

FORUM

EDITORIAL BOARD ROUNDTABLE

Voters deserve to hear what gubernatorial candidates will 'do'

The primary votes weren't even all counted two weeks ago when gubernatorial nominees Republican Vivek Ramaswamy and Democrat Amy Acton went into attack mode.

Ramaswamy labeled Acton as "the first socialist governor," and accused her of "utter laziness and abandonment of responsibility" during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

A few blocks away, as cleveland.com's Jeremy Pelzer reported, Acton was filling "her election-night speech with already familiar attack lines," calling Ramaswamy "an 'out-of-touch' billionaire who's 'out for himself'" and blasting a 2023 speech when he declined to call Ohio "the best state."

Really? Is this what Ohioans expect or want to hear from the two leading candidates to succeed Gov. Mike DeWine at the helm of Ohio? Is mudslinging the best they can do?

Why not talk about how they'd handle controversies already roiling Ohio communities — from bright-red rural counties to the state's largely Democratic urban centers — concerning data centers, property taxes, school funding, a skewed tax burden and regulatory fairness and reform? Since neither has held elective office before, forthright debate on the issues is even more important.

So what does our Editorial Board Roundtable see as ways the major gubernatorial candidates can up the level of this campaign? What issues should they be talking about?

Leila Atassi, manager public interest and advocacy:

The next governor will inherit a state struggling with population stagnation, brain drain, an aging infrastructure network and distrust in public institutions. What's their plan to keep young people here? To prepare workers for an AI economy? To restore faith that government can function competently? Fine. He's a carpetbagger. She quit during a crisis. Ohio voters already know the rough outlines of both candidates' vulnerabilities. Let's move on.

Ted Diadiun, columnist:

After watching Ramaswamy's immature, squirm-inducing performance during the 2024 Republican presidential primary debates, his approach doesn't surprise me. But I am surprised, and disappointed, with Acton. What was compelling in her earnest and compassionate approach during the daily pandemic updates with Gov. Mike DeWine was her humanity and intelligence. She's getting terrible advice from someone. Be the adult in the room, Amy, and leave the schoolyard taunts to Vivek.

Thomas Suddes, editorial writer:

Voters often claim, and bystanders typically assume, that voters are significantly more interested in "issues"

than in personal attacks and political mud. Experience suggests that's a grossly optimistic perspective on human nature. If personal attacks didn't work, at least to some degree, campaign managers wouldn't deploy them, such as notorious Democratic suggestions that 1964 Republican nominee Barry Goldwater was mentally unfit to have authority over nuclear weapons — a brazen smear.

Eric Foster, columnist: I would like to hear a comprehensive vision for Ohio's future. Long-term models predict a significant population decline, with rural Ohio being hardest hit. The population is aging. Fertility rates are low. What about Ohio's youth? Student scores are declining. Too many migrate elsewhere when able. What is Ohio uniquely great at or positioned for? How can it leverage those things for broad prosperity?

Lisa Garvin, editorial board member:

The problem with negative campaigns by two political newcomers is that we don't know what they stand for except trashing each other. By not detailing exactly how they will address pressing issues like rising energy costs, data center proliferation and public education funding, both Acton and Ramaswamy are ignoring the anger among Ohio voters who want real answers, not mudslinging. Climb out of the gutter and stick to the facts.

Victor Ruiz, editorial board member:

Models of good behavior start at the top. Unfortunately, our country's highest officeholder is the greatest mudslinger of all time. I am not going to be naïve and demand that these two act differently in this political climate. To be honest, my top priority is to move Ohio, and this country, out of the depths of MAGA world.

Mary Cay Doherty, editorial board member:

The campaign will unfold predictably as candidates vacillate between elucidating their platforms and sniping at each other. Acton will likely leverage traditional media, expecting favorable coverage. Ramaswamy will just as likely take his platform directly to the people, expecting traditional media to align with Acton. Ohioans' party leanings and affiliations may play an outsized role in their decisions, since we cannot know specifically how either will govern.

Elizabeth Sullivan, opinion director:

Yes, many voters will remember the salacious attack ads and grainy, unflattering photos over candidates' carefully worded position papers. That doesn't mean going negative is good. It cheapens the candidates who fall back on it and ultimately adds to voter disaffection.

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COMMENTARY FROM THE COMMUNITY

Artificial intelligence's risk to political dialogue and elections

Richard M. Perloff and Anup Kumar

Hundreds of posts, purporting to be from middle-aged men, people of color and attractive young women, cascaded across social media, all conveying the same message: "the left say Republicans aren't united. That's funny because I bet I can get a Trump supporter from every state to comment," followed by a heart and American flag emoji.

It looks pretty impressive until, as reported by the New York Times, one learns these were all phony AI-generated pro-Donald Trump avatars of unknown provenance, generated by hired consultants, foreign influencers, or someone else.

As Generative AI diffuses across society's landscape, concerns about AI falsehoods are mounting, and as scholars of political communication, we are increasingly worried that AI will be widely hijacked by unscrupulous political actors. Some of the possibilities are dire, as an insightful January article in the Journal of Democracy points out.

Generative AI can fabricate waves of manufactured online testimonials and videos, creating the illusion of an online grass roots movement. This can move public opinion by creating the appearance of widespread support that could lead others to want to join a winning cause. Indeed, AI bots supercharged with Agentic AI capabilities can crawl and lurk on the web to develop persuasive malicious content and falsehoods to distort and undermine discourse on public opinion in online forums.

Agentic AI can intervene in public discussions by closely following human patterns of communication that mimic the voice and style of journalists and experts, in ways that make it nearly impossible to differentiate truth from falsehood in news.

We're seeing the dissolution of trust in media, already at a low ebb, with AI-generated falsehoods fabricating facts, like an Elon Musk-promoted claim on X that the COVID-19 vaccine killed tens of thousands of people in Germany that was viewed some 60 million times.

On a more micro level, AI allows unscrupulous outfits to create personalized per-

suasive narratives idiosyncratically geared to particular users — a liberal urban dweller, a rural conservative, a Latino independent. But the drawback of these uber-personalized messages is that they transform political communication from a common public conversation in which all can partake to a series of silos in which people engage privately with political persuaders, undermining the "demos" in democracy.

AI-generated ads present another set of problems. Here in Ohio, we've seen the ad developed by a pro-Republican political action committee that used AI to impersonate Sherrod Brown. To be sure, political ads have long trifled with truth. But when commercial speech moves into an area of outright falsehoods, it becomes impossible for voters to know what is true. This undermines trust in democracy, while the cynicism it produces among voters impedes candidates' ability to deploy persuasion to make their case for election.

Reforms are urgently needed. Given the increasing abilities of AI to exploit vulnerabilities in information systems, such as voter databases, in ways that scare even its proponents, time is of the essence. The Federal Trade Commission, which regulates ads, should require that AI-generated ads contain a machine-readable label that says the content was synthetically generated. Ohio should also join 47 other states in regulating deepfakes.

Democratic societies must find ways to balance AI's potential to synthesize vast amounts of information efficiently with the many ways it can undermine democratic decision-making. This will require dialogue among civic groups, technology experts, and political parties, not easy tasks to manage given the polarized nature of American politics.

Democracy's future depends on our ability to use AI to our benefit, not for it to benefit its most unscrupulous human agents by its capability to use us.

Perloff is a distinguished professor of communication and political science, and Kumar is a professor of communication at Cleveland State University.

COMMENTARY FROM THE COMMUNITY

The mental health of children and teens ... time to close the gap

Marissa Kiefer

Mental and behavioral health problems are surprisingly common in kids and teens. Research suggests one in five U.S. youths aged 3-17 has a mental, emotional or behavioral health condition. As the mental health needs of children and teens have risen sharply, health care systems have struggled to respond at the scale and speed required. Ongoing provider shortages and gaps in capacity have left too many young patients facing barriers to timely, appropriate care.

A 2025 analysis here in Ohio found that 75 of 88 counties had shortages of mental health providers for kids and teens. A 2026 study in JAMA Pediatrics found that nearly one-quarter of children who need mental health treatment are not receiving it. Some experts put this number as high as 50%.

This is an all-hands-on-deck moment. At UH's Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital, we have been working on this weighty problem for several years:

Reimagining access: Since 2017, our young

patients have received mental health care from behavioral health collaborators to ease child psychiatry shortages. This mental health professional manages care typically for three to six months, while checking in regularly for supervision from a child psychiatrist, and staying connected with the pediatrician.

Providing quicker follow-up after an emergency room visit: Working with other children's hospitals, we've worked to ensure that once a child is safely discharged from the emergency room for a mental health concern, they have a follow-up appointment within seven days. The "secret sauce" that makes this work is an Emergency Department (ED)-based care coordinator, who helps with scheduling a follow-up appointment upon discharge, whether within our system or with community partners.

Leveraging teamwork: A UH Rainbow team focuses on ED access, outpatient-care access, safe discharge from the ED and suicide screening. The latest numbers from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention put suicide as the second-leading

cause of death for people ages 10 to 24. We've built depression and suicide screening into our electronic medical record and are training providers to use it. All our pediatric primary care clinics across Northeast Ohio are now equipped with the iPads necessary to accomplish this, and participation rates have soared to almost 90%. The team also launched a program to distribute "lock boxes" to store dangerous medications or weapons, as well as home safety tips for parents.

Enlisting natural allies: UH Rainbow child psychiatrist Dr. Molly McVoy, M.D., has designed evidence-based workshops to help teachers better identify behavioral health issues in students and support them within the classroom. She points out that nearly every mental health disorder presents as trouble at school. She's leading workshops in five Ohio school districts where they're covering anxiety, talking to parents, technology, who's at risk, and youth communication challenges.

Expanding hospital capacity: Young patients who need hospital support have

options at UH Rainbow, including intensive outpatient care. This program also offers support for young patients with a dual diagnosis of a mental health problem and substance abuse disorder. Some patients also require full-time hospitalization — we're expanding and renovating that unit to better serve our patients.

Mental and behavioral health challenges among young people are not rare — they're part of life for many families. And they've also strained our health systems. But there is hope. At UH Rainbow Babies & Children's, we're dedicated to trying new approaches — connecting patients more quickly after an ED visit, equipping teachers to spot warning signs, expanding access through care coordinators and team-based solutions. Together, our hope is to strengthen support, improve access and help young people thrive.

Kiefer, who holds a master's degree in Health Services Administration, is president of UH Rainbow Babies & Children's and UH MacDonald Women's hospitals.

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