

MAGA crashes into moderates in train-wreck Senate race

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BY HOLLY OTTERBEIN | 02/18/2021 10:51 PM EST



Then-Pennsylvania Rep. Ryan Costello speaks during a news conference at the Capitol March 21, 2018 in Washington, D.C. | Alex Wong/Getty Images

PHILADELPHIA — Pennsylvania Republican Sen. [Pat Toomey](#) isn't running for reelection in 2022. But his vote to convict former President Donald Trump is already rocking the race to succeed him.

County parties have censured Toomey, prompting backlash from centrists and even some Trump supporters who think the efforts will hurt the GOP in upcoming elections. Former Rep. Ryan Costello, a moderate Republican eyeing a bid for the Senate, has publicly come to Toomey's defense in the wake of his vote. Former Trump aides, in turn, are making plans to torpedo Costello before he announces a campaign.

The turmoil is the latest evidence that Trump's departure from office has not at all diminished his role in the GOP — in Pennsylvania, in fact, the primary is likely to be a proxy fight between Trump loyalists and those who believe the former president damaged the party's

ability to compete here.

"Any candidate who wants to win in Pennsylvania in 2022 must be full Trump MAGA," said Steve Bannon, a former White House chief strategist to Trump.

The back-and-forth over Toomey's vote is also exacerbating party fissures in a state where Republicans lost Senate and gubernatorial contests in 2018 and the presidential contest in 2020. The intraparty tensions could damage Republican prospects in 2022, when control of both the House and the Senate will be up for grabs.

The Pennsylvania Senate race in 2022 is a must-win seat for Republicans, and there will be a critical gubernatorial election that year in the state as well.

Sam DeMarco, GOP chair in Allegheny County, which includes Pittsburgh, said he strongly supports Trump and disagrees with Toomey's vote to convict him. But he called the efforts to censure Toomey a "distraction" and believes that Democrats pursued the second impeachment of Trump explicitly to divide the GOP.

"At a time where we need to bring people into our tent, into our party, I worry that the attempts to censure or punish the senator for his vote would send the wrong signal to independents and other like-minded individuals who might lean Republican, but don't think there's a place in the party for them," he said. "Politics is a numbers game. You only win through addition, not subtraction."

Costello, who represented a suburban House seat before retiring in 2018, told POLITICO that the censures "will hurt Republican candidates." On Twitter, he went further, saying that a proposed resolution to censure Toomey drafted by the Chester County GOP — his home county's party — is "staggeringly dumb" and "will indisputably brand them in such a way that it will make it *more* difficult to win county-wide elections this year."

Bill Bretz, leader of Westmoreland County's Republican Party in Western Pennsylvania, said his committee members censured Toomey because they were "pretty outraged" and downplayed concerns that the admonishment would divert the party from working to win upcoming elections.

"We're capable of walking and chewing bubble gum at the same time," he said. "We can express our dissatisfaction with his vote and still proceed accordingly with getting ready to get our statewide judges elected."

It will be months until the Senate primary heats up, and some party operatives argued that Toomey's vote is unlikely to have an impact on the election by the time voters go to the polls.

But as several Republicans fret over the political fallout of the party's condemnation of Toomey, others are already battling over how the senator's vote — and those who stood up for him — will be remembered by voters in 2022. Former Trump aides told POLITICO they are planning a public relations campaign against Costello, who has defended Toomey as a "foremost policy wonk" for GOP legislative priorities.

A person involved in the anti-Costello effort said their goal is to take on "Toomey plus people trying to follow in his form" in the party. Costello, a longtime Trump critic who is expected to launch an exploratory committee for the Senate in short order, brushed off the threat.

"They can say whatever they'd like, it won't bother me," he said. "It might help my fundraising, to be honest with you."

Top Trump allies are also already openly criticizing Costello.

"Never Trumper Ryan Costello is a sellout to the globalists," said Bannon in a statement that [echoed Washington Republicans' dissatisfaction](#) with Costello for declining to run again after a court redrew Pennsylvania's congressional map. "I don't always agree with the [National Republican Congressional Committee], but when their Chairman Steve Stivers said Ryan Costello lacked intestinal fortitude, I agreed."

Costello replied: "Sloppy Steve will say whatever he's told [because] he's forever indebted for his pardon."

The national anti-Trump group Republican Accountability Project, meanwhile, is expected to launch a campaign to support Toomey and hopes that anti-MAGA Republicans will be encouraged to run for his seat in 2022.

Joe Gale, a Montgomery County commissioner who was an early Trump backer in 2016, launched a bid for governor this week bashing Toomey. He said in his announcement that the senator has a "track record of betraying President Trump" and that his brother, Sean, who is running for the open Senate seat, "will be the exact opposite of RINO Pat Toomey."

The uproar over Toomey's vote has also led to questions about the role he will play in attempting to influence the contest for his seat. Some pro-Trump Republicans predict that a stamp of approval from Toomey could be harmful in the Senate GOP primary. Toomey's office

declined to comment for this story.

Greg Manz, Trump's 2020 communications adviser for strategy and a former spokesman for the Pennsylvania GOP, said Republican candidates who vie for Toomey's endorsement or funding from his political action committee will be viewed unfavorably by pro-Trump activists.

A nod from the state party apparatus — whose members include many Trump loyalists — is seen as a significant benefit for primary candidates here.

"It would be foolish for any statewide candidate seeking the Pennsylvania GOP's endorsement to accept Sen. Toomey's endorsement or donations from him," said Manz. "I imagine a feckless hack like Ryan Costello would gladly align himself with Sen. Toomey, but he won't even place in the Senate primary. He's a non-factor ultimately."

In an indication of how divided the two flanks of the GOP are, Costello struck back at Manz with a scathing comment.

"Before Greg Manz worked for Trump, he worked at the state party. Everyone back then and before used to make fun of him [because] he's a clown. No one respects him and a few years from now, he will probably be pumping gas in New Jersey," he said. "No one knows who he is. He just does what he's told like the little errand boy he is."

Manz returned the barb: "People who disparage hard-working Americans, gas station attendants in this case, have no place in public office."

Shortly after speaking with POLITICO, Costello took to Twitter to criticize Manz again. Jason Miller, Trump's senior adviser, retweeted Costello and defended Manz, calling him "true #MAGA and a real-deal Patriot!"

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