

Romney faces headwinds as he mulls reelection

The freshman senator has alienated himself from his state party for criticizing Trump.



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A decade ago, Mitt Romney was one of the most well-known Republicans in the country.

He was a two-time presidential candidate and one-time nominee. Each time, he had overwhelming support from Utahns. Though he lost the state's unique caucus-convention by a narrow margin when he ran for Senate in 2018, Republicans rallied behind him in the primary on his way to a landslide victory against a conservative candidate.

But come 2024, Romney will be facing a different Republican Party and a different electorate in Utah that may have grown frustrated with his fights with former President Trump.

Utah's Republican Party Chairman Robert Axson described Utah's Republican Party as one that benefits from "conservative principles in the platform of the Republican Party nationally and here in Utah."

Axson admitted Romney has been out of step with Utah Republicans.

"I think the party is trending towards people who are committed to our platform and show up. And this is a place where I would invite Senator Romney to start showing up," Axson told *National Journal*.

Romney hasn't yet decided whether he will run for reelection, but as one source close to Romney put it, who asked to remain anonymous to speak candidly about his thinking: "He's in until he's not."

If he runs, he has a team standing by he can quickly assemble and sources close to Romney say he has been discussing a reelection bid with his family this summer. A decision could be made by fall.

Not waiting for a decision from Romney: Trent Staggs, the mayor of Riverton, who entered the race earlier [this summer](#). He's vying for Trump's endorsement and describes himself as an antiestablishment candidate who is running because he thinks Utah is not getting "bold conservative leadership and representation that the Republican voters want."

Staggs has been endorsed by Utah's [Fraternal Order of Police](#), the Utah Republican [Veterans' Caucus](#), and conservative [talk radio host](#) Mark Levin, but has not translated those endorsements into campaign cash. He ended the latest fundraising quarter in June with [just over \\$220,000](#) in his coffers.

Romney's most serious potential challenger is Utah state House Speaker Brad Wilson, who announced the creation of an exploratory committee back in [April](#). But even as he has raised an impressive \$2.2 million, outpacing Romney's \$1.1 million in the latest fundraising quarter, his campaign remains in limbo.

Wilson also recently received the backing of [more than 60](#) conservative lawmakers in Utah encouraging him to make an official run. Insiders say he has a good chance at defeating Romney and that the race will come down to the two of them.

Wilson is exploring his own potential race, irrespective of what other potential candidates may or may not do. He continues to travel across the state and is constantly hearing that Utahns want a bold, proven, and conservative leader as their Senator," Wilson spokesperson Chris Coombs told *National Journal* in a statement.

Wilson's campaign would not say when he plans to make a formal decision on a run, but a source close to him told *National Journal* that once he makes a decision he will likely step down from his speakership post before his term ends.

Other names that have been floated as potential candidates include Utah's Attorney General Sean Reyes and former Republican Rep. Jason Chaffetz. But if Romney does not run, insiders say more candidates will likely enter the race.

"I'm thinking about it. I haven't decided, that will probably come later this fall," Chaffetz said. "I see no urgency to making the decision," noting he has high name recognition that affords him the ability to take his time. He also said Romney's decision is not part of his calculus.

Axson described Chaffetz, Reyes, Wilson, and Staggs as fitting in the "tent" of Utah's "conservative, strongly leaning Republican state." But he omitted Romney.

Though Romney proved he didn't need the support of the nominating convention in 2018, which is considered more conservative than the typical Utah Republican voter, primaries drive stronger ideological voters to the polls, which could mean the gulf between his views and those of the state party faithful may be even harder to bridge this time.

Despite his already rocky relationship with Trump, the former president [endorsed Romney](#) in his 2018 Senate bid. But their rift grew once Romney got to Washington. He broke from Republicans and voted to [convict Trump](#) in both of his impeachment trials.

His hostility with Trump prompted Utah Republicans to [try to censure him](#) unsuccessfully in 2021.

"If Trump turns out to be the nominee for the party, and if it appears that he enjoys a very continued strong support of the GOP here in Utah, then yes, it can clearly affect Romney, because any opponent of Romney will point out his record in terms of opposing Trump," former Utah Republican state Rep. Lowry Snow, a Romney ally, told *National Journal*.

Other Republicans who have scorned Trump at the expense of their hometown parties, like Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, have proven they can overcome party resentment. In 2022, Murkowski was the first Senate Republican up for reelection who voted to convict Trump. Her hometown party despised her for the vote, yet she [was able to prevail](#) in the state's ranked-choice-voting system, which often favors more moderate candidates, even against a candidate backed by Trump and the state's Republican party.

Utah's most recent Senate contest could provide some clues on how Republicans there feel about Trump. Fellow Republican Utah Sen. Mike Lee was, like Romney, cold on Trump in 2016, but eventually embraced him, a change Evan McMullin [capitalized on](#) when he ran against him as an independent Senate candidate in 2022, as he looked to court anti-Trump voters.

In the end, Lee beat McMullin by an 11-point margin. Romney ultimately stayed out of the race because he said both candidates were "good friends."

Though three Romney allies *National Journal* spoke with said no one should discount Romney's high name recognition and appeal to moderate voters in the state, when asked who they would support in a primary, they declined to say given their allegiance to both Romney and Wilson.

"I cannot say enough good things about my friend Brad Wilson. He is, in many ways, a statesman and a fine candidate. But I also feel some allegiance to Senator Romney," said Snow, who appreciates the moral stance Romney took against Trump. "That was a difficult thing for him to do and he could have gone with the rest of the group, but he was willing to speak up and stand up for what he thought was right."

Another Romney ally, Republican state Sen. Todd Weiler, told *National Journal* that he would stay out of the race and not say who he would vote for: "Because I'm friends with Brad Wilson," but plans to endorse Wilson if Romney does not run.

A poll from the *Deseret News*/Hinckley Institute of Politics in [June](#) found that Romney held a 41 percent approval rating among Utah voters, against a 49 percent disapproval rating. The recent poll represented an [11-point](#) dip in Romney's approval ratings compared to a poll it conducted in March. Of those voters, 54 percent of Republicans said they did not want him to run again, while 55 percent of Democrats said they wanted to see him run again.

"I think Senator Romney's record of fighting for Utah speaks for itself," Romney Chief of Staff Liz Johnson said. [W](#)

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