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Ohio's elections for governor are rarely close: Brent Larkin

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By Brent Larkin

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The gubernatorial election seems to be slipping away from Cuyahoga County Executive Ed FitzGerald.

There's just no way to spin it differently. Struggling with low name recognition and not nearly enough money, the Democratic nominee has now fallen 15 points behind Republican incumbent John Kasich, according to a poll released Wednesday by Quinnipiac University.

The notion floated by Democrats that the race was tied was always a fairy tale. And release of the Quinnipiac Poll comes at a point in the campaign when FitzGerald desperately needs to convince deep-pocketed donors and third-party contributors to make a major investment in his campaign.

That bad news came on the same day FitzGerald unveiled what was, by far, the most significant public policy proposal either candidate has made during the campaign: a pledge to invest \$500 million to offer preschool for every three- and four-year-old in the state.

FitzGerald didn't adequately explain how he'd pay for the preschool, but, in the short term, that failing didn't matter. His plan was devoured by media attention over Kasich's 50 percent to 35 percent lead in Quinnipiac's horse-race question.

If Kasich-FitzGerald becomes a rout - and it's not there yet - no one should be the least bit surprised. That's because, despite Ohio's well-deserved swing state status in presidential elections, there's a dirty little secret about our elections for governor:

They're rarely close.

And more often than not, they're landslides, awarding the victor a win of at least 10 percentage points.

That's only one tiny tidbit of information political junkies can find on a remarkable new website, "Ohio Historical Election Results" (<http://ohioelectionresults.com>). The site is a labor of love built by Columbus-based consultant Mike Dawson, former press secretary to Gov. George Voinovich and a top aide to former Sen. Mike DeWine.

Dawson's work on the state's election history has been cited by virtually all the nation's leading news organizations, including The New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Washington Post.

More will be added later, but the site already contains results of more than 150 Ohio elections for president, governor and U.S. Senate – results broken down almost every way imaginable.

Dan Balz, who has covered the last nine presidential campaigns for the Washington Post, said Dawson's site "provides a model" for what should be attempted in other states.

"What Mike has done is a huge favor to everyone who follows politics and wants authoritative information about one of the most important states in the country," said Balz. "Ohio always seems to be ground zero in presidential campaigns and now there is an easy way to see its political history in great depth."

A tour of the site will provide the viewer with a treasure trove of interesting data. Here's just a tiny sampling:

Governor

- Of the 19 Ohio gubernatorial elections since 1950, only three have been close. (I liberally defined "close" as five percentage points or less separating the top two candidates.) Those close elections were: the 2010 race where Kasich bested incumbent Ted Strickland by two percent; the 1978 contest won by Gov. Jim Rhodes over Lt. Gov. Dick Celeste by 1.7 percent; and 1974, when Rhodes upset incumbent John Gilligan by less than four tenths of one percent. That 1974 election was the second-closest for an Ohio governor in history, the closest dating back to 1873, when Democrat William Allen beat Republican Edward Noyes by 817 votes out of about 450,000 cast.

- Of the 19 elections since 1950, 11 have been blowouts – with margins of victory exceeding 10 percentage points. The most lopsided gubernatorial election was in 1994, when incumbent George Voinovich captured nearly 72 percent of the vote against State Sen. Rob Burch. Rhodes ran up the second-biggest percentage victory, winning more than 62 percent of the vote against Democrat Frazier Reams Jr. in 1966.

- There have been 65 elections for governor since the current two-party system began in 1855 (governors served two-year terms until 1958). Republicans have won 38, Democrats 27.

- No candidate has ever won all 88 counties in an election for governor, though Rhodes won all but Pike in 1966.

- Between 1944 and 1994, there were 11 elections with a candidate who resided in Cleveland (Frank Lausche, Celeste or Voinovich). The Clevelander won nine of them.

U.S. Senate

- Prior to 1914, senators were chosen by the legislature. Since then, there have been 37 elections, Republicans winning 21 and Democrats 16. Warren Harding was the first Ohioan directly elected to the Senate. Six years later, in 1920, Harding was elected president.

- Democrats dominated the 36-year period from 1956 to 1992, winning 11 of 13 contests. John Glenn won four of those elections, Howard Metzenbaum three.

- Glenn was not only the longest-serving elected senator in state history; he also owns the two highest-winning percentages - nearly 68.8 percent in 1980 against Rocky River State Rep. Jim Betts and 62.5 percent in 1974 against Cleveland Mayor Ralph Perk.

I covered Glenn's 1974 senatorial campaign for the Cleveland Press. On election night, Perk explained that a major factor in his million-vote loss was a desire by Cleveland-area voters for him to remain as mayor.

That 1974 election was the first time a Senate candidate carried all 88 counties. Voinovich also did so in his 2004 re-election campaign against Eric Fingerhut.

President

- In the 14 presidential elections between 1856 and 1908, Ohio voted Republican every time. Since 1912, it has been the very definition of a swing state, with the Republican candidate winning 14 times and the Democrat 12.

- In the 40 presidential elections since 1856, Ohio has voted with the winner 35 times - including the last 13. The last time the winner did not carry Ohio was 1960, when Richard Nixon beat John F. Kennedy.

- From 1856 to 1932, Northeast Ohio voted for the Republican candidate in 17 out of 20 elections. In the last 20 elections, voters in the region supported the Democrat 15 times.

- The last Republican to carry Cuyahoga County was Nixon in 1972.

In off-year elections, Ohio leans slightly Republican, as evidenced by the GOP victories in seven of the last 10 elections for governor.

But every four years, the turnout model changes and the playing field levels. The score in the last 10 presidential elections is tied at five.

That tie gets broken in 2016.

Brent Larkin was The Plain Dealer's editorial director from 1991 until his retirement in 2009.