

Less divisive, more inclusive leadership sorely needed by Cuyahoga Dems

U.S. Rep. Shontel Brown's troubling decision to stay on as Cuyahoga County Democratic Party chair as she ran in a special primary election for Congress last year, and as she defended her congressional seat this year, has created wide rifts in the local party. Those rifts, in turn, have impacted the ability of the county that's home to Ohio's largest Democratic population to turn those voters out for statewide and congressional elections — where Cuyahoga can make the difference — as well as to recruit solid candidates for office and to raise money.

“During Brown's run for Congress, the party suffered to a degree,” cleveland.com's chief politics writer, Seth A. Richardson, recently reported. “Fundraising fell over comparable years, even with the high-profile congressional race and the first open mayoral race in more than two decades.”

Brown's tenure has also been marked by growing rancor within the Democratic ranks and accusations from some of a lack of transparency and an overly narrow, noninclusive leadership style in doling out party funds, favors and endorsements.

Brown has said she'll move on after this election. That's finally opening an opportunity for Cuyahoga County Democrats to heal their intramural wounds, create a more inclusive party structure, focus more resources on turnout and elections infrastructure and create a more transparent, evenhanded approach to recruitment, party support and endorsements.

Four, maybe five candidates have taken up the challenge, Richardson reports:

Term-limited State Rep. Kent Smith of Euclid, who is running for state senate this year.

Former Shaker Heights Council member Rob Zimmerman, a lawyer specializing in government relations law, who stepped down from Shaker council last year after 16 years.

Andy Mizesak, a former Bedford school board member who is the Bedford Democratic Party leader.

David Brock, an education and outreach coordinator for a nonprofit housing group who has run unsuccessfully for Cleveland City Council.

State Rep. Juanita Brent of Cleveland, who is running for reelection to the Ohio House this year. Brent “has floated her name as well” for the county chair’s job, Richardson reports, “though multiple Democrats were not sure if she was running.”

In general, our editorial board stays out of intraparty feuds even though we’d prefer that both parties be less divisive, more open and focused on quality candidates, especially for the judiciary. State and local politics are healthier and more representative when both parties are more inclusive, transparent and functional.

But the damage done to Cuyahoga County’s Democrats during Brown’s tenure is obvious. It goes beyond fundraising, with sinking turnout threatening the ability of the county’s voters to have their voices count in critical statewide votes. And the more divisive internal party politics are, the more divisive overall politics can be — a toxic recipe that can impede progress for all.

During her primary endorsement interview with the editorial board of The Plain Dealer and cleveland.com this year, Brown bragged of her get-out-the-vote efforts. But in the May 3 primary, turnout in heavily Democratic Cuyahoga County sank to a pathetic 18.49% in preliminary results, well below the 20.64% statewide turnout. The turnout everywhere will likely increase in final results after all valid provisional and absentee ballots are counted, but the underperformance of the state’s most important Democratic county takes on even greater significance given Ohio’s deeply partisan standoff over redistricting and the high-stakes statewide contests on the Nov. 8 ballot, including for governor and Ohio Supreme Court chief justice.

So what relevant lessons do we draw? The next Cuyahoga County Democratic Party chair needs to be a uniter, a reformer and activist who can focus — not on their own political careers, but on improving local Democrats’ infrastructure to educate and turn out voters, on countering apathy and division with a more inclusive structure and on making party leadership job one.

Among the leading contenders, one candidate stands out given these priorities — Rob Zimmerman. An experienced and steady hand in local politics who appears to have no ambitions for higher office himself, Zimmerman’s only criticism from others appears to be that he gave \$100 to Josh Mandel when Mandel was a nonpartisan (and nontoxic) member of Lyndhurst City Council, and a family friend.

It’s up to county Democrats, of course, to make the final call. But in making their decision, we urge serious consideration be given to the rebuilding ahead — and the need for steady, capable and on-the-spot leadership to get it done.