politics has always been a part of Huffman’s life, the policies of state government — and the legislative work behind them — have captured much of his interest since joining the General Assembly in 2007.

“I guess my passion has been to solve seemingly complex problems,” he says.

That has led him in a whole range of directions, from his role in revamping the state’s redistricting process to require bipartisan support for new political maps, to addressing changes in the state’s voting and gambling laws.

“Those were things that were sort of foisted upon me,” he says, joking that “when the leaders think there are problems nobody wants to deal with, they say, ‘You go deal with it, Huffman.’”

The Ohio native has held several leadership positions himself while in the legislature.

In the House, he served one term as Republican majority leader and another as speaker pro tempore; earlier this year, Huffman’s Senate colleagues chose him as majority floor leader. (Because of legislative term limits, Huffman left the House in 2014. He successfully ran for a Senate seat two years later.)

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Sen. Huffman discussed his views on leadership, policy priorities for the state and his Senate district, and some of his most valued legislative accomplishments. Here are excerpts.

**Q: You’ve served for some time in both the Ohio House and Ohio Senate. How is it different for you now serving in the Senate?**

**A:** [The difference] is substantial, and the first reason is no more complicated than there are fewer people [33 members vs. 99 in the House]. ... Because of that, I think you have a little bit different mindset over here. There’s a tendency to slow down, and you get a better chance to look at things. You’re not trying to please as many people by passing a bill, which often turns out to be one of the things you try to eliminate later when you find out that it wasn’t such a good idea after all.

**Q: What do you view as being your biggest accomplishments during your tenure in the Ohio General Assembly?**

**A:** I think there are a couple of different answers depending on your perspective. I think most people would say, because it’s higher profile, that it’s the changes to how we draw General Assembly districts and congressional districts — those are changes to the Constitution

### Bio-sketch of Ohio Sen. Matt Huffman

- ✓ selected as Senate majority floor leader earlier this year
- ✓ previously served as majority leader and speaker pro tempore in the Ohio House
- ✓ first elected to the Ohio Senate in 2016; previously served in the House from 2007 to 2014
- ✓ served on Lima City Council from 1992 to 2006, including seven years as council president
- ✓ is an attorney in private practice at his family law firm; has law degree from the University of Cincinnati
- ✓ lives in Lima with his wife, Sheryl; they have four adult children and two grandchildren



“My style [as legislating] has a bit to do with being the fifth of nine children. I’m the middle child. I really believe that for most problems, there is a reasonable solution that most people will agree with.”

(via two separate legislatively referred amendments approved by voters).

I think the most impact that I’ve had is in the changes to [expand] school choice. All the time, I have people I don’t know write me letters or call and talk to me about how the ability of their child to go to a different school in certain circumstances saved their child, or something to that effect. They don’t particularly care what goes on in the halls of government; they only care about their family and their neighborhood and their community. So I think that’s been among my biggest accomplishments.

**Q: What are you focusing on this legislative session?**

**A:** One of the problems that we face, and one that governments always face, is looking at the vestiges of policies that don’t work today. The last General Assembly, the legislature passed the Public School Deregulation Act (SB 216). The public school superintendents, who maybe aren’t so crazy about my school-choice legislation, really liked this bill. It basically went back and looked at either a lot of bad legislation or policy rules that had been adopted over the years, and were still somehow part of the system. We changed that [with SB 216].

I’m continuing to work on that and also doing it for our joint vocational schools, and we’re going to look to do that for small businesses as well. Just because we’ve been doing something for many years doesn’t mean it’s a good idea. Let’s look at innovative ways to do things, but at the same time, let’s also stop doing things that really aren’t very helpful to the constituency you’re trying to serve.

**Q: You’ve described your seven-county Senate district in west-central Ohio as “heavily agricultural,” but also “very rich in manufacturing.” What are some of the challenges that you’re trying to address for your district?**

**A:** Our biggest problem right now is that we have jobs, but we don’t have enough people. So we’re trying to import people and make sure that the homegrown products of our schools stay home after they go off to college. But it’s really a good problem to have, and I think it really speaks well of the folks who are running businesses in west-central Ohio that the economy is thriving.

**Q: How would you describe your leadership style and your approach to legislating?**

**A:** My style has a little bit to do with being the fifth of nine children. I’m the middle child. I really believe that for most problems, there is a reasonable solution that most people will agree with, and the first thing you need to do is eliminate the people from the discussion who don’t want to solve the problem — they’re never going to help you resolve the issue.

Not everybody is going to agree on everything, but about three-fifths to three-fourths of the people can find the things they agree on. So you need to try to find the things that everyone agrees on, and that’s what becomes legislation. Everybody’s pretty happy and you’ve solved problems. So you can’t let the “bullies” or “interrupters” or “bomb throwers” break up a solution. You have to eliminate those folks from the discussion and then get to the people who are actually trying to solve the problem.