

John Kasich's Victory-That-Wasn't

By Matt A. Mayer

Conservative ideals and the real, tough work of governing were on display this weekend as the nation's Republican governors gathered in Boca Raton, Florida. As party leaders, pundits, and grassroots activists begin to size the field of governors who might run in 2016, it'd be easy to overlook some fundamental differences between some of the biggest names.

For instance, much is being made nationally about Ohio Governor John Kasich's big win on election night and what it means for 2016, yet much of that premature Beltway pontificating lacks a true understanding of what happened here in Ohio: His "big win" actually shows a much less popular figure than a first glance would appear.

Kasich certainly would love to be President of the United States. He ran once before in 2000, but he pulled out before any votes were cast, realizing congressman don't become Presidents. Governors do.

Fast-forward to 2010 when Kasich won the governor's race by 77,000 votes with 49% of the vote. In four years, Kasich increased state spending by 20%, expanded Medicaid under Obamacare, shifted taxes from income to sales and commercial business taxes, tried to hike taxes on Ohio's nascent energy renaissance, failed to sustain public sector collective bargaining reform, tripled the number of legal gambling sites from four to eleven, and monitored Ohio's middling 27th ranked private sector job growth from 2011 to today.

With this shaky record, just reading the topline election results make it look like Kasich's reelection win was a huge mandate for his odd brand of conservatism.

But was it?

Kasich won Ohio by some big numbers. He won 86 out of 88 counties—even Democratic strongholds like Cuyahoga (Cleveland), Mahoning (Youngstown), and Lucas (Toledo) counties. Kasich took 63.85% of the vote en route to a 31-point victory. He garnered just shy of two million votes in his reelection walk. Pro-Kasich pundits rolled out the White House red carpet.

Sounds impressive until a few other facts are revealed. His opponent, Ed FitzGerald, was a little known county executive with the weakest resume of a major party candidate in state history, which helped. Combined with FitzGerald's self-inflicted wound when his pick for a running mate was a debt-ridden State Senator put him squarely behind the eight ball.

FitzGerald continued to dig himself into a huge hole. First, it came out that he was caught by police in a car with a woman not his wife at 4:00am. Then, we

learned he was driving without a license and had been for nearly a decade. The race was over before Labor Day.

Other numbers help put Kasich's win in proper context.

The turnout in Ohio was historically low, with just under 40% of Ohioans casting a vote. Kasich raised over \$20 million, with another \$4 million in television ads from the Republican Governors Association, compared to FitzGerald's measly \$2.5 million. Kasich's 2014 vote total only added 26,764 votes to what he got when he barely won in 2010. In contrast, FitzGerald received 825,389 votes less than Kasich's 2010 opponent, incumbent Democratic Governor Ted Strickland.

To put Kasich's win in Ohio electoral perspective, his "huge" win only provided him with 50,943 more votes than Republican Bob Taft received in his reelection effort in 2002. Kasich's 2014 vote total was 15,667 less than Republican George Voinovich's 1990 win and 479,136 fewer votes than Voinovich's 1994 reelection victory—and this is during a time when the state's overall population has grown from 10.8 million in 1990 to 11.5 million in 2012. (Even Strickland's 2006 win snared 512,948 more votes than Kasich did in 2014.)

It doesn't seem a stretch to say that a strong Democratic candidate would have given Kasich a real race—and potentially even dashed his presidential hopes before the race even started.

Kasich is lucky that the Democrats in Ohio are so inept—they've won over the last twenty years just one gubernatorial race, one attorney general race, and one treasurer race, as well as a short-lived two-year Ohio House majority in 2006 when the anti-Bush midterm wave crushed Republicans. In fact, other than those four wins, Republicans have controlled all statewide offices and the Ohio General Assembly since 1995.

These more interesting numbers reveal that Kasich's win was really just another chapter in that book. It also points to problems Kasich will have in getting past his Obamacare expansion of Medicaid, higher state spending, and tax shifting approach with Republican base voters. Kasich's minimal improvement over his 2010 vote total indicates an underlying weakness.

Wisconsin Governor and potential presidential candidate Scott Walker seems acutely aware of

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Kasich's vulnerability. It wasn't accidental that he took a direct shot at Kasich in a news interview four days after the election when asked about Kasich's invocation of St. Peter to justify his expansion of Medicaid. "It's probably not fair to ask the son of a preacher to use biblical metaphors. My reading of the Bible finds plenty of reminders that it's better to teach someone to fish than to give them fish if they're able," Walker stated bluntly. "Caring for the poor isn't the same as taking money from the federal government to lock more people into Medicaid."

Ouch.

If Kasich chooses to run for president, he'll face a more complicated landscape than a reelection against an underfunded self-defeating nobody. Jeb Bush, Chris Christie, Mike Huckabee, Rick Perry, and Walker are well-known successful governors who can raise a lot of money.

And, unluckily for him, the Republicans nationally are better than the Democrats in Ohio.

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