

Why Ohio Citizen Action doesn't endorse candidates

As a matter of policy, Ohio Citizen Action does not endorse candidates for office, nor contribute to candidates or parties, nor take any action implying an endorsement, such as giving its mailing list to a candidate or providing in-kind staff assistance by organizers or canvassers. The organization does not rent its mailing list, offices or phones to candidates, nor accept website or other advertising from public officials, political candidates or political parties.

Here's why:

1. Background

1970's: Staying out

Ohio Citizen Action initially stayed out of electoral politics, since the organization's candidates wouldn't be able to raise enough money to win, and meanwhile we would become compromised. Credibility is the group's most important asset, so it wouldn't be worth it.

Then came second thoughts.

First, the organization often asked legislators to support or oppose legislation. At election time, those who had helped would ask for help, saying that lobbyists were pouring contributions into their opponent's campaign. We did not want to have to say, "Sorry, we don't get our hands dirty with electoral politics. Good luck!" That seemed to be a prescription for ineffectiveness.

Second, we were impressed by the results of the 1977 Cleveland municipal elections, which took place during Citizen Action's campaign against downtown tax abatements. Angry voters ousted the mayor and ten incumbent council members over the issue in what the newspapers called the "Tuesday Night Massacre." After that, Cleveland officials put tax abatements on hold for a decade.

1980's: Experiments

In the 1980's, the organization decided to experiment with electoral politics to test its potential.

It got involved across Ohio in dozens of races, from city council, to mayor, school board, county commission, state representative and senator, secretary of state, governor and U.S. representative and senator.

In different races, staff and activists took roles as candidate, campaign manager, field director, research director, constituency coordinator, and canvasser. To do this, staff sometimes took leaves of absence, sometimes worked in their spare time, and sometimes as an in-kind contribution from the organization.

The organization registered voters, canvassed door-to-door, did lit drops, ran phone banks, organized speakers bureaus, held forums and debates, raised money, held focus groups, polled public opinion, produced TV and radio spots, printed materials, did giant mailings, pounded yard signs into lawns, and organized Get-Out-The-Vote drives. It publicly endorsed candidates, or just recommended candidates to members, or distributed voting records, or voter guides without recommendation. It tried everything.

II. Lessons

About candidates and public officials

The decade of experiments was highly successful in conventional political terms: winning elections.

Our standard is higher, however. What counts is not whether the candidate wins, but whether the members win. Does the candidate being in office make enough difference in winning on issues to justify the campaign's extraordinary time commitment and diversion from direct issue campaigns?

By this standard, the results were mixed. A few officials the organization had supported showed genuine leadership; U.S. Senator Howard Metzenbaum is an example. Most of the rest did little, nothing, or worse once in office.

Why this was so is no mystery. Public officials come under great pressure from all directions to do wrong, and it takes character to stand up to it. They need to be able to say, "There is a line I will not cross even if it costs me my political career." Very few public officials are willing to say that.

These results are, in a way, a gauge of Ohio Citizen Action's strength as an organization. While it is often able to elect people, it is not yet strong enough to hold consistently accountable any public official, including those elected due to its efforts. Whether a successful "Citizen Action candidate" stayed close to the members and the organization depended on their strength of character. Most drifted.

A candidate endorsement implies the organization's assurance that the candidate, if elected, will maintain their leadership on our issues and their relationship to Citizen Action. Experience has taught us that we cannot give such assurances.

About members

Members think they know their interests, individual and collective, better than does the board and staff. They are right.

In assessing candidates, many members take more into account than positions on Citizen Action issues.

Members do not want the Citizen Action board and staff to tell them what to do in the voting booth.

Members do want the organization to help them with facts, fairly presented, about candidates' positions and records on Citizen Action issues.