

A presidential election puzzle:

Why hasn't the White House told Taft to clean up the Ohio GOP scandals before the election?

[Paul Ryder](#), Organizing Director
Ohio Citizen Action, (216) 861-5200

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Republicans in Ohio have long been known for their ability to sort out internal rivalries and clean up their political messes relatively quickly and quietly. So it is unusual to see the Ohio party now floundering in scandal, especially in a presidential year when Ohio might make the difference.

One would expect that the White House would have intervened by now, insisting that Gov. Taft bring the legislature back to pass a series of campaign finance reforms to get this scandal behind them before the election. So far, however, Bush has not weighed in, or he has not done so emphatically enough.

August 23, 2004

The situation was well illustrated by the events of August 23. That morning, the *Washington Post* ran a John Harris story detailing the current Ohio GOP scandals, and concluded "Polls show that only a small percentage of Ohio voters remain undecided about the presidential race. But among those few, the problems at the state level could become a factor at the national level if these voters conclude that Republicans are the party of entrenched power in both Washington and Columbus."

- COLUMBUS -- [GOP hopes local turmoil won't hurt Bush](#), John F. Harris, *Washington Post*, Aug 23, 2004.

Whether on his own, or prompted from Washington, Gov. Bob Taft called a press conference for that same day, to demand campaign finance reform -- after the election.

Reporters were skeptical, asking: "How is this any different from the press conference

you held two years ago?" Taft replied: "You haven't heard this before: We're going to get this done before the end of the year. If it takes a long December session, so be it."

A questioner pointed out that, as governor, Taft could call the legislature into special session to pass campaign reforms in September (Ohio Constitution, [Article III, § 3.08](#)). Taft replied that the reforms wouldn't take effect until the next campaign, and anyway "the House" didn't want to have a special session. He thus missed the point that much of the scandal had come out of the Ohio House, and that Taft doesn't need the House's permission to call a special session.

Taft's press conference continued in this vein, until by the end Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell had publically broken with Taft to call for campaign finance reforms before the election, not during the lame duck session.

If the press conference was intended to make the questions in the *Washington Post* story go away, it did not succeed:

- COLUMBUS -- [Ohio GOP in midst of money scandal](#), Andrew Welsh-Huggins, *Associated Press*, Aug 28, 2004.
- COLUMBUS -- [Campaign-finance reform gets the usual insincere, "We're gonna do it,"](#) Lee Leonard, *Columbus Dispatch*, Aug 30, 2004.

Why the Ohio GOP isn't functioning is clear. Ohio politics has come unglued in the last decade (See the primer on Ohio politics, below). With no opposition party, the GOP has kept sinking unchecked into internal conflict and scandal. Right now, it clearly needs outside intervention.

Now that the National GOP Convention is over, maybe it is time for President George Bush to call fellow Bonesman Bob Taft (whose great-great-grandfather, Alphonso Taft, co-founded the Skull and Bones Society in 1833). Bush can let Taft know that presidential politics is serious business, and that he doesn't intend to see his chances imperiled because of Taft's inaction.

A primer on Ohio politics: The three rules, all now broken

Until recently, understanding Ohio politics has required learning three rules:

Rule #1: No party can hold the Governor's Office for longer than 8 years.

This rule -- known as "the pendulum" -- took hold in 1905 and lasted until 1998, when

Bob Taft won the governorship, succeeding fellow Republican George Voinovich. With Taft's re-election in 2002, the GOP is now enjoying the longest single-party control since 1822.

Rule #2: No Ohioan can be elected governor or U.S. senator unless they have already run and lost for one of those offices.

This pattern began in the mid-1950's and held without exception until 1998. The main reason was that Ohio's population is not concentrated in one or two cities. To win, candidates have had to know inside-and-out the politics of seven distinct metro areas. Only California, Texas, and Florida are similarly difficult to master. In 1998, the rule was broken when Bob Taft won the governorship without having previously lost for either governor or U.S. senator.

Rule #3: Democratic candidates can be elected statewide if they win Cuyahoga county (Cleveland) by at least 100,000 votes.

The charts below show that this is no longer so. In the charts below, the vertical axis units are thousands of votes.

- **The dark blue line** is the Republican margin for all Ohio counties except Cuyahoga. It thus also represents the required Democratic margin in Cuyahoga county.
- **The magenta line** is the actual Democratic margin in Cuyahoga county. When the magenta line has been above the dark blue line, the Democrats have won.

Gubernatorial campaigns

On the above chart, the 100,000-vote rule applied in 1978, 1982, and 1986, but not since. Starting in 1990, Democrats haven't had a 100,000-vote margin in Cuyahoga county, but it wouldn't have helped anyway, since downstate votes would have swamped it.

U.S. Senate campaigns

Similarly with U.S. Senate campaigns, the 100,000-vote rule applied until 1992. Since then, Democrats have been lucky to carry Cuyahoga county at all, let alone by a 100,000-vote margin. Had they done so, it wouldn't have overcome huge Republican margins elsewhere. This chart combines the results from all recent U.S. Senate races in Ohio: John Glenn v. Thomas Kindness (1986), Howard Metzenbaum v. George Voinovich (1988), John Glenn v. Michael DeWine (1992), Joel Hyatt v. Michael DeWine (1994), Mary Boyle v. George Voinovich (1998), and Ted Celeste v. Michael DeWine (2000).

Presidential campaigns

The most striking features of this chart are the two Republican spikes, Nixon in 1972 and Reagan-Bush I in the 1980's. The Democratic margin in Cuyahoga county mattered in 1976, 1992 and 1996, the only three elections where Democratic candidates won the presidency. Generally, however, even though the Cuyahoga margin has been reliably above 100,000, the statewide outcomes had more to do with downstate swings. Most recently, Al Gore took Cuyahoga county by 167,000 votes in the 2000 election, but lost the rest of the state by 332,000.

What happened in 1998?

According to the rules, 1998 should have seen the end of GOP control of state government. After eight years, the Voinovich Administration had lost its way, covered in scandal. As the campaign began, the governor's powerful Chief of Staff, Paul Mifsud, was serving a jail term for concealing a kickback. In Cincinnati, a federal grand jury was investigating state government corruption involving the governor's brother Paul Voinovich, state prison contracts, and the notorious Waste Technologies Industries hazardous waste incinerator in East Liverpool.

The Governor's Office was the Democrats' for the asking. Instead the Republicans won everything again in 1998. This was because in the 1990's, instead of preparing for the next swing of the pendulum, the Ohio Democratic Party turned to dust.

Why?

- Money: In the 1980's, when the Democratic Party was on top in Columbus, the amount of money flowing in and around Ohio politics began to grow quickly. Consulting, fundraising, lobbying and "public affairs" work came to be seen not just as a job, but a way to become wealthy. Most Democrats found the appeal irresistible, and left government and politics for the lucrative world immediately surrounding it.
- Failure to develop new leaders: Partly due to the above, and partly due to simple short-sightedness, the Ohio Democratic Party and its associated interest groups forgot to identify, recruit, train and develop new leaders. This problem lasted through the '80's and '90's, essentially passing up an entire generation. As a result, when the Republican dominance had run its course, and the political pendulum was ready to swing back toward the Democrats, there was no one ready to take advantage of it.
- "Opportunity knocks, and he complains about the noise": Term limits, overwhelmingly passed by Ohio voters in 1992, destabilized entrenched state

legislative leadership, weakened the debilitating incumbent seniority system and created regular open-seat elections. This was a big opportunity for all outsiders, including the non-incumbent party, which at the time was the Democrats. Instead, Ohio Democratic Party officials, and the party's associated interest groups and constituencies, spent the 1990's complaining about term limits -- *as though they were the incumbents*. The complaints became self-fulfilling, of course, because Democrats ran weak candidates and weak campaigns and thus forfeited the open seat elections to others.

It didn't have to be this way: California passed limits in 1990. Latino leaders there saw the opportunity and used the open-seat elections to dramatically increase their numbers in the legislature and elect two Latino Assembly speakers in a row. Similarly, California women politicians used the open-seat elections to increase their numbers from 18% of the legislators in 1992 to 30% in 2003. In Ohio, by contrast, the proportion of women legislators only grew from 15% to 19% in the same period.

Ohio Citizen Action is Ohio's largest environmental organization, with 100,000 dues-paying members. Founded in 1975, Ohio Citizen Action is non-profit and non-partisan; it does not endorse or otherwise support candidates for public office.

[*More on money and politics in Ohio.*](#)