

Republicans have owned Ohio. Could Dr. Amy Acton be the Democrat to stop their streak?

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COLUMBUS, Ohio—Dr. Amy Acton's [announcement last Tuesday that she's running for Ohio governor in 2026](#) generated lots of media attention, as well as cheers from Ohio Democrats who think she can end their party's years-long losing streak.

But how exactly does Acton, who rose to prominence as the state's health director early in the COVID-19 crisis, and her supporters plan to actually win in Ohio, where Republicans have dominated for more than a decade?

The 2026 general election is still nearly 21 months away, and Acton is the first major candidate from either party to publicly launch a campaign for governor. It remains to be seen which other Democrats – and Republicans – enter the race.

But [cleveland.com/The Plain Dealer](#) talked to Acton's supporters, detractors, and outside political experts about what Acton's path to victory might be, and why that may or may not come to pass.

Acton's campaign declined to give specifics about their campaign's strategy. But in a statement, Acton said she's "a doctor and problem solver, not a politician.

"I know the answer to moving Ohio forward is continuing the conversation I have had with Ohioans over the last few years about the challenges they face and their ideas to give us all a little breathing room," she said. "I'm running for governor because I refuse to look away from Ohioans who are struggling. I look forward to bringing Ohioans to the table to give power back to the people instead of politicians."

Here are some of the arguments political watchers gave for Acton's ability to break the Democrats' losing streak -- and the counterpoints about why she won't.

Argument #1: Enthusiasm for Acton will help her on the campaign trail

Acton became a household name during the initial months of the coronavirus pandemic, when she appeared with Gov. Mike DeWine during daily televised briefings. Acton won over many Ohioans by combining a calm and soothing demeanor with a passionate plea for Ohioans to take precautions like wearing masks and staying at home, leading some to make [bubbleheads](#) and [cartoons](#) featuring her.

Nearly five years later, that goodwill has endured among many Ohioans, said Cindy Demsey, chair of the Cuyahoga Democratic Women's Caucus.

"After her announcement, there's been a lot of enthusiasm and really positive response to her stepping into the race," Demsey said, particularly among women excited about the prospect of Acton becoming the first woman elected Ohio governor.

David Pepper, a former Ohio Democratic Party chair and a prominent backer of Acton's campaign, said he's seen many Ohioans approach Acton with a hug and a personal story. He compared her ability to evoke such personal responses from people to John Glenn, the late astronaut and longtime U.S. senator from Ohio.

Acton's proven ability to inspire and emotionally connect with people around Ohio opens up the potential for her to become a more successful candidate than past, unsuccessful Democratic candidates, her backers say.

Not only does it create a core group of voters and campaign contributors, but Pepper said he anticipates that Acton grassroots organizations will pop up around the state, similar to how Democrat Dick Celeste was able to win two terms as governor in the 1980s.

Celeste himself, in an interview, agreed that Acton has an opportunity to create such a network, but that it's now up to her and her campaign to do what's needed to convert her popularity into a tangible political operation.

"The big danger for Amy Acton will be if she decides to hire traditional political consultants and run a 'traditional' campaign," Celeste said. "I think the challenge for her will be to understand that she has an opportunity to build a statewide volunteer effort that is the sort that changes the way people engage at election time."

In addition, Celeste said, while Acton's work during the COVID crisis helped create this base of support, she now has to reestablish herself to voters as the same authentic, inspirational leader on issues voters care about now – from the cost of food to health-care access.

"Can she articulate that in the same authentic way?" he asked.

Rebuttal #1: Some Ohioans harbor lingering resentment of Acton

Acton, along with DeWine, was the face of the state's coronavirus policies during the initial months of the pandemic, including orders to close businesses, require Ohioans to stay at home, and mandate use of face masks in indoor public places.

As conservative anger over those policies mounted, Acton was often singled out for criticism, and [protesters repeatedly picketed outside her home](#). Just as Acton's supporters haven't forgotten their feelings about her from the COVID crisis, nor have her critics.

At a time when any Democratic statewide candidate needs a significant number of Republicans and independents in order to overcome the GOP's daunting voter advantage, critics say, this enduring resentment will doom Acton's campaign.

"Amy Acton is Beto O'Rourke in a skirt," wrote Scott Pullins, a GOP operative and attorney [on X](#), referring to the well-known but unsuccessful Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate and governor in Texas. "She will raise tons of money and lose soundly to any Republican."

Ryan Stubenrauch, a Republican political consultant who previously worked on a number of DeWine's campaigns, said he "get(s) the allure of Amy Acton" among Democrats. But he called it a "pipe dream" to think that Acton's time as state health director has made her popular enough six years later to get a presidential election-sized vote total in a Republican-dominated state.

"Not a lot of other people either remember her that fondly or have deeply ingrained memories of (the COVID crisis)," Stubenrauch said. Plus, he said, "She's not that exciting. I don't know if LeBron James ran as the Democrat, maybe we could get a turnout for Democrats that would have somewhat approached president."

As for the hope that Acton's supporters will lead to a grassroots campaign network, Jerry Austin, who managed Celeste's two successful campaigns for governor in 1982 and 1986, said it was "fallacious" to compare Acton's situation with Celeste's.

Austin said that's because Celeste had set up statewide campaigns for years prior – first for lieutenant governor in 1974, then an unsuccessful run for governor in 1978. Acton, by comparison, has never run for elected office until now.

"Can she put together an organization next year and a half? Perhaps," Austin said "Dick (Celeste) was a state (representative) for two terms (and) lieutenant governor

before he ran for governor, and Amy has not been elected to anything. Does that mean anything anymore? I don't know."

Argument #2: Acton can succeed where other Democrats have failed

The traditional plan for Ohio Democratic candidates is to win landslides in major urban areas like Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati, hang tough in suburban areas, and limit Republicans' victory margins in rural parts of the state.

Pepper said he thinks Acton can succeed at that plan where others have failed.

Pepper pointed to the 2018 gubernatorial race – which, like 2026, is shaping up to be a midterm election with Donald Trump in the White House -- when Democratic nominee Richard Cordray lost to DeWine by less than 4 percentage points.

Pepper said that Cordray would have won if he did as well in suburban areas as Hillary Clinton did in the 2016 presidential election. Acton, Pepper said, has the ability to do that in 2026.

"Amy has an opportunity to build on that – to do better than Hillary ever did in those suburbs," Pepper said. "And if you project onto that what we saw in '18, that's a winning race right there."

As for rural Ohio -- where Republicans have maintained or even improved on their already significant electoral wins in recent years, despite Democrats' repeated pledges to reverse that trend – Acton and other Democrats need to get back to brass tacks and talk to voters there about specific things that state government can (and should) do for them, said Tom Sutton, a longtime political scientist and acting president of Baldwin Wallace University in Berea.

"If you're talking to farmers, and they're talking about the huge increases in the prices of fertilizer and other elements that are part of the farming process, are there things the state could do to lower help lower those prices?" Sutton said.

It's a level of detail and technical expertise that most statewide candidates don't get into, Sutton said.

"But I really think in Ohio, if you're a Democrat running, you've got to show that you understand -- not rhetorically, but in real terms -- what it takes, what is needed by different constituencies that a state can deliver," he said.

When The Plain Dealer/cleveland.com [asked Acton last week](#) what issues she intends to focus on in her campaign, she mentioned the need to address the rising cost of groceries, childcare, healthcare, and housing, though she didn't mention any specific proposals to address those problems.

Rebuttal #2: The traditional plan is outdated

The idea that Democratic candidates will win if they to run up the score in major cities, survive in the suburbs and limit GOP landslides in rural areas no longer reflects Ohio's current political reality, Sutton said.

While cities like Columbus and (to a lesser extent) Cincinnati are growing in population, Sutton noted, Cleveland and many other major cities in Ohio have been either losing people or [are seeing their populations flatten](#). That not only means there are fewer voters to back a Democratic campaign, Sutton said, but that the voters in those areas are, as a trend, getting older and whiter.

Meanwhile, once reliably Democratic strongholds in Youngstown and Southeastern Ohio are quickly and dramatically shifting toward Republicans, putting the 2026 Democratic gubernatorial nominee in an even deeper hole to start.

And for all the talk of Acton's potential to become a transformational candidate, right now she's just a first-time political candidate who's not independently wealthy and who just about everyone associates with a period of national crisis that few (regardless of politics) remember with fondness.

"I do not see an inexperienced, unknown, not self-funded candidate winning a race for governor," Stubenrauch said.

Stubenrauch said Acton is a "great candidate for governor in 2006," referring to the last year when a Democrat (Ted Strickland) won the governor's office.

"Well, we ain't living in 2006 Ohio anymore," he said. "Those demographics and political winds have changed in a way that are never going back."