

# The Columbus Dispatch

**Want to be governor? Here's how  
With election a year away, 4 who won the office share advice  
By Joe Hallett - Columbus Dispatch  
Sunday November 3, 2013**

When four-term Gov. James A. Rhodes last ran in 1986 at age 77, he gave a speech in Steubenville and waxed poetically about the local university — *Youngstown State* — which, of course, is in Youngstown.

“I slipped him a note reminding him we were in Steubenville,” recalled Rhodes’ running mate, Bob Taft. “He was getting up in years.”

When running for Ohio governor, it is good to know where you are, because if you don’t, “That’s what people will remember,” said Taft, a Republican who was governor from 1999-2007.

“Also, you have to know how to pronounce the places you go to.”

Voters in Wooster live in “Wusster,” those in Archbold are in “Arch-a-bold,” Russia is “Rooshee,” and never say “Leema” in Lima. Candidates get bonus points for pronouncing Gnadenhutten correctly.

These are things a Republican or Democratic nominee for governor should know, because inevitably he or she will campaign in places like Archbold, Russia and Gnadenhutten.

“People expect you to pay attention to them and not ignore Vinton County because it’s Vinton County,” said Democrat Richard F. Celeste, governor from 1983-91.

A year from Monday as they make their final Election Day pitches to voters, the two likely gubernatorial nominees — incumbent Republican John Kasich and Democratic Cuyahoga County Executive Ed FitzGerald — are bound to be dragging.

They probably will have visited most, if not all, of Ohio’s 88 counties, given hundreds of speeches and media interviews, shaken thousands of hands, and made countless phone calls to raise the roughly \$15 million it will take to buy television ads in the 11 cities that broadcast to Ohio voters, including Wheeling and Huntington in West Virginia and Fort Wayne, Ind.

Unless you’ve already done it — and Kasich has — there is nothing to simulate the rigors of campaigning statewide in Ohio, America’s quintessential purple state, truly a microcosm of the nation politically, culturally, demographically and geographically (OK, so we have big hills instead of mountains and a great lake instead of an ocean).

Few Ohioans understand the state better than the four living ex-governors who campaigned for the job, all of whom have won and lost statewide races — Celeste, Republican George V. Voinovich, Taft, and Democrat Ted Strickland. In recent interviews, all viewed running for governor as a high-risk and high-reward endeavor, requiring dedication, discipline, stamina, money and a message that resonates.

The four governors remain awestruck by the state's understated beauty and cultural diversity, agreeing that, politically speaking, East Liverpool on the Ohio River and Greenville near the Indiana border might as well be on different planets, and what plays in Cleveland might not in Cincinnati.

"The personalities of the various regions of Ohio are very distinct," Strickland said. "I've heard Cleveland described as a Northeastern city, Columbus as a Midwestern city, and Cincinnati as a Southern city."

Calling Ohio "diverse and decentralized," Taft noted that the state "has as many media markets as any state, and it has as many medium-sized and small towns as any state. A ton of those towns cannot be ignored."

They can be reached, in part, by focusing visits on Ohio's big cities to fetch "free" or "earned" TV and newspaper coverage, particularly late in a campaign.

**"Both candidates have to pay the most attention to northeastern Ohio because that's where 38 percent of the state's vote is," said Mike Dawson, an election statistics expert and Voinovich's press secretary. "The key for a Republican victory is to do as well as you can in northeast Ohio and then get your victory by winning central, southwestern and western Ohio."**

In the 14 elections since Ohioans began electing governors to four-year terms in 1958, Democratic nominees have won the 20-county Cleveland media market nine times, but the five times Republicans won it they also won statewide. Over that span, the four times the GOP nominee lost the 20-county Columbus media market, he also lost statewide, and the two times the Republican lost the eight-county Cincinnati market, he lost the race.

While major urban areas command most attention, the four ex-governors agreed that it is important to visit as many of the 88 counties as possible, because voters still expect to see the candidates in person.

"Nothing beats being physically present," Celeste said. "You have to get around and introduce yourself to the state in order to win statewide, and a lot of times you have to lose. If one loss discourages you, you shouldn't be in the race in the first place."

Kasich in 2010 and Strickland in 2006 shattered an Ohio political axiom: You have to lose statewide before you can win. In the past 14 races for governor, Kasich and Strickland are the only two winners who had not suffered a previous statewide defeat.

Sometimes candidates have only themselves to blame for a loss: “You can’t always win an election, but you can always lose an election,” Celeste said.

Voinovich accepted blame for running a raunchy TV ad that backfired in his 1988 U.S. Senate loss to Democratic incumbent Howard Metzenbaum. Voinovich said he learned from the loss, that the ad was out-of-character for him and that the worst thing a politician can do is to be somebody he’s not. Even though many pundits declared him politically dead, he came back to win the governor’s race two years later.

“We went back and reconnected with people and built on 1988, so by the time I ran for governor we had been to every county in the state, got to know every county Republican chairman, and got to know a lot of Democrats, too,” said Voinovich, governor from 1991-99.

Sometimes, though, a candidate can be overwhelmed by events, as was Strickland in 2010 when he ran for re-election on the heels of the Great Recession, which had cost Ohio 400,000 jobs.

“In politics, nearly everything is timing,” Strickland said. “The same electorate can feel very different from one year to the next depending on the circumstances going on in the larger culture, especially the economic circumstance.”

Strickland’s two races for governor demonstrate the fickle nature of Ohio politics. Two years after Republican President George W. Bush painted Ohio red by winning 72 counties in 2004, Strickland repainted it blue by also carrying 72 counties, winning more votes than any gubernatorial candidate in state history. In 2010, Kasich beat Strickland by 2 percentage points.

Just as Strickland benefitted from Bush’s unpopularity in 2006, Kasich benefitted from Democratic President Barack Obama’s low approval rating in 2010. Indeed, it often is a curse for a gubernatorial candidate to be from the same party as the president: In Ohio’s past 14 races for governor, a candidate from the same party as the sitting president won only three times.