

It's time for Ohio Democrats to have a conversation...

Recently, Ohio Democratic Party Chair David Pepper said this when asked about the Democratic National Committee's search for a new leader: "Slow it down, have a conversation."

He's right about one thing: there needs to be an open conversation, but that conversation must, in light of the results of the November 8 election, also involve the direction of the Ohio Democratic Party.

This document is intended to start that conversation.

The Chair, his executive team, and the party's consultants must address what happened and why, because 2016 was a disastrous year for Ohio Democrats in general and our presidential nominee in particular.

How disastrous?

When measured by the ten-percentage point difference between Clinton's 51.6% to 43.5% popular vote loss to Trump here, and her 1.9%-point victory nationwide, **it was the worst performance by a Democratic presidential nominee in Ohio in the 198-year history of the Democratic Party.**

To date the only comments from the party's upper echelon about the election were made by Chairman Pepper, and Clinton- and Strickland-consultant Aaron Pickrell, at a forum staged by ImpactOhio on November 9. As the Columbus Dispatch reported on November 10:

Clinton got the victory margins she needed in the big urban counties, Pickrell said...

... The Clinton campaign had all the infrastructure it needed to win Ohio, Pickrell said. Now, as he does a little Monday morning quarterbacking, he isn't sure what would have changed the result.

"I don't know what we would have done differently in Ohio," he said. "I don't know how we could have swung it, because of the national narrative."

Mr. Pickrell's assertion that what happened in Ohio was attributable to the "national narrative" is without foundation. His other remarks were, to say the least, astonishing for three reasons: first, because he admits that the people entrusted to run the 2016 campaign in Ohio **had no idea what to do with the millions of dollars they were given.** The outcome of the election clearly indicates that he was, at least in this instance, absolutely correct.

Second, they're astonishing because his contention that HRC amassed the votes needed in the state's urban areas isn't supported by the election results. HRC won fewer votes in eight of the state's ten traditionally Democratic urban counties than Barack Obama in 2012. She also underperformed John Kerry in eight of ten counties. **Her combined vote count in the ten**

counties was 184,228 votes fewer than Obama's in 2012. In addition, she lost in more of the counties than any other Democratic candidate in the 21st Century and would have lost Mahoning County were it not for the strength of the African American vote in Youngstown.

These results give credence to the belief that African American and other urban voters were taken for granted throughout the campaign, even though activists warned both the ODP and the HRC campaign that voters were less than enthusiastic about the Democratic ticket. They repeatedly asked the party and the presidential campaign to take more aggressive steps to close the enthusiasm gap and are convinced that if their advice had been followed, the vote disparity in the state's urban areas between HRC's 2016 performance and President Obama's in '08 and '12 would have been erased.

Finally, the remarks are astonishing because they imply that the ODP was blindsided by Trump's strength in the state, particularly among blue collar workers. Yet, anyone who was paying attention **knew in March that HRC was in trouble** with that constituency when thousands of Democrats pulled Republican ballots in the primary.

Mahoning County Democratic Party Chair David Betras was among those who recognized what was happening. In response, he drafted a memo that laid out a clear message and strategic plan designed to win back this critically important sector of the electorate. The ODP provided the memo to officials in the Clinton campaign who failed to adopt it. A copy of the memo has been referenced in a number of post-election stories in the *Washington Post*.

Unfortunately, because the people entrusted to conduct the 2016 campaign did not know what to do and refused to even consider advice offered from outside their closed inner circle, Ohio Democrats suffered a crushing and historic defeat despite vastly outspending the GOP.

That monumental defeat, along with the blowout in the U.S. Senate race, the disappointing performance in the aggregate vote for our Congressional candidates, the loss of Democratic districts in the Ohio House and Senate, and the defeat of the party's nominees for the Ohio Supreme Court, raises a number of very serious questions. Chief among them:

Should Ohio Democrats continue down the path that has led to disaster in multiple election cycles or has the time finally arrived to ask honest and tough questions, assess every aspect of the party's operations, and objectively measure its effectiveness? For those who truly care about the party and the people it represents, now is the time to determine what type of change is required if our party is to succeed in 2018 and beyond.

Numbers that tell the woeful tale.

Because it is important that this document not be characterized as an ad hominem attack against those responsible for the ODP's woeful performance, considerable time and effort was devoted to assembling objective data about the 2016 election and the three cycles that preceded it. Those cycles were reviewed because many of the party's top-level personnel along with the consultants who have performed the vast majority of the work for the ODP, the Democratic state legislative caucuses, statewide candidates, Super PACs and IE groups have remained largely unchanged since 2010.

The study revealed the following:

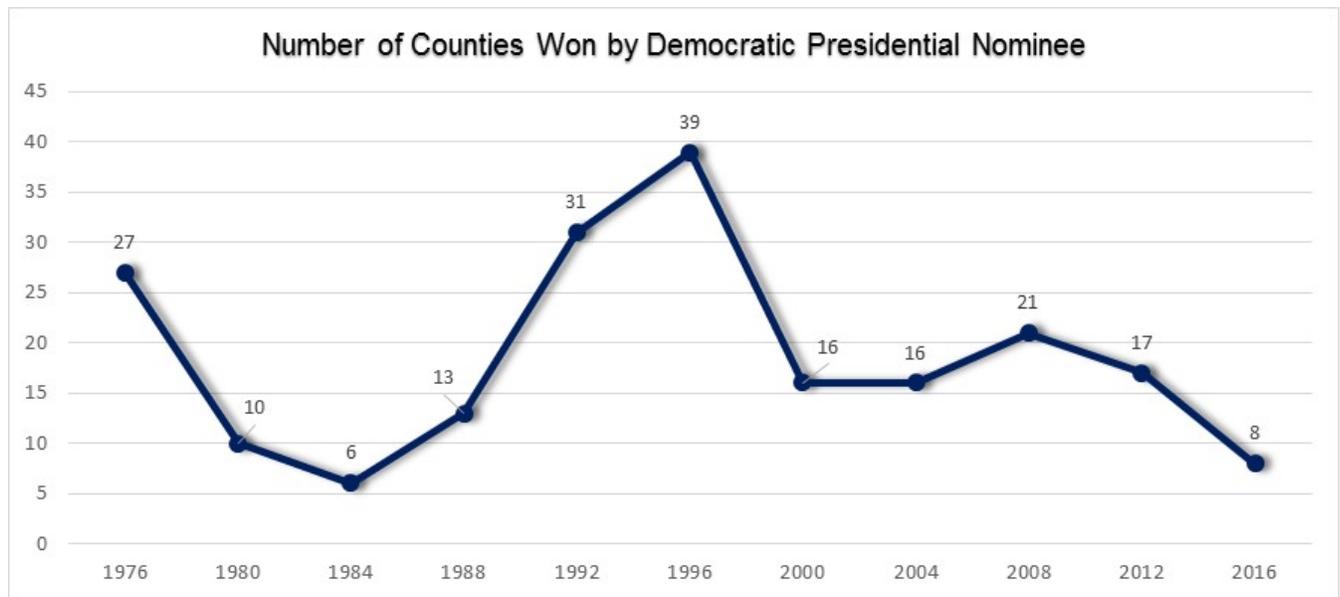
First, a comparison was drawn between the percentage of the popular vote garnered by Democratic presidential nominees in Ohio and nationally. HRC lost the popular vote in Ohio by 8.1% while winning nationally by 1.9%. The 10% spread represents the greatest deviation in Ohio history and is by far the largest in the past seven presidential election cycles.

Year	Ohio	National	OH to National %
2016: Clinton/Trump	D: 43.3 R: 51.9 D -8.1	D: 48.2 R: 46.5 D +1.9	D -10%
2012: Obama/Romney	D: 50.6 R: 47.6 D +3	D: 51.2 R: 47.2 D +4	D: -1%
2008: Obama/McCain	D: 51.5 R: 46.9 D +4.6	D: 52.9 R: 45.7 D +7.2	D: -2.6%
2004: Bush/Kerry	D: 48.7 R: 50.8 D -2.1	D: 48.3 R: 50.7 D -2.4	D: +.3%
2000: Bush/Gore	D: 46.5 R: 50 D -3.5	D: 48.4 R: 47.9 D +0.5	D: -4%
1996: Clinton/Dole	D: 47.3 R: 41 D +6.3	D: 49.2 R: 40.7 D +8.2	D: -2.2%
1992: Clinton/Bush	D: 40.1 R: 38 D +2.1	D: 43 R: 37.4 D +5.6	D: -3.5%
1988: Dukakis/Bush	D: 44.1 R: 55 D -9.1	D: 45.6 R: 53.4 D -7.8	D: -1.3%

Next HRC’s percentage of the popular vote in Ohio and Trump’s margin of victory were compared to the results in other Midwest battleground states. While Trump’s margin of victory in those states was razor thin, the contest in Ohio wasn’t close:

Ohio:	Trump: 51.9%	Clinton: 43.3%	Trump +8.1%
Pennsylvania:	Trump: 48.8%	Clinton: 47.6%	Trump +1.2%
Michigan:	Trump: 47.6%	Clinton: 47.3%	Trump +0.3%
Wisconsin:	Trump: 47.8%	Clinton: 47%	Trump +0.8%

Only one Democratic presidential candidate in the past 40 years, Walter Mondale, won fewer Ohio counties than HRC:



The chart below provides a comparison of vote totals for the Democratic presidential nominee generated in the state’s ten Democratic-leaning urban counties. Although party officials stated that HRC “got the victory margins she needed” in these critically important areas, the results below refute that claim and show a significant decline.

County	2016 vote	2016 plurality	2012 Vote	2012 plurality	2008 vote	2008 plurality	2004 vote	2004 plurality
Cuyahoga	398,271	214,060	447,273	256,613	458,422	258,542	448,503	226,903
Franklin	351,198	151,867	346,373	130,376	334,709	139,179	285,801	48,458
Hamilton	207,587	42,054	219,927	26,601	225,213	96,534	199,679	(22,059)
Summit	134,256	22,230	153,041	42,040	160,858	47,574	156,587	38,029
Montgomery	122,016	(1,893)	137,139	12,298	145,997	40,656	142,997	4,626
Lucas	110,833	35,135	136,616	66,676	142,852	56,109	132,715	45,555
Stark	68,146	(30,242)	89,432	851	96,990	23,284	95,337	3,122
Lorain	66,949	131	81,464	22,059	85,276	13,585	83,194	17,767
Mahoning	56,188	3,765	77,059	34,418	79,173	16,614	78,970	34,433
Trumbull	43,014	(6,010)	61,672	23,393	64,145	5,077	66,673	25,696
Total	1,558,458	431,097	1,749,996	615,325	1,793,635	697,154	1,690,456	421,652

According to exit polls, HRC’s performance among key groups in Ohio was dismal:

Group	National	Ohio	Difference
Females	HRC + 12	HRC +4	-8
Union Households	HRC + 8	HRC -12	-20
White College Educated women	HRC +6	HRC -14	-20

The electoral carnage wasn’t limited to the contest for the White House:

- ODP’s endorsed and hand-picked senate candidate Ted Strickland lost to Rob Portman by 20 percentage points and conceded shortly after the polls closed;
- The GOP won the state’s aggregate Congressional vote in a landslide: 58% to 42%. The 16-point spread is **13 points larger** than the national aggregate vote: GOP 49% Dems 46%;
- Both Democratic nominees for the Ohio Supreme Court were defeated;
- The Democratic candidate for the open 94th District Ohio House lost the seat that had been held by Democrat Debbie Phillips since 2008;
- Incumbent Democrat State Senator Lou Gentile lost his bid for reelection in the 30th District. The district had been represented by a Democrat for 30 years.

The Unbroken Losing Streak

The outcome of the November 8, 2016 election marks the continuation of an epic losing streak that began in 2010:

- Between 2010 and 2016 Democrats suffered a net loss of 20 seats in the Ohio House of Representatives, falling from 53 members to 33. When the General Assembly convenes

in January 2017, fewer Democrats will be serving in the House than at any time in the last 45 years.

- The Senate remains firmly in Republican hands. They now hold a 24-9 advantage. Like their colleagues in the House, the nine Democrats will be members of the smallest caucus in 45 years.
- Democrats lost every contest for Ohio's Constitutional, non-judicial offices: governor, auditor, secretary of state, treasurer and attorney general, in both 2010 and 2014. In 2014 every Democrat was defeated by 13 percentage points or more, including hand-picked gubernatorial candidate Ed Fitzgerald who was buried by 30 points.
- Democrats have been defeated in eight of nine contested races for the Ohio Supreme Court. The only Democrat to win, Justice Bill O'Neill, was opposed by the party in 2012. He defeated the endorsed Democrat in the primary by 43 percentage points then beat the Republican incumbent in the general election 52% to 47%.

The dismal results at the state level have an undeniable impact on local races. County party chairs, candidates and activists recognize that it's much more difficult to win down-ballot races if the top of the ticket falters and Democratic turnout drops as a result. This unfortunate situation weakens our party by creating openings for Republicans to capture local positions that they later use as springboards to higher office.

In addition, the party's inability to win the statewide and legislative elections needed to gain control of the apportionment/redistricting process has had a dramatic, negative impact on Ohio's Democratic Congressional delegation, which now stands at four members, the lowest level in decades. This situation makes it more difficult for our members of Congress to affect public policy. It also diminishes our importance as a state.

Senator Sherrod Brown's victory in 2012 is the one break in the losing streak. His six-point victory over a well-funded Republican opponent was attributable in large part to his long-standing advocacy for working families, opposition to NAFTA and other unfair foreign trade deals, tireless work on behalf of the disadvantaged, and support for civil and human rights. His ability to capture the votes of traditional Democrats stands in stark contrast to the party's performance among those core constituent groups this year.

How did the ODP get here?

Unfortunately, the same problems that led to the 2014 electoral debacle and resignation of the ODP chair at that time still exist today. The party is still controlled by a closed loop of insiders and consultants who have demonstrated conclusively, election after election, that they simply do not know how to win. And, as Mr. Pickrell noted in his post-election remarks, the problem isn't that the ODP lacks money or resources. The problem is that those in control of and benefiting from the resources lack the ability to use them effectively and develop strategies that will win elections.

The refusal to abandon the discredited practice of rigging primaries on behalf of favored candidates is also a major shortcoming, as the results of this year's U.S. Senate election clearly demonstrate. Indeed, it appears that only two groups benefit from this ploy: the Republicans who cruise to easy victories over Democratic candidates who have been hand-selected by the powers that be rather than elected by primary voters, and the closed circle of consultants who are repeatedly hired by those Democrats even though they lose race after race.

Yet, despite the fact that rigged primaries have resulted in repeated losses, the media is abuzz with alarming reports that party insiders are preparing to clear the field for their preferred candidate for governor in 2018. Perhaps no aspect of Mr. Pepper and his team's tenure is as disappointing as his embrace of this failed tactic.

The Path Forward

There are some steps that must be taken, some reforms that must be implemented—soon—if the ODP is to have a chance to change course and succeed in 2018 and beyond.

Stop rigging primaries. Not only does the practice produce defeats, it discourages women and men with fresh ideas and perspectives from seeking higher office, inhibits efforts to extend fundraising beyond existing donors, saps energy from the party, and robs candidates of the opportunity to hone their skills, refine their messages and test their teams in the heat of a primary election. This does not necessarily mean that the party should not endorse in primaries. **It does mean that all candidates should be provided with the opportunity to earn the ODP's endorsement via a process that is open and fair.**

Unravel the interconnected web of consultants who have a stranglehold on the ODP. This issue has been raised numerous times but it has never been directly addressed. Today, and for the past four election cycles, a tightknit group of consultants has had a stranglehold on contracts let by the ODP, the legislative caucuses, candidates, Super PACs and independent expenditure groups. These consulting firms, as well as the individuals who own, operate and/or work for them, have received hundreds of thousands, and in some cases millions of dollars during this period without any accountability or measurement of effectiveness.

In the days ahead, more information about the use of resources will be disseminated. For now, **it's reasonable to ask for a full and transparent audit of all expenditures so interested parties have the information needed to determine if the ODP's funds have been spent efficiently and effectively.**

Adopt new messages—and more effective strategies for delivering them. As the results of the election show, the ODP must craft and deliver messages that will motivate voters to support our candidates and utilize more effective tactics and strategies to deliver them. The party can't afford to be dormant between elections. We must treat every day as if we are in the midst of a campaign because we are.

There are a number of other issues that should be addressed, including the composition of the executive committee, the endorsement process, as well as the need for ongoing financial transparency and accountability.

That said, it appears obvious that the status quo cannot stand. The voters in Ohio and across the nation rejected business as usual on November 8 because it simply wasn't working for them. The results of the last four election cycles prove conclusively that business as usual simply isn't working for the ODP. That case should be made at the ODP executive board meeting on December 10 and hopefully the open and honest conversation about the state of the party and the reforms that need to be made can continue from that point until the issues raised in this document are resolved.