

The quiet rise of Robert Stivers, Kentucky's most powerful legislator

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MANCHESTER

Kentucky Senate Republicans had a political hot potato in their possession.

Late in the 2024 General Assembly, some in the caucus were clamoring to pass a bill banning diversity, equity and inclusion practices in public higher education, part of a national trend on the right. But other Republicans, like former Sen. Whitney Westerfield, were uncomfortable with the bill.

Westerfield recalled that he and Sen. Lindsey Tichenor, a first-term social conservative from Oldham County, were arguing during a closed-door caucus meeting when Senate President Robert Stivers spoke up.

He didn't scold or make demands of his colleagues. Instead, he reminded them of the issues where they agree.

"He said, 'Whitney, you're pro-life. Lindsey, you're pro-life. Whitney, you believe in traditional marriage. Lindsey, you believe in that. You guys probably agree on 90% of the things that make up our platform,'" Westerfield recalled.

"It was a peacemaker moment," Westerfield said. "He wasn't trying to drive a wedge, and he wasn't actually trying to drive the debate."

Stivers defused a tense situation. The anti-DEI bill died that session, aligning with the majority of GOP senators' wishes. When it returned in 2025, a similar bill received easy passage.

Moments like that have defined Stivers' 12-plus years at the helm of the Senate GOP, according to friends and colleagues. He is somebody who wants everyone to get along, and his ability to make that happen has lifted him to



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State Senate President Robert Stivers, R-Manchester, speaks during the 31st Annual Kentucky Chamber Day Dinner at the Central Bank Center in Lexington on Jan. 8, 2026.

great heights.

In November, Stivers, 64, became Kentucky's longest-serving Senate President. He has shepherded some of the most meteoric policy and political shifts in Kentucky history during that tenure.

Stivers has grown the Senate GOP into Kentucky's most dominant political caucus since the 1800s. There are currently 32 Republicans to only six Democrats.

With the help of a GOP-controlled House since 2017, his caucus has seen through a near-total ban on abortions, put the state on a path to cut its personal income tax altogether, instituted "right to work" anti-union laws, limited Kentucky youths' access

to transgender care and taken full control of the state's multi-billion dollar annual budget.

In the 2026 legislative session, Stivers will be at the wheel for major political and policy decisions. He and his staff have warned against the push from some GOP colleagues both to cut the income tax this year and to redistrict out Kentucky's lone Democrat in Congress.

Most of Stivers' work to reshape the state has taken place under the nose of a Democratic governor, Andy Beshear.

With lawmakers continually reducing Beshear's authority, some would argue that Stivers' position gives him even more power than Beshear.

"There's no question," said

lobbyist Abby Piper, of the firm Piper-Smith. "It's obviously Stivers."

In some ways, Stivers said the decisions he and his caucus make have a greater impact on Kentuckians than the state's members of Congress. That Senate GOP caucus, alongside its House counterpart, controls the lion's share of the state's wealth and fiscal direction. The state's biennial budget totals more than \$30 billion.

"We're by far more impactful on a day-to-day basis," Stivers said. "The federal delegation, do they impact school curriculum or school days? That's virtually the biggest employer here in every

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OSBORNE

go out of his way to try to make sure my caucus felt safe. As I look back, I think that was probably a difficult position for him to be in."

Jenkins retired in 2022, and since then she's watched the GOP caucus wade further into fringe issues, she sees Osborne increasingly as a lynch pin that's preventing the party from sliding into full-tilt MAGA territory.

"I think there are folks like me, in both parties, that wonder: if Osborne should retire or lose his leadership position, what would happen? I think he has done a very good job of trying to keep the caucus together. At the end of the day, even though he and I might not agree on how to do it, he does want what is best for Kentucky."

TREATED WITH RESPECT AND DIGNITY

Maintaining the political upper hand still feels new to Osborne, who was first elected in 2005.

At the time, and still today, he's a career real estate agent. Osborne renews his license every year, sometimes barely. He holes up in front of the computer around Christmas, his wife, Lori, cajoled in May from their historic Oldham County home, which Osborne said is the oldest two-story stone house in the state.

As an adolescent, Osborne was no stranger to political campaigns. His great, great-grandfather was a Kentucky representative, and as a child he remembers tagging along with adults to volunteer and knock on doors.

"One of my oldest memories is knocking on doors with my mom for Gene Snyder, before he was a highway," Osborne said of the former Republican representative who was first elected in the 1960s.

"I've always had an interest in it, always liked being involved in it. Never really thought about running for office, quite frankly. And it just so happened there were lots of things that kind of came to a head in 2005, both around career, family, that all of a sudden afforded me a little time that I've never thought I'd had before," he said. "In this



Speaker Pro Tempore Rep. David Osborne, R-Prospect, speaks with House leadership during the General Assembly at the Kentucky State Capitol in Frankfort on Feb. 8, 2018.

world, you can't ever pick your time. Time picked me at that point."

That time was a special election after then-Rep. Tim Feeley was appointed to be a family court judge by former Gov.

Ernie Fletcher.

"I almost hate to say it, but it was almost on a dare," Osborne said of his choice to run. "There was an article that came out in the newspaper about some people who were the frontrunners to take Tim's seat, and it just wasn't a very good representation of what Oldham County had to offer."

He'd never served in public office before, and his first campaign mostly highlighted "pro-business," Chamber of Commerce-type issues, he said. Social wedge issues that have since become benchmark policies of his party were not front and center.

He spent the next 11 years in the minority until Republicans made history in winning control of the House on the coattails of the 2016 election of Trump.

In the decade since, the Kentucky GOP has swelled to a supermajority of 80 of the House's 100 seats. But as the party makeup becomes more binary, so do political extremes. It's a whirlpool Osborne wishes his party would try harder to

swim against.

The tenor of politics — and the policies prioritized by the GOP — have shifted markedly since he was elected 20 years ago, he and others in the GOP said.

"In 2005, when me and David Osborne both started, we were both called right-wingers. Now we're called RINOs — Republicans In Name Only," House Majority Floor Leader Stephen Rudy said in an interview this summer.

"But I don't think either one of us has changed that much in our position. It's the pendulum of how (the party) swung and where it is today."

In the last near-decade, under the leadership of Osborne and Senate President Robert Stivers, Republicans have passed policies that more traditionally align with the conservative platform: They've lowered the state income tax, made Kentucky a right-to-work state and repealed a prevailing wage requirement.

The Kentucky GOP has also passed many controversial policies against the advice of field experts but in line with the far-right-leaning party platform under Trump, which aims to combat "wokeness" and champions a "return to common sense."

Republicans under Osborne

and Stivers have eliminated diversity, equity and inclusion offices and initiatives in higher-education settings, criminalized abortion with a near-total statewide ban, they've banned transgender teenage girls from playing on girls' sports teams, and outlawed access to gender-affirming health care for trans teens and many trans adults.

Osborne has shepherded some of these bills to final passage, but he has purposely avoided becoming a mouthpiece championing them. He will share his candid thoughts with members in caucus, he said, but he declined to share personal opinions about them for this story.

Mostly, he tries to turn down the volume and understand what motivates each member.

"Individually, no one is poorly intended," he said. "Their views are based on what they believe is best for Kentucky and best for the people as a whole, so you can't dismiss that, even though some people are better than others at communicating those things and working in groups."

At the same time, Osborne resists today's hyper-partisan political landscape, one that feeds on anger and vitriol over political compromise. In this vein, he admits that at times his membership has lacked compas-

sion toward the people who bear the brunt of those policies, including trans Kentuckians.

But at a time of such heightened partisanship, level-headed diplomacy alone isn't necessarily enough to protect the interests of all underrepresented Kentuckians, said Attica Scott, a Louisville Democrat who served in the state House from 2017 to 2022.

"When it comes to politicians, including Speaker Osborne, and they talk about feeling conflicts with vitriol and hatred, racism and sexism, I don't have the stomach for it (and) it doesn't matter to me; you're in a position to help halt a lot of that," she said.

"If you're a publicly elected official, people want to see your action in public," Scott said, "not the behind the scenes, back-door politicking, because it's what has gotten us where we are now."

"What we need from the Speaker of the House and President of the Senate is the kind of leadership that says we are not going to play into the divisiveness," but rather, "what can I do to make sure everyone in the Commonwealth thrives, not just the people who donate to my campaign, not just the loudest voices or the supermajority."

Critics of those GOP policies, including Beshear, have characterized them as hateful, rebuking the party for "politicizing issues that are literally killing our children."

When asked about this perception, Osborne paused for 11 seconds before answering.

"We clearly have a very passionate and conservative base in the legislature," he said. "My hope is that we never lose sight of the fact that we're talking about people."

"I spent a decent amount of time talking to our caucus about that: Never lose sight of the fact that everybody is a person. It doesn't necessarily change the way you view policy, but at least you view them as real people that have real lives and need to be treated with respect and dignity."

"We can disagree, but that doesn't excuse us from not having compassion for people. I hope we somehow figure out a way of doing a better job of showing that compassionate side, (because) I don't think we show it enough. I really don't."