

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

What does James Comer's rising profile in Washington mean for his future in KY?

By Austin Horn

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U.S. Rep. James Comer, left, greeted Jim Hagan, of Gilbertsville, Ky., during the 141st Fancy Farm Picnic at St. Jerome Catholic Church in Fancy Farm, Ky., in 2021. *Lexington*



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A photo of First Congressional District Congressman James Comer and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky, hangs in Comer’s Washington office.

It’s from Comer’s college days, when he was elected president of Kentucky Future Farmers of America.

TOP VIDEOS



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“To my young friend James Comer, with high hopes for your bright future,” McConnell wrote on the photo. It’s a common phrase the senator uses for photos he takes with promising young Kentuckians.

“It certainly turned out to be true with Jamie Comer,” McConnell, 80, said in an interview with the Herald-Leader.

Now Comer, 50, and McConnell’s paths cross frequently in Washington D.C., as well the airspace between the nation’s capital and their home state. They sometimes sit together on flights to and from Louisville and D.C.

McConnell is the king of Kentucky Republican politics. It’s been that way for decades. Could Comer, with his statewide network and [newfound national clout as a](#)

television omnipresence for his role as chairman of the U.S. House Oversight & Investigations, be up next? Maybe, friends and observers say.

It's well known that Comer played a central role in one of the biggest 'what ifs' in Kentucky political history: he lost by just 83 votes in a vicious 2015 primary to former governor Matt Bevin.

Now Comer is starting to become the subject of "what if" questions about the future: What if Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear wins reelection and Republicans need a safe bet to reclaim the governor's chair? What if Comer's oversight committee actions launch into Republican leadership? What if he's widely interpreted as farcical and he gets laughed out of prominence in Washington?



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In an interview, Comer left no possibility for his future off the table: congressional leadership, governor, or even the U.S. Senate.

Which begs another question: What if Comer becomes the next McConnell?

Some signs are showing that he's positioning himself to do so.



A photo of Senator Mitch McConnell with James Comer when Comer, as a college student, was the Kentucky Future Farmers of America president. *Office of Senator Mitch McConnell*

Comer at home: gas station pizza and lite beer

While Comer’s ubiquity on American television is new, his life’s work has been building the kind of network and reputation that makes you a celebrity at the local courthouse.

Such was the case in Metcalfe County, where Comer was the marquee speaker at the mid-December swearing ceremony of Rep. Amy Neighbors, R-Edmonton. Neighbors won a contentious primary and got no general election opposition – Democrats hardly lift a finger anymore in the historically deep red pocket of South Central Kentucky – to take the state-level seat formerly held by Comer.

Comer invited several politicians back to his Tompkinsville home that night. On the menu: gas station pizza and lite beer. On the agenda: trading political stories from Washington, Frankfort and Monroe County local government.

The crowd included the state representative who replaced Comer, longtime Comer staffers, Monroe County politicians, former House GOP floor leader and current candidate for commissioner of agriculture Jonathan Shell, another state representative and a prominent Frankfort lobbyist – these were the area’s political elite, though an outsider might be fooled into thinking otherwise by their lax manner.



James Comer keeps a room full of memorabilia from campaigns and political events in his Tompkinsville home. Austin Horn



Through a voice hoarse from TV appearances – but still with his blend of southern drawl and Appalachian crunch – Comer regaled his friends and allies with stories of Washington. But he was equally entertained by the stories from home, like Monroe County Judge-Executive Mitchell Page’s recounting of being against his own brothers running for local posts. One even ran against him.

Page recalled to the group, standing in Comer’s room of political memorabilia, a conversation he had with a brother of his who ran for magistrate against a close friend that he supported.

“I’m against ye’, I want you to know I’m against ye’, and I don’t want you to hear it from nobody else.” The room roared with laughter, much as they did at Comer’s easy-mannered jokes.

This is the strength of James (in Kentucky, most call him “Jamie”) Comer’s political career: a loyal network that relishes hanging out with you over pizza and beer as much as they relish your political advice.

“He’s the best person I’ve ever met at keeping relationships,” Shell, who was also McConnell’s 2020 Senate reelection campaign chair, said of Comer. “He still talks to all of his high school friends – like, almost daily – and a lot of the young people he’s influenced are getting elected locally. By the time it’s all said and done, I don’t know of anybody in the state of Kentucky who’s built a network and organization of people they actually talk to regularly more than Jamie has.”

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Though keeping relationships seems to come naturally to Comer, it’s also a conscious effort. He’s learned from McConnell, he says, that it helps a whole lot to have a small army of former employees and mentees across the state.

“It’s in every county,” Comer said of McConnell’s network. “A lot of politicians you see former employees that hate their guts. But McConnell’s seem to love him. I couldn’t name you three people that work for McConnell that I think disliked the man. ... He’s helped a lot of people like that over the years, and that overcomes the shortfalls of his approval rating – because he’s just got a really impressive network

“I’ve wanted to do that.”

Now one major player in Comer’s orbit, [former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Craft](#), is running for governor.

A bet on the future: ‘Thick and thin’

Many of the people gathered at Comer’s home are evidence of his drive to build out a Kentucky network like McConnell’s. One important member of the Comer circle is traveling all over the state now.

Comer has described Sen. Max Wise, R-Campbellsville, as one of his “closest political friends.” Wise, who’s well-liked among Republicans in Frankfort and in his and Comer’s South-Central Kentucky, is [running to become lieutenant governor this year](#) on the same ticket as [Craft](#).

The congressman was the one who suggested that Craft – who has access to significant wealth through her [billionaire coal magnate and philanthropist husband, Joe Craft](#), and is spending record amounts of money on the race – pair up with Wise.

Wise and Comer met in 2010 and have been friends and allies ever since. Wise said they would call a few times a week before Comer’s congressional duties picked up.

Comer stayed neutral in Wise’s Senate race against an incumbent Republican in 2014 and Wise was a major backer of Comer’s 2015 governor bid.

“Those of us that have been loyal to Jamie, I think Jamie provides that same loyalty back to us,” Wise said.

Loyalty could play a role in more ways than one in the story of Comer’s Craft endorsement.

Kelly Craft was in Tompkinsville when Comer launched his 2015 run for governor and she served as his campaign finance chair. Joe Craft, through his JWC III Revocable Trust, was the largest single source of funding for a Comer-aligned gubernatorial Super PAC, giving it \$400,000 out of its \$1.2 million-plus total.

“She helped us raise some money and stuck with me through thick and thin. I plan on doing the same with her,” Comer said.

Comer said that Craft is “what Kentucky needs,” but that his front-and-center position in Washington may keep him from close involvement on the campaign trail in Kentucky this Spring.

“I’ve never seen anybody work harder than Kelly. People assumed that because she had money, she was lazy. Now they realize that’s not the case,” Comer said. “... I think she’s got a lot more organization out there than what people realize. So I don’t think she needs a lot of help from me right now.”

But what about prominent Republicans who aren’t his friends?

For reasons unclear, Comer’s relationship with his commissioner of agriculture successor Ryan Quarles – who is running against Craft and Attorney General Daniel Cameron, among others, in the gubernatorial primary – is fraught. Is it merely a natural rivalry between two ambitious commissioners with similar builds and starkly gray hair?

It’s a “long story,” Comer said. Quarles’s campaign spokesperson declined comment when asked about his relationship with Comer.



James Comer (left) is pictured with his successor in former state representative Bart Rowland and Rowland’s new successor in Rep. Amy Neighbors, R-Edmonton. Austin Horn

Eyes still on Frankfort?

There was a moment during [Comer's second interview on NBC's Meet The Press](#) that caught the ears of some Kentucky observers.

In referencing Republicans' push to cut spending from the federal budget, he referred to plans for the "state government."

"That was a tell, that was a Freudian slip, that was important. The guy's mind is still on Frankfort. He lives in Frankfort for God's sake, and his political trajectory has always been governor," Al Cross, longtime Kentucky political observer and director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues, said. "Serving as chair of the oversight committee investigating the President United States is very likely to help him in terms of political stature, and he can use that however he wants."

"I think he would still prefer to use it to become governor rather than senator," Cross added.

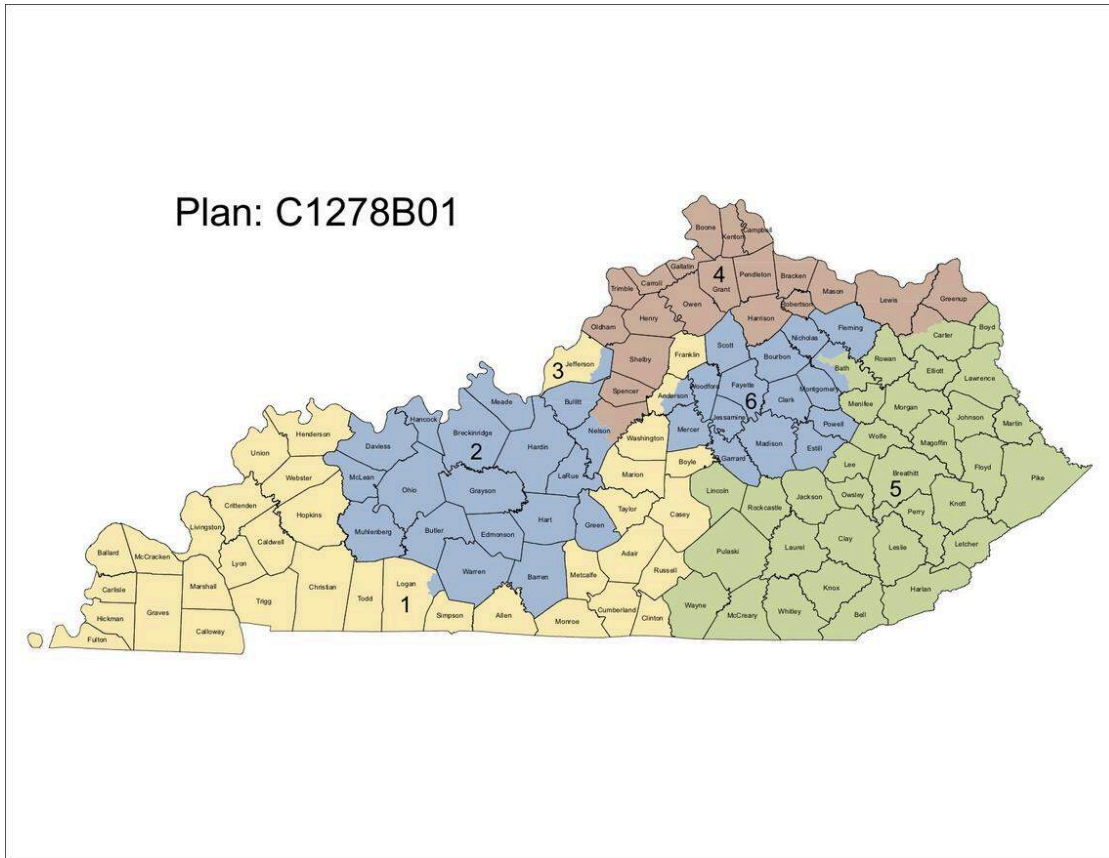
Comer won't say that, exactly. But he'll tell you: his heart's in Frankfort, and so is his family.



Memorabilia from Comer's congressional run is featured in a room in Comer's Tompkinsville home. Austin Horn

Comer's residence in Frankfort became a talking point [when the new Republican-drawn redistricting maps for the state were unveiled in early 2022](#). His new First Congressional District, which existed mostly in Western Kentucky and parts of South-Central Kentucky was reconfigured to snake up to Central Kentucky, snagging Franklin County as its northernmost point.

Comer and his wife, T.J., purchased a home there in 2012 after he was elected commissioner of agriculture. He’s not shy about the fact that his family – which, to be clear, includes himself – lives there and considers it home. But when asked about how the district got to be what it was, he defers to Central Kentucky’s Rep. Andy Barr.



The maps released Tuesday include dramatic changes to the state’s 1st Congressional District, occupied by James Comer. The map snakes the district starting at the tip of Western Kentucky all the way to Frankfort.

“I had to add population and Barr had to shed population. For whatever reason, he chose to shed Franklin County... I didn’t aggressively pursue Franklin County,” Comer said.

A spokesman for Barr’s office did not directly respond to Comer’s statement, saying “we defer to the (state) legislators responsible for drawing the map to answer questions about how it was constructed.” Those legislators have long stayed mum on political calculations that may or may not have influenced their map-drawing.

Comer still owns a house and a considerable chunk of land in Monroe County, where he says he votes and will always consider home.

That begs the question of whether he’s tempted to stay where his kids and wife are, and when the next opportunity to do so could come up.

If Beshear wins reelection, a few of the most promising Republicans in the state – Cameron, Craft and Quarles – will be licking their wounds and potentially pivoting

to other jobs or elected office. Comer, some Republicans say, would be a surefire bet for the GOP nomination in 2027.

Comer’s name has not often been [mentioned in lists of potential politicians to succeed McConnell](#), but his profile has risen astronomically in a short time.

Circuit Judge David Williams, a former state Senate president and fierce ally of Comer’s following a deathbed request from Comer’s grandfather, said the sky’s the limit for Comer, but “there will never be anybody like McConnell. He was a transformative figure.”

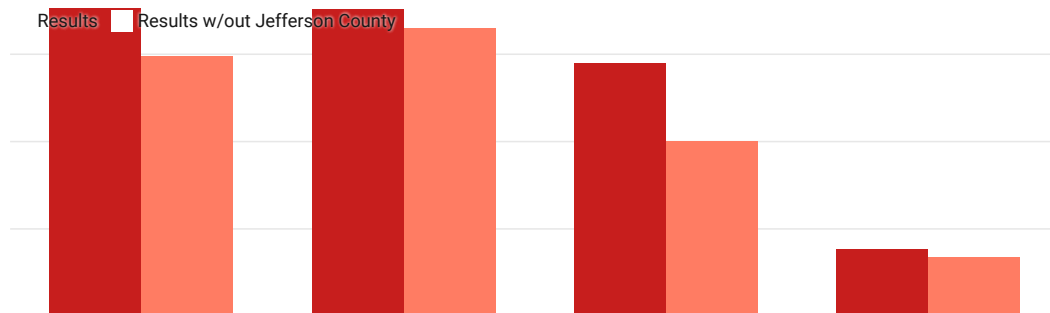
As for the governorship: “I don’t see anybody that would have more potential,” Williams said. “Does Jamie want to be in the U.S. Senate? I’ve never talked to him about it, but you sure don’t want to be a person that speculates about replacing (McConnell) while he’s still making his decision. I don’t think that’d be a very healthy place to be, if you know what I mean.”

Of course, as much as James Comer is the man of the moment in Washington, he is still in some ways a man of 2015 in Kentucky. That’s when he lost to Bevin by the thinnest of margins in the GOP primary for governor. A lot of that had to do [with allegations from Comer’s college ex-girlfriend](#), who said that Comer hit her when they dated, was emotionally abusive and drove her to a clinic in Louisville in 1991 to have an abortion. When asked about those allegations, Comer’s press team [referred to previous statements and denials](#) the congressman has made.

“I think about it a lot,” Comer said of the 2015 outcome. “If 42 people had voted differently, I’d have won the primary. That’s 42, out of a quarter of a million that voted that day.”

2015 GOP gov primary results with & without Jefferson Co.

James Comer lost the 2015 GOP gubernatorial primary by just 83 votes, but lost by a margin of more than 14,000 in Louisville/Jefferson County.



Will Ross
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It's also possible for Comer to become the leading voice and kingmaker in Kentucky's Republican party while running for governor instead of Senator, or by staying put in Congress.

But there's potential for pitfalls. Being chairman of such a prominent committee is not just an opportunity for Comer to raise his profile; it's also a role where he could make a fool of himself, said former Democratic state auditor Adam Edelen. Edelen, who said he likes Comer personally, shares an investigatory history with Comer, as Comer assisted his investigation into the conduct of Comer's commissioner of agriculture predecessor, [former University of Kentucky basketball star Richie Farmer](#).

Becoming a caricature could hinder Comer's options, even in a conservative state like Kentucky, Edelen said.

"He needs to be very careful about becoming a Saturday Night Live caricature of himself. You've seen this guy whose reputation in Kentucky was for bridge building, but now it looks to me like he's gonna spend his next couple of years burning bridges and embracing conspiracy theory. That may serve him very well in Washington or Kentucky, but I guess that remains an open question."

Edelen, who was elected to his statewide office the same time as Comer and also had gubernatorial ambitions, said that he believes that Comer would have won the 2015 general election and would still be governor today if not for those 83 votes.

But there's an irony to the way things have worked out, Comer said.

"I'm higher up than I would have been if I were governor of Kentucky. I don't think Andy Beshear has the profile that I have right now, and I don't think (in 2023) during that governor's race, any of those candidates will have anywhere near the profile that I have," Comer said. "... I've got a great opportunity to talk about what Republicans want to do – not just what the Oversight Committee is gonna do, but what the conference is going to do. I don't think I would have that opportunity as governor."

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