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2014 Ohio Election: Labor Day Akron Buckeye Poll

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2014 Ohio Election:

Labor Day Akron Buckeye Poll

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Executive Summary

This report describes the state of the 2014 Ohio election on Labor Day, the traditional beginning of the general election campaign. It also documents the underlying patterns in these results and provides a baseline for change as the campaign develops. Like all survey findings, this report is a snapshot of public opinion at one point in time.

Major findings include:

- As of Labor Day 2014, the Republican statewide candidates hold statistically significant leads over their Democratic opponents among registered voters.
- In the gubernatorial race, Republican John Kasich has a double-digit lead over Democrat Ed Fitzgerald among registered voters. Republican candidates lead for all the other statewide office, but often by smaller margins.
- A key factor in the Republican advantage is name recognition: the number of undecided voters increases steadily from the best-known offices and candidates to those that are less prominent.
- These patterns are not unusual given the advantages of incumbency and a political environment that favors Republicans. However, the fundamental factors in the election reveal the potential for competitive contests by November.
- As of Labor Day, Republican Kasich has largely united his fellow partisans and potential supporters. Meanwhile, Democrat Fitzgerald has yet to do so.
- In terms of issues, registered voters give top priority to economic and other domestic issues. Kasich has the support of a plurality of voters on economic issues and a majority on domestic issues.
- In terms of candidate traits, registered voters give top priority to “honesty and integrity” and “understanding ordinary people.” Kasich has majority support among voters that stress “honesty and integrity” and Fitzgerald has a plurality among voters that give top priority to “understanding ordinary people.”

THE SURVEY

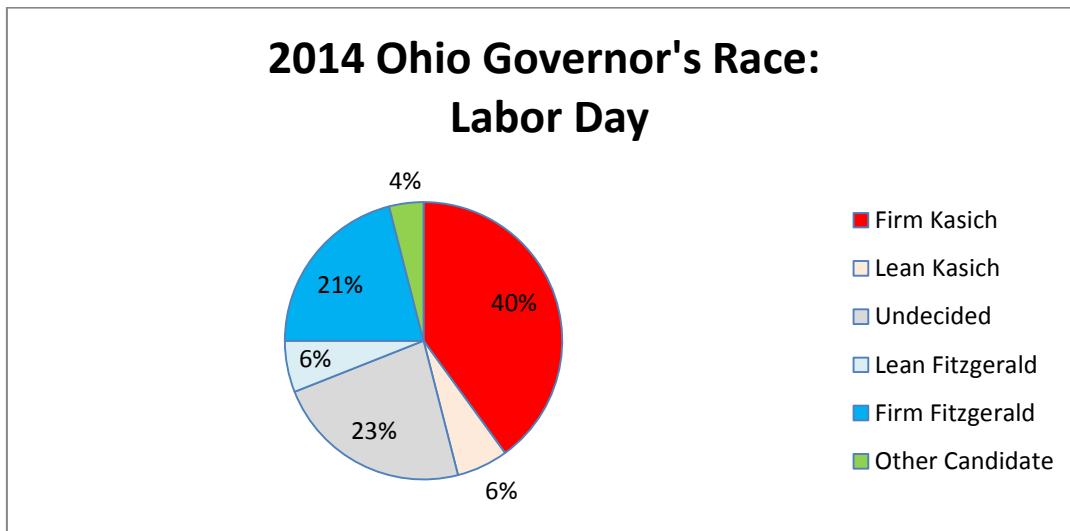
This report is based on the 2014 Akron Buckeye Poll, conducted by the Center for Marketing and Opinion Research for the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at The University of Akron in late August 2014. This survey re-interviewed 551 registered voters surveyed in April 2014 (original sample was 1,078). An additional 49 new respondents were also interviewed to obtain a representative sample

of registered voters in Ohio. The final sample size is 600, including both landline and cell phone components, with a margin of error of plus or minus four percentage points.

State of the Races: Labor Day 2014

As of Labor Day 2014, Republican candidates led in the 2014 Ohio statewide elections.

Among registered voters, Republican gubernatorial nominee John Kasich leads Democratic nominee Ed Fitzgerald 46% to 27%, with 4% for another candidate and 23% undecided (including those who lean toward both candidates). If only voters with a firm choice are included, Kasich leads by the same margin (40% to 21%). (See tables below for demography and gubernatorial candidates.)



The Republican candidates for other statewide offices are also ahead, ranging from single- to double-digit leads (all outside the four-percentage point margin of error of the survey).

Firm Choice for Statewide Offices, Labor Day

Attorney General	DeWine	Undecided/Other	Pepper	
	41	37	22	100%
Governor	Kasich		Fitzgerald	
	40	39	21	100%
Treasurer	Mandel		Pillich	
	34	41	25	100%
Secretary of State	Husted		Turner	
	30	45	25	100%
Auditor	Yost		Carney	
	26	52	22	100%

Name recognition is central to these figures: the percentage of undecided voters rises from the best known offices and officials (sitting governor, former U.S. Senator) to less prominent offices (secretary of state and auditor). Name recognition is a special challenge for the Democratic nominees, only one of whom has previously run statewide.

Although the gubernatorial race typically dominates the statewide campaigns (and thus deserves special scrutiny), the relatively high level of undecided voters suggest a capacity for down-ticket races to take on an independent character.

This Republican advantage is not unusual, given the benefits of incumbency and a political environment favorable to the GOP (namely, a mid-term election with a Democratic President). However, the fundamental factors in the election reveal the potential for competitive contests by November.

Fundamental Forces in the Election

Partisan control of state government is a fundamental factor in statewide campaigns. In spring 2014, Ohio registered voters were evenly divided on whether Republicans should stay in control of state government or Democrats should take control.*

Partisan Control of State Government and Gubernatorial Candidates

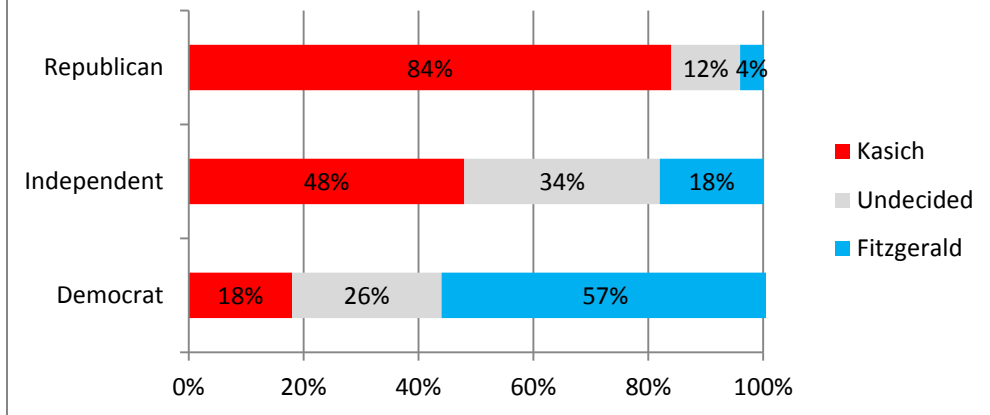
	April	<i>Labor Day</i> <i>Kasich</i>	<i>Undecided</i>	<i>Fitzgerald</i>	
Republicans stay in control of Ohio Government	50%	80	17	3	100%
Democrats take control of Ohio Government	50%	19	28	53	100%
	100%				

As of Labor Day, Republican Kasich has garnered 80% of registered voters who preferred the GOP to remain in control of state government, with 17% undecided and 3% for his opponent. In contrast, Democrat Fitzgerald has the backing of just 53% of registered voters who preferred Democratic control of state government backed him, while 28% were undecided and 19% favored Kasich.

These patterns reflect the underlying partisanship of Ohio voters. Republicans have largely united their followers and the Democrats have not. More than eight in ten self-identified Republicans support Kasich compared to less than six in ten self-identified Democrats who support Fitzgerald. Almost one-half of independents back Kasich, while about one-third support Fitzgerald.

* It is worth noting that as of Labor Day, the Republicans and Democrats were tied in the generic ballot for state legislative candidates with one-quarter of registered voters backing each party and one-half undecided. Because this question does not mention the names of particular candidates, it is a measure of underlying disposition toward the major parties.

Party and Race for Governor: Labor Day 2014



Another fundamental factor is voter perception of the Ohio economy. In spring 2014, 55% of registered Ohio voters said the economy was on the “right track” and 45% said it was on the “wrong track.” Republican Kasich has also responded effectively to these perceptions; 61% of registered voters who said the Ohio economy was on the “right track” backed Kasich. In contrast, voters who said the economy was on the “wrong track” were divided, with roughly one-third backing Democrat Fitzgerald, one-third undecided, and one-third supporting Kasich.

Perception of Ohio Economy and Gubernatorial Candidates

	April	Labor Day			
		<i>Kasich</i>	<i>Undecided</i>	<i>Fitzgerald</i>	
Ohio Economy on Right Track	55%	61	18	21	100%
Ohio Economy on Wrong Track	45%	31	35	34	100%
	100%				

Based on these fundamentals factors, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate may be able to expand voter support by twelve percentage points by more effectively exploiting the fundamentals of the election.

Issues and Candidate Traits

As of Labor Day, 46% of registered voters in Ohio said that the economy (jobs, prices) would be the most important issue in determining their vote. Domestic issues (spending, taxes) were a distant second at 19%, followed closely by social issues (same-sex marriage, abortion). Just 8% said foreign policy would be a top priority.

Issues and the Gubernatorial Race, Labor Day

		<i>Kasich</i>	<i>Undecided</i>	<i>Fitzgerald</i>	
Economic issues	46%	41	26	33	100%
Domestic issues	29%	53	25	22	100%
Social issues	17%	41	30	29	100%
Foreign policy	8%	62	22	16	100%
	100%				

Among registered voters, Republican Kasich leads in all these issue domains. A particular strength is domestic issues, where a majority of registered voters support him (53%). Kasich has the support of a plurality (41%) of voters who give priority to economic or social issues. Between one-quarter and one-third of voters in each issue area are undecided between the gubernatorial candidates. (An exception is foreign policy, the least important of the issue domains in this survey.)

At the same time, the proportion of voters that are undecided about the incumbent governor provides an opening for the Democratic challenger.

By Labor Day, 55% of Ohio registered voters said honesty and integrity would be the most important candidate trait in determining their vote. A distant second was an understanding of ordinary people (29%), with personal background (9%) and experience in public office (7%) least important.

Candidate Traits and the Gubernatorial Race: Labor Day

		<i>Kasich</i>	<i>Undecided</i>	<i>Fitzgerald</i>	
Honesty and integrity	55%	55	22	23	100%
Understanding ordinary people	29%	30	34	36	100%
Personal background	9%	55	11	34	100%
Experience in public office	7%	39	32	29	100%
	100%				

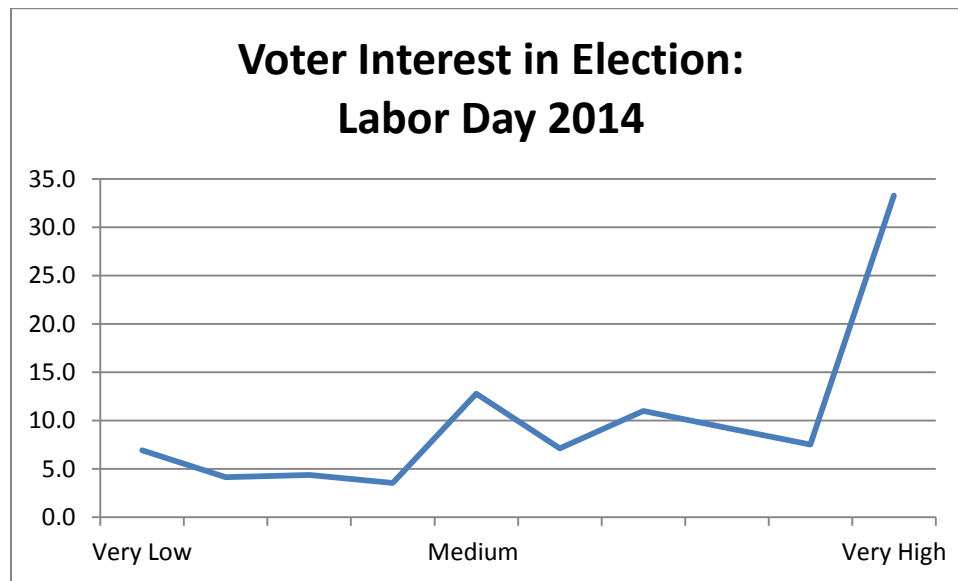
Among registered voters, Republican Kasich has majority support (55%) among those who give priority to “honesty and integrity” and personal background. Kasich also has a small lead (39% to 29%) among voters who valued experience in public office—as might be expected for an incumbent governor. However, Democratic Fitzgerald holds a small lead (36% to 30%) among voters who give priority to “understanding ordinary people.”

Taken together, these findings suggest that the Democratic gubernatorial candidate has some opportunities to increase the competitiveness of the campaign.

Estimating Voter Turnout

Ohio registered voters report relatively low interest in the 2014 election as of Labor Day. One-third of voters reported “very high” interest (a ten on a ten-point scale). One-half of registered voters reported medium to low interest in the election (scoring below 7 on the 10-point scale).

Interestingly, Kasich and Fitzgerald supporters showed about the same level of interest in the campaign (an average of 7 on the ten point scale). Undecided voters showed marked lower interest in the election (an average of 5).



Low levels of interest are common at the beginning of the fall campaign and interest is likely to increase as the campaign progresses. Interest in the campaign is a key factor in the level of voter turnout. Other factors that influence turnout include campaign advertising, voter mobilization, and the demographic characteristics of voters.

Because of the multiple factors involved in turnout, it is difficult to predict at the beginning of the general election campaign. But it is possible to assume different levels of turnout and assess the impact on the election result based on the Labor Day survey results, including interest in the election, voting intention, and report of past voting behavior. These measures were combined into a likely voter index and used to produce three estimates of voter turnout.

One estimate assumes a relatively low voter turnout, such as the 47% percent of registered voters that cast a ballot in the 2002 gubernatorial election. Based on this assumption—and all else being equal—Republican Kasich is projected to receive 64% of the vote, Democratic Fitzgerald 34%, and other candidates 4%. This result would benefit Republican candidates for lower level offices.

Estimated Gubernatorial Vote by Level of Turnout

	<i>Low Turnout</i>	<i>Medium Turnout</i>	<i>High Turnout</i>
Kasich	64	58	54
Fitzgerald	34	38	44
Other	2	4	2
	100%	100%	100%

Another estimate assumes relatively high voter turnout, such as the 53% of registered voters who cast a ballot in the 2006 general election. Based on this assumption—and all else being equal—Republican Kasich is projected to receive 54% of the vote, Democratic Fitzgerald 44%, and other candidates 2%. This result would benefit Democratic candidates for lower level offices.

Yet another estimate assumes that 50% of registered voters cast a ballot—the average of the 2002 and 2006 levels of turnout (and a bit higher than in 2010). Based on this assumption—and all else being equal—Republican Kasich is projected to receive 58% of the vote, Democratic Fitzgerald 38%, and other candidates 4%.

These estimates must be viewed with caution. However, they do suggest that high turnout would improve the Democratic gubernatorial vote by as much as ten percentage points. Extensive voter registration efforts, early voting, and strong GOTV activities are avenues for increasing turnout.

Campaign Developments

Elections results are difficult to predict with accuracy as of Labor Day. But these survey results suggest that if present conditions are maintained, the Republicans are likely to remain in control of state government.

There are three key areas where the campaign may change and thus are worth watching carefully.

First, the fundamentals of the election as well as the patterns of issues and candidate traits suggest that the Democratic gubernatorial candidate may be able to expand voter support significantly.

Second, increased interest in the election and the prospect of relatively high turnout also suggest that the Democratic gubernatorial candidate could reduce the Republican advantage substantially.

Third, down-ticket races may develop independently of the gubernatorial race, taking advantage of the large number of undecided voters.

A competitive campaign by November 2014 may require all three kinds of changes.

Demographic Crosstabs in Ohio Gubernatorial Race

	ALL	<i>Kasich</i>	<i>Undecided</i>	<i>Fitzgerald</i>	
GENDER					
Male	52%	50	27	23	100%
Female	48%	44	27	29	100%
	100%				
RACE					
White	81%	52	25	23	100%
Non-white	19%	23	36	41	100%
	100%				
REGION					
Southwest	23%	51	27	22	100%
Southeast	11%	45	34	21	100%
Central	20%	53	22	25	100%
Northwest	11%	41	31	28	100%
Northeast	35%	44	26	30	100%
	100%				
AGE					
65 and over	20%	60	22	18	100%
45-64	40%	50	23	27	100%
25-44	29%	38	33	29	100%
18-24	11%	34	35	31	100%
	100%				
WORSHIP ATTENDANCE					
More than once a week	13%	58	22	20	100%
Once a week	28%	53	25	22	100%
Once or twice a month	16%	48	26	26	100%
A few times a year	18%	45	32	23	100%
Seldom	14%	40	25	35	100%
Never	11%	27	33	40	100%
	100%				

INCOME

Over \$75,000	34%	62	15	23	100%
\$49-75,000	23%	44	26	30	100%
\$25-48,999	25%	43	29	28	100%
Under \$25,000	18%	34	39	27	100%

100%

LABOR UNION MEMBER

Yes	9%	36	23	41	100%
No	91%	47	28	25	100%

100%

TEA PARTY MEMBER

Yes	8%	73	23	4	100%
No	92%	44	28	28	100%

100%