

# Ohio Rep. Fred Strahorn

During long tenure in the legislature, Ohio native has gone from behind-the-scenes staff person to leader of the House Democrats

by Laura Tomaka (ltomaka@csg.org)

Six years ago, after nearly a decade of service in the Ohio General Assembly, Fred Strahorn got swept away from office in the Republican “wave election” of 2010.

But it didn’t take long for him to resurface, this time with a newfound appreciation for the job of legislator and a commitment to making his third go-around in the legislature even better than the first two.

“It’s always a bit of a gut check to lose an election; it was soul-searching for me,” Strahorn recalls of that unsuccessful 2010 race for a state Senate seat (he had been appointed to the position a year earlier).

“I made the decision that I do really want to be here and that I love what I do. So when I came back, I tried out a different attitude. I was more focused on paying attention to time and making the most out of the time I have in the legislature.”

And soon after returning to the legislature, this time as a member of the Ohio House, his Democratic colleagues chose him to be their top caucus leader, a position he continues to hold today.

It has been a long, and surprising, run for a man who in college “didn’t care for politics at all” and, even once he did, initially took on behind-the-scenes roles.

For Strahorn, the path to the Ohio Statehouse began by “tagging along” with his brother, a volunteer for then-U.S. Rep. Tony Hall. Along the way, Strahorn met his future mentor and boss, Tom Roberts, and began to discover that he did care about politics.

But that didn’t necessarily mean being a legislator himself. Strahorn instead volunteered, advised and worked for candidates and elected officials. He served for years as a staff person to Roberts, who at the time was a state legislator.

When approached to run for office and replace the term-limited Roberts, Strahorn was hesitant. The reason: his discomfort with speaking in public.

“I was at a crossroads,” he recalls. “I needed to move up or move on. I realized that I had fallen in love with the institution, and I didn’t want to leave. So I decided to work through my public-speaking issues.”

Strahorn’s legislative tenure dates back to 2000, and he has never served in a majority caucus. Still, he can point to important policy victories — his role in creating a DNA registry for felons, for example, and helping remove the term “retardation” in statutory language for people with developmental disabilities.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Strahorn reflected on his legislative career and role as House minority leader.

**Q: How do you think your experience as a legislative staff person has impacted your work as a legislator?**

**A:** I got to learn at a slower pace and be comfortable with it by the time I even ran for office. I knew where things were and how to get stuff done. I also came in at a time when there were still some older legislators around — years of service, not age.

## Bio-sketch of Rep. Fred Strahorn

- ✓ elected House minority leader in 2014
- ✓ member of Ohio House from 2001-2008; state Senate from 2009-2010; and state House since 2013
- ✓ former senior political adviser for Ohio Democratic Party
- ✓ previously served as vice president of government affairs for the Ohio United Way, in addition to managing residential properties and selling real estate
- ✓ lives in Dayton



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... I had the benefit of watching some really good legislators who were here for the right reasons and who focused on policy and knew how to work with people of both parties.

**Q: What do you enjoy most about the legislative work and process?**

**A:** The thing that attracts me to it most is the potential to do good things for people. If we do our jobs well, it has a tremendous ability to positively impact a person’s life, or to prevent the bad stuff from impacting a person negatively.

**Q: How would you describe your legislative leadership role and style?**

**A:** I want to be part of a team, and I don’t know that I would have agreed to do it any other way. I really do want other people’s input, and I don’t want it to feel stifling in any way. We’ve tried to approach this from a group perspective. The role of leadership is to provide for the success of our members and candidates. It’s our function and mission: How do we advance the caucus so that it can do better work for the public? It’s a means to an end, and the end is better policy.

**Q: You are leading the smallest House Democratic caucus in more than 50 years — only 34 of the 99 members of the Ohio House are Democrats. What words of advice or perspective do you try to give to your fellow caucus members?**

**A:** I tell my caucus to not view [members of the other caucus] as evil people. They are not the “enemy.” They are fellow citizens who have a different ideology or perspective, but many times want the same goal that we are pursuing. We should figure out ways to sit down and work with them and figure out the right path to compromise. Because at the end of this, it’s not about who’s in charge or what we get. It’s about whether we are doing better things for the general public or not.

**Q: You talk a lot about your fondness for the legislative institution. Can you comment on your personal philosophy that drives the way you legislate, and what you’d like your legacy to be?**

**A:** I am really big on that philosophy of systems design and paying attention to what we are doing to systems and our funding of it. Whatever [the policy] is, we need to design a system that will actually get us the outcome we said we wanted. After I’m gone from here for 15 years, is that policy still working its magic and creating opportunities for people in our state?

I’ve also tried to take a stance that you need to understand the history of the institution and the rules. The rules, which were here way long before I was, are here for a reason. They are designed to drive civility if you adhere to them. I like that about the institution.

**Q: How do you think term limits has impacted the Ohio legislature?**

**A:** I was part of the first term-limit class, so my trend line is pretty broad. It does make it more difficult in certain respects. Things have changed culturally, in terms of how legislators operate and conduct themselves. But also there is the basic, core understanding of the institution and the policy — why things were the way they were before or what are we changing or what are we messing up.

A prime example is that 30 years ago, we didn’t make education a political football. We let experts in education design how the system should operate. Now we are changing the environment every two to three years in which educators and principals and school boards are expected to operate. I have no idea how anybody can do it under those circumstances. That’s just an example.

Generally, my concern is that we lose our frame of reference and a context for the things we are responsible for doing around here. And we lose really good people who would like to do this job for longer but can’t because of term limits. ★