# The Politics of a Purple State

"Operation Clark County"

A few weeks before the 2004 U.S. presidential election, Oliver Burkeman, a columnist for the British newspaper, *The Guardian,* came up with a rather audacious idea. Since he felt that the American election would have global ramifications, he urged his readers to take an active role in trying to influence the U.S. campaign. Specifically, he proposed "to match individual *Guardian* readers with individual voters in Clark County, in the crucial swing state of Ohio," so that the British citizens could draft personal letters to these American voters, letting them know how citizens from another country understood global political issues.[1] Not unexpectedly, the effort, branded "Operation Clark County," met with considerable backlash. Angry citizens from throughout the U.S. wrote hostile e-mails to the *Guardian,* accusing the newspaper of facilitating an improper and perhaps illegal attempt by non-U.S. citizens to change the outcome of an American election. The director of the board of elections in Clark County was even quoted as saying "the American Revolution was fought for a reason."[2]

In the end—at least from the point of view of the *Guardian* writer—Operation Clark County was a failure. Burkeman had hoped to convince voters to support the Democratic challenger, John Kerry; instead, Clark County was won by President George W. Bush, even though Bush had lost the county to Al Gore four years earlier. What is most interesting for students of Ohio politics, however, is to recognize that when it came time for a European newspaper to try to influence an American presidential election, the publication quite naturally focused on Ohio. Indeed, it would not be much of an exaggeration to claim that when it comes to U.S. presidential politics, the whole world directs its gaze to Ohio (Photo 1.1). Of course, they are just reflecting the behavior of the candidates themselves. For example, the *Washington Post* estimated that during their first term in office, either President Barack Obama or Vice President Joseph Biden visited Ohio on average once every three weeks![3] But is all of this attention justified?
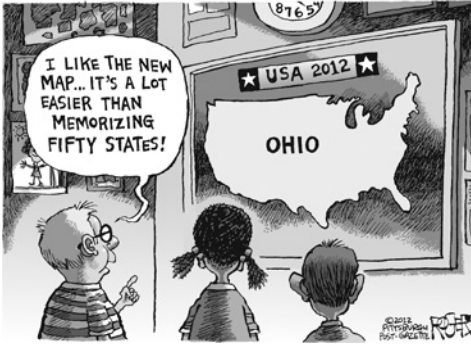
In the 82-year span between 1841 and 1923, the United States elected 21 individuals as President. Eight of those presidents, or nearly 40 percent, were from Ohio. Only the state of Virginia has sent an equal number to the White House (although, technically, the first president from Virginia, George Washington, did not occupy the famous address at 1400 Pennsylvania Avenue). Still, no Ohioan has sat behind the desk in the Oval Office since Blooming Grove native President Warren G. Harding's death on August 2, 1923 (Photo 1.2).

Although no longer supplying presidential timber, Ohio has clearly remained at the center of presidential contests. The political mantra, repeated every four years, is that since 1960, no one has been elected president without capturing a plurality of the popular vote in Ohio. Unlike many such mantras, this one has the virtue of being true. As Table 1.1 shows, however, this does not mean that a candidate *must* win Ohio in order to capture the White House. Of the eight individuals elected in the 13 elections beginning in 1964, only George W. Bush (in both 2000 and 2004) needed Ohio's electoral votes to claim a victory. Every other president could have garnered an electoral majority without Ohio's votes. Moreover, in 2000 at least, President Bush, with only 271 electoral votes (one more than he needed) could not have lost *any* of the 30 states that he won and still claimed victory.

Table 1.1 does demonstrate a second important point. With every new census, Ohio's representation in Congress, and therefore the total number of electors representing the State, declines. In 1964, Lyndon Johnson gained 26 votes by capturing Ohio. When Barack Obama won Ohio in 2012, only 18 electoral votes were earned. In a sense, therefore—and again, by looking at the numbers—Ohio is becoming less and less significant in presidential politics. So why is Ohio still considered, even by the candidates themselves, a crucial battleground state in U.S. presidential elections? There are two related reasons.


President Warren G. Harding

Table 1.1   Comparison of Electoral Vote Difference to Electoral Votes Available in Ohio, 1964–2012

Year	Electoral Vote difference	Ohio Electoral votes
1964	434	26
1968	110	26
1972	503	25
1976	57	25
1980	440	25
1984	512	23
1988	315	23
1992	202	21
1996	220	21
2000	5	21
2004	35	20
2008	192	20
2012	126	18

Data source: "270 to Win," accessed October 4, 2014, http://www.270towin.com/

When political pundits talk about *red states* and *blue states*, they are acknowledging that, even before anyone casts their vote in a presidential election, it is not hard to predict with a high degree of certainty which party's candidate will ultimately win the popular vote. Republicans dominate in red states and Democrats control blue states. So, for example, the two most populous states (and therefore the two most electorally rich states), Texas and California, are not currently considered competitive.[4] It is a foregone conclusion that Texas is red and will support the Republican candidate, while a majority of voters in blue California will cast their ballots for the Democratic Party's nominee. Texas and California are not alone when it comes to states that are considered noncompetitive. As Map 1.1 shows, a total of 38 states and the District of Columbia are considered fairly solid red or blue states. That leaves 12 so-called swing states. Swing states are states where the outcome is difficult to predict because voters swing back and forth from election to election between the Republican and Democratic candidates. Swing states are also sometimes called *purple states*, since their electoral status is derived from the near-equal numbers of solid red and blue voters.

MAP 1.1   Red, Blue, and Purple States
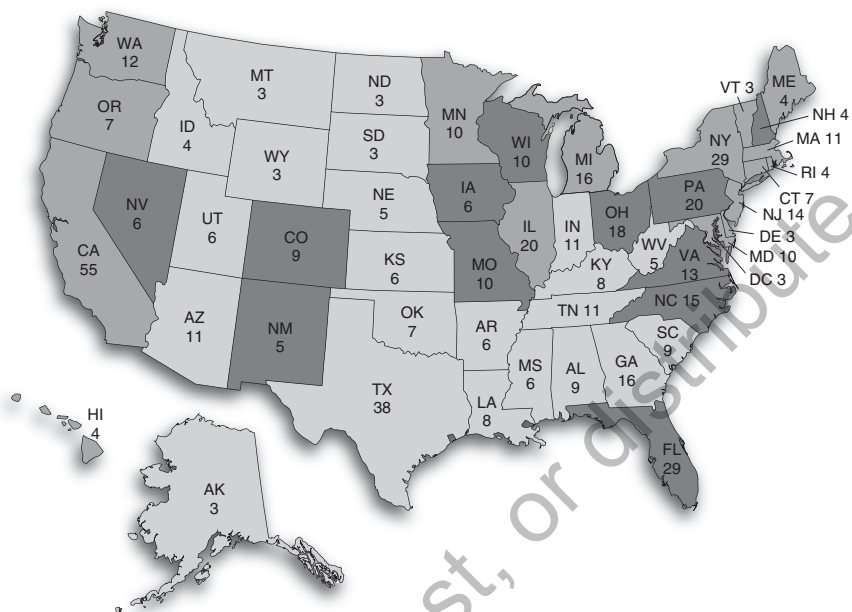
Source: "Electoral Vote Predictor," accessed October 8, 2014, http://www.electoral-vote .com/evp2012/Pres/Maps/Aug07.html

Looking at only the purple states in Map 1.1, one sees that only Florida and Pennsylvania have more electoral votes than Ohio. Since it is difficult to label Pennsylvania as a pure purple state (voters there having supported only Democratic candidates for president since 1988), among the truly purple states, Ohio trails only Florida in electoral clout.

Using this definition, it is hard to imagine a state more purple than Ohio. For example, if one adds up all the Democratic votes for president between 2000 and 2012 and then compares that number to all the corresponding Republican votes during that same period, the difference is only about 150,000 votes out of more than 21 million cast. This comes out to a difference of less than 1 percent (see Table 1.2).

Beyond electoral votes and the closeness of presidential races in Ohio, there is an additional argument to be made about the significance of Ohio in presidential campaigns. As Table 1.3 shows, Ohio is, demographically, somewhat of a micro-cosm of the United States. With the notable exception of the very low number of Hispanic voters in the state, Ohio looks like the United States. From this perspective, Ohio is important because it is an ideal test market for political candidates. Put

TABLE 1.2   Presidential Vote Difference, 2000–2012

Year	Democrats	Republicans
2000	2,186,190	2,351,209
2004	2,741,167	2,859,768
2008	2,940,044	2,677,820
2012	2,827,709	2,661,437
Total	10,695,110	10,540,234

Total Votes cast = 21,235,344

Difference = 154,876

Percentage Difference = .7 percent

Data source: "Election Results," Ohio Secretary of State, accessed October 4, 2014, http://www.sos.state.oh.us/sos/elections/Research/electResultsMain.aspx

another way, if a candidate is popular in Ohio, they are likely to have qualities that will appeal to voters throughout the U.S. Hence, winning Ohio is important not because of the electoral votes gained but because of what it says about a candidate.

TABLE 1.3   Ohio Basic Facts

	Ohio	United States
Population	11.5 million	316.1 million
Female	51.1%	50.8%
White	83.%	77.7%
Black	12.5%	13.2%
Asian	1.9%	5.3%
Hispanic	3.4%	17.1%
High School Graduate	88.2%	85.7%
College Graduate	24.7%	28.5%
Per Capita Income	$25,857	$28,051
Below Poverty Line	15.4%	14.9%

Data source: "State & County QuickFacts," United States Census Bureau, http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/39000.html

Purple State Politics

More than 50 years ago, Thomas A. Flinn, a political science professor at Oberlin College, wrote an often-cited article describing Ohio politics.[5] Reading that article today, it is remarkable how much of what Flinn documented in 1960 remains unchanged. Flinn concluded, for example, that "Ohio is now and has long been a competitive two-party state in which Republicans have an advantage."[6] He based this statement on the partisan results in presidential, gubernatorial, and state legislative elections in Ohio from 1895 through the 1958 election. Using these same data points for the years beginning in 1960, one finds similar results. From 1895 to 1958, Flinn found that Republicans won 10 presidential elections while Democrats came out ahead in six contests. From 1960 through 2012, the numbers are almost exactly the same, with Ohio voters giving a plurality of their support to Republicans in a little more than half (8) of the 14 contests. Gubernatorial elections, however, tell a slightly different story. By a count of 19 to 12, Flinn's study found that Democrats were more successful than Republicans. Beginning in 1962, however, Republicans reversed the trend and won nine out of the next 14 gubernatorial elections. These increasing gains for Republicans are also reflected in the state legislature. Flinn found that, in the Ohio senate, Republicans held a majority 21 times, while eight senate elections were favorable to Democrats. The senate was tied twice (something that could not happen after 1967, when the size of the senate was set at 33, an odd number). The Republican trend in the senate became even more exaggerated after 1960, with Democrats controlling the senate after only four of 27 elections held through 2012. Where Flinn had found the house "somewhat more Republican than the Senate," the results from 1960 do not bear this out. Unlike in the senate, in the house, Republicans held only a slight edge, maintaining a majority after 15 elections with Democrats capturing the house in the remaining 12 elections.

The end result is that Ohio is a state that leans Republican in state races but tends to give its votes almost equally to Republicans and Democrats in presidential contests. It is this latter fact that gives Ohio its purple state identity. Even this statement, however, must be qualified. For when one looks at the election results tallied by each of the state's 88 county boards of elections, one does not find many purple results. Instead, one finds counties that are consistently deeply red (Republican) and others that are equally as blue (Democratic). Over the years, analysts have come up with various templates to try to both categorize and explain the different voting patterns found throughout the state.

The Rural-Urban Divide

One consistent and obvious distinction is between rural and urban areas. Parts of Ohio that are more densely populated gravitate toward Democrats, while less populated areas tend to support Republicans. In addition, however, economic

history and past migration patterns also seem to influence present-day voting. For example, the strong Republican leanings of the southwestern part of Ohio have been linked to the fact that early settlers to the area were antislavery Southerners from Virginia and elsewhere whose descendants gravitated to the Republican Party.[7] At the same time, the fact that northeast Ohio was once the home to large unionized manufacturing facilities helps to explain the strong and consistent Democratic vote found in these counties.

MAP 1.2   The Five Ohios

The Five Ohios

Perhaps the most popular way of understanding the diverse politics of Ohio is to divide Ohio up into five regions. This "Five Ohios" approach identifies the distinct political orientations of northeast, northwest, southeast, southwest, and central Ohio (see Map 1.2). Northeast Ohio is the most Democratic region in the state. Historically, the Democrats' strength in this corner of state is countered by strong Republican voting in the opposite corner of the state, in southwest Ohio. The northwest, central, and southeast regions of the state tend to be more competitive, although the first two regions have leaned toward Republicans.

Curiously enough—and yet another possible reason behind Ohio's identity as a political bellwether—the five regions correspond well to identifiable regions within the nation as a whole. As a paper put out by the Bliss Institute of Politics at the University of Akron explains,

> Northeast Ohio resembles the country's Northeast region in relative terms when it comes to the African American population, population of European ethnicity, and the proportion of Catholics. In contrast, Southeast Ohio resembles the South in terms of poverty and the percentage of Evangelical Protestants. Central Ohio resembles the West in terms of professional/ managerial occupations and college degrees. Meanwhile, Northwest and Southwest Ohio resemble the Midwest region as a whole.[8]

As one looks at the results of the most recent presidential races in Ohio, however, the Five Ohios approach seems to be breaking down. Hamilton County, the largest county in southwest Ohio, supported the Democratic candidate Barack Obama in both 2008 and 2012. Southeast Ohio, however, is seems to be becoming much more Republican. In 2012, only Athens County (home of Ohio University) supported the reelection of Barack Obama. It is becoming evident that the rural-urban division is still the best way to explain the partisan vote in Ohio. The Democratic candidate, incumbent President Obama, won nine out of the 10 largest counties in Ohio in 2008 and eight of 10 in 2012. John McCain, his Republican challenger in 2008, defeated Obama in nine of the 10 smallest counties. Mitt Romney did a bit better, winning in all 10 of the smallest counties. In fact, Romney won every county in Ohio with a population of under 40,000 residents (27 counties) while losing every county with a population above 500,000 (five counties). (See Figures 1.1 and 1.2.)

Conclusion

Ohio politics have been remarkably consistent over time. Although the state leans Republican, particularly in non-presidential voting, it still roughly follows the mood of the nation. For example, in 2006, as Democrats took over both houses of
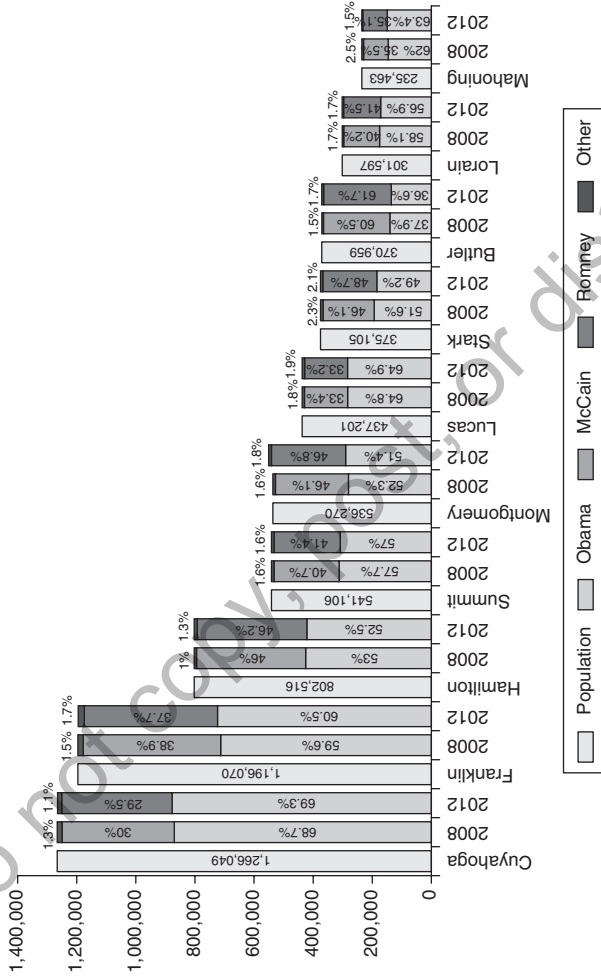
FIGURE 1.1 2008 and 2012 Presidential Election Results, 10 Smallest Counties in Ohio
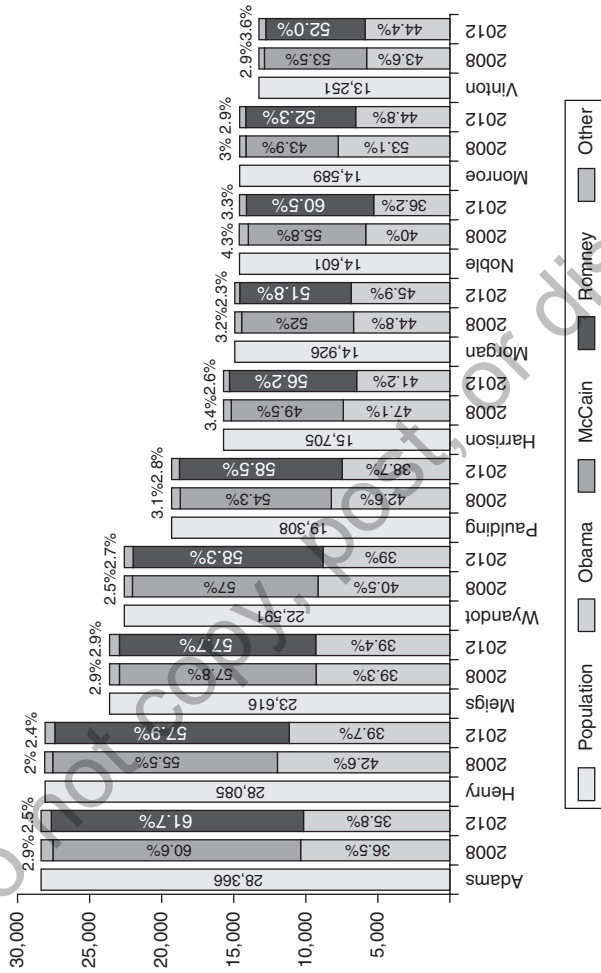
Data source: "Ohio population by County—total residents," US-Places.com, accessed October 4, 2014, http://www.us-places.com/Ohio/population-by-County.htm and "Election Results," Ohio Secretary of State, accessed October 4, 2014, http://www.sos.state.oh.us/sos/elections/Research/electResultsMain.aspx

FIGURE I.2 2008 and 2012 Presidential Election Results, 10 Largest Counties in Ohio

Congress at the national level, Democrats in Ohio won all but one statewide office. In 2008, Ohio not only supported the Democrat Barack Obama for the White House but also gave his party a majority in Ohio house of representatives. As the nation swung in a more Republican direction in 2010, Ohio followed, electing Republicans to every statewide office and taking back control of the house of representatives. In 2012, Ohio again followed the rest of the country, giving its support to President Obama, but by a smaller margin than it had four years earlier. As we approach the 2016 campaign, only one thing is certain: All eyes will once again be on the Buckeye state.

Notes

1. Oliver Burkeman, "My Fellow Non-Americans," *The Guardian*, October 12, 2004, accessed October 4, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/oct/13/uselections2004.usa11

2. Andy Bowers, "Dear Limey Assholes . . . A Crazy British Plot to Swing Ohio to Kerry,—and How it Backfired." *Slate*, November 4, 2004, accessed October 14, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2004/11/dear_limey_assholes_.html

3. Jerry Markon and Alice Crites, "Obama Showering Ohio with Attention and Money," *Washington Post*, September 25, 2012, accessed October 4, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/decision2012/obama-showering-ohio-with-attention-and-money/2012/09/25/8ab15a68-019e-11e2-b260-32f4a8db9b7e_story.html

4. California was once considered a competitive state, and some analysts suspect that as its percentage of Hispanic voters increases, Texas will lose its status as a solid red state.

5. Thomas A. Flinn, "The Outline of Ohio's Politics," *Western Political Quarterly* 13 (1960): 702–721.

6. Ibid., 702.

7. John H. Fenton, *Midwest Politics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 118.

8. "Basic Information on Ohio Politics #2: The Five Ohios," Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, The University of Akron, accessed October 4, 2014, http://www.uakron.edu/bliss/research/biop-2-the-five-ohios.dot