

PROFILE: OHIO SENATE PRESIDENT ROB MCCOLLEY



‘Deep appreciation for the system we have’: That appreciation began early in life, led him to public office, and continues to shape his legislative outlook and priorities

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

The “educational vacation” wasn’t near the top of the wish list for a young Rob McColley.

But it is what his family did.

Trips to colonial Williamsburg. To Washington, D.C. To Canada’s capital of Ottawa.

“Here we are now, and I’m taking my kids on those same vacations,” McColley says.

“Funny how that works.”

Those trips are part of the story of where he finds himself today, as a 10-year state legislator who is Ohio’s new Senate president — a leader in one of the American institutions that he had the chance to learn about, and learn to appreciate, from an early age.

His mother, Denise, a fellow traveler on those “educational vacations,” is an even bigger part of what helped bring McColley to the legislature.

“She got elected as a [county] judge in 2004 and I was part of that process, or as much as I could be when I was home on the weekend from college,” says McColley, a graduate of The Ohio State University and the University of Toledo College of Law.

“I saw the importance of the work she was doing, and at some point, I thought, ‘Maybe I will run for judge someday.’”

Ultimately, McColley’s chance to continue the family legacy of public service came in another way. In November 2014, he won the election for an open seat in the Ohio House, moved to the Senate a few years later, and quickly ascended in leadership.

McColley took the oath of office as the new Senate president in early 2025, surrounded by his wife, young children and other loved ones.

Just a few feet away, swearing him into office, was his mother — now-retired Ohio Judge Denise McColley.

Q You are the son of a judge, but over the years, you’ve taken a lead role in efforts to protect the powers of the legislative branch, including trying to improve oversight or control of the executive branch. What are some of the ways you have tried to do this?

A It had become really easy over the years for the legislature to, say, pass a three-page bill that creates a new program and tells the state agency to develop all the rules. Well, a three-page bill might then lead to 150 pages of rules, and that’s frankly the legislature not doing its job — and abdicating its own authority in the process.



Surrounded by his wife, children and other loved ones, Ohio Senate President Rob McColley is sworn into office by his mother, retired Judge Denise McColley. The oath-of-office ceremony took place in January.

BIO-SKETCH: OHIO SEN. ROBERT MCCOLLEY

- ✓ unanimously elected Senate president in January; previously served as Senate majority floor leader
- ✓ was first elected to the Ohio House in 2014; served as assistant majority whip before being appointed to the Senate
- ✓ previously worked as executive director for the Henry County Community Improvement Corporation
- ✓ lives in his hometown of Napoleon (in northeast Ohio) with his wife, Denise; their daughter, Anna; and their twin sons, Matthew and Michael
- ✓ is a 2015 graduate of CSG Midwest’s Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development

“[Be] somebody who is seen as good to work with, who is reasonable on legislation and trying to address the concerns of others in a meaningful way, and who is open-minded to creative solutions.”

So I’ve tried to push back on that and really cast our members to put in the time and to do the work. Don’t rely on the executive branch to do it, because in many cases, it may not match up with the intent that you were striving for.

Q What do you see as the positive effects of the legislature becoming more active or forceful within the three-branch system of government?

A Part of what we’ve done is try to address what we see as Ohio’s administrative state becoming too large over the course of several decades. So, for example, we passed a law that says a state agency of the executive branch had to cut 30 percent of its rules over a three-year period, and until it did that, two rules had to be eliminated for every one new rule that was created.

Some of this has been an attempt to right-size government.

But we also were acknowledging that the legislature can play a bigger role. We had been giving the executive branch too much ability to, in effect, legislate through the bureaucracy, and that is bad public policy.

Q On the more general topic of legislating, what have you observed to be some of the common traits of effective lawmakers?

A I would say that we always have to be mindful of our political

capital balance. You’ve got to know when to conserve it. You have to know when to spend it. And you have to be mindful of the fact that it is not infinite: If you are spending, spending and spending that political capital, eventually nobody’s going to take you seriously.

I’ve seen political capital built in a variety of methods. One is being somebody who is seen as good to work with, who is reasonable on legislation and trying to address the concerns of others in a meaningful way, and who is open-minded to creative solutions.

But you also build political capital by being trustworthy and forthcoming with information. Do what you said you were going to do.

They sound simple, but I think those are the things that allow people to be successful in the legislature. Because at the end of the day, if people don’t trust you, then they’re going to be immediately suspect of anything you’re trying to do.

Q Do some of those same principles apply to successful legislative leadership?

A Certainly being consistent and doing what you said you were going to do are some of the biggest parts of leadership. I would also say communicating clearly and understanding that, just like leaders in an organization, embrace the fact that you’ve been entrusted to make difficult decisions.

You are going to have major detractors in many circumstances. But you have

to trust your instincts, you have to trust your skill set and experience, and you have to trust that you have been put in that leadership position for a reason.

On the communication side, understand what people’s priorities and desires are, and communicate clearly what the objectives of the caucus are.

For major pieces of legislation, there have been circumstances where we probably over-communicated. But that was because we needed the membership to be comfortable with it, and we understood that the membership was going to be getting hit from all sides.

Q You worked recently on legislation that is going to create new institutes and centers at some Ohio universities focused on civics and constitutional thought. Why was this important to you?

A I always have had a deep appreciation for the system we have in place in this country, even if I didn’t always appreciate what our government itself was doing.

I think a lot of the lack of appreciation in our institutions is either based on misinformation or a jaded point of view.

What these institutes are aimed at doing is getting back to the basics. Let’s really examine the founding of our country and our founding documents — how they came about, how they’re impacting our government today. Then let people come to their own conclusions, rather than through a heavily editorialized or modern point of view.