



Inside

Analysis: Bibb and Griffin clash shapes Power Struggle at City Hall

This analysis examines key public disagreements between Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb and City Council President Blaine Griffin.

Page 5



CLEVELAND OBSERVER

Since 2018

“Engage... Educate... Empower.”

Vol. 7, Issue 3, March 2026

WWW.CLEOBSERVER.COM

Job data shows uneven recovery in Cleveland



By Ray'Chel Wilson

Cleveland's unemployment rate stood at 5.2% in July 2025, the highest among the nation's 56 largest metropolitan areas when measured by the rate increase over the previous year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics BLS. But employment numbers alone don't tell the full story of economic security for Cleveland workers.

The Cleveland metro area saw the steepest unemployment rate increase—0.8 percentage points between July 2024 and July 2025—among the nation's 56 largest metropolitan areas, according to the BLS August metropolitan area employment report. The national unemployment rate stood at 4.1% in July 2025, according to the same BLS report.

Why it matters for Cleveland

Cleveland's rising unemployment rate comes as workers nationwide increasingly rely on multiple part-time jobs and gig work rather than stable, full-time employment. The shift affects everything from household budgets to retirement savings, with implications for Cleveland's



Credit Wallet Hub

economic recovery and cost-of-living pressures facing residents.

As Cleveland saw the steepest increase in unemployment among the nation's largest metros, the nature of work itself is changing, with more residents working multiple jobs, taking gig work, or leaving the workforce entirely rather than finding stable employment.

National labor data adds context

The national unemployment rate edged down to 4.4% in December, while the labor force declined by 46,000 people, according to the BLS's February Employment Situation Summary. The labor force participation rate declined to 62.4% in December

2025, according to BLS data, with federal charts showing lower participation among several demographic groups.

The broader U-6 unemployment rate (which tracks the unemployed plus people working part-time because they can't find full-time work) stood at 8.4% in December, more than 2 percentage points above pre-pandemic levels, according to BLS data.

Multiple jobs become the new normal

Multiple job holders accounted for 5.5% of employed workers in December 2025, according to the BLS from the Current Population Survey. The

rate represents the highest sustained level since 2009, as workers increasingly patch together income from several sources rather than relying on a single full-time position.

More than 70 million Americans now work in the gig economy, freelance or short-term contract jobs, representing 36% of the U.S. workforce, as traditional full-time employment becomes less dominant, and workers turn to platforms like Uber, DoorDash and Upwork to supplement income, according to Goldman Sachs Research.

One in four workers engaged in some form of gig work in 2025, from driving for Uber to freelancing online, as traditional employment becomes less stable, according to the ADP Research Institute.

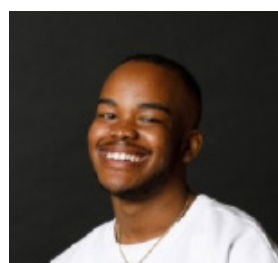
The BLS tracks workers who hold more than one job simultaneously, whether working multiple part-time positions or combining full-time and part-time work. The sustained elevation of this rate signals a shift in employment patterns, with more Americans unable to meet their financial needs through a single job.

National wages lag behind rising costs

Nominal wages (the dollar amount before adjusting

Continue on page 4

Cleveland arts expand online, access varies



By Konner Hines

Cleveland's cultural scene, from world-class orchestras to contemporary art museums, has increasingly turned to digital platforms to expand access and connect with broader audiences.

These virtual offerings have opened new doors for arts engagement, but questions remain about who truly benefits and who is left behind in a city where technology access and paywalls can create barriers.

Across museums and performance venues, digital engagement has become an essential part of arts programming. For many institutions, it is not simply an optional add-on but a strategic extension of their mission to reach audiences far beyond local visitors. Digital platforms offer

audiences opportunities to stream concerts, explore collections online, join virtual exhibits, and engage with local artists, often at no cost or with minimal barriers.

Streaming and digital concerts: Cleveland Orchestra's reach

The Cleveland Orchestra, one of the city's most prestigious cultural institutions, has embraced livestreaming and on-demand platforms as a major part of its audience engagement strategy.

Through Adella, its dedicated digital streaming service, the orchestra offers users free access to educational videos, selected recordings, and behind-the-scenes content, while premium subscriptions unlock exclusive livestreams, digital concerts, and deeper musical features.

In addition, the orchestra hosts livestreams of performances on platforms like Medici.tv, ensuring concerts from the Severance Music Center are accessible via the internet on a global scale.

Other digital initiatives



Cleveland's Museum of Contemporary Art (moCa) Credit: UniversityCircle.org

include partnerships, such as “Lunchtime with The Cleveland Orchestra” on local public media, that present orchestral recordings and commentary to listeners online and via radio, cementing the role of digital media in maintaining community connection during and after pandemic-era closures.

These offerings not only expand the orchestra's reach geographically, but they also allow audiences who may lack

the means or mobility to attend in person to experience world-class music. However, some premium content still sits behind subscription models, raising questions about equity in access for all Clevelanders.

Independent artists and online platforms

Beyond institutional offerings, Cleveland's independent

Continue on page 4

Urban Agenda shows unity; execution debated



By Ron Calhoun

Greater Cleveland Partnership's launch of the Urban Agenda marks one of the broadest alignments of Cleveland-area institutions around economic mobility in recent years. It also reflects a growing willingness among civic leaders to name racial income and wealth disparities directly rather than framing poverty solely as a general economic issue.

The Urban Agenda Memorandum of Understanding, led by PolicyBridge, has a shared commitment to focus on three key outcomes:

- Raise Black and Hispanic/Latino median incomes
- Increase Black and Hispanic/Latino homeownership
- Close the racial wealth gap.

"The Agreement is an economic imperative and regional



SCAN TO LISTEN

Federal Reserve Bank of New York. "But without clear policy levers, funding streams and accountability, these initiatives often struggle to move from alignment to impact."

Erickson's research and leadership on cross-sector collaboration and community strategies are documented through his publications and role at the New York Federal Reserve.

"Coordination is not the same as redistribution," said Dr. Andre Perry, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who studies racial wealth gaps. Perry's book "Black Power Scorecard" examines the racial gap in economic power and offers approaches to closing it, emphasizing investment in assets like homeownership and business ownership as part of structural solutions.

"If the underlying systems that determine wages, housing access and asset ownership don't change, disparities tend to persist even when institutions are well aligned," said Perry.

A familiar approach in Cleveland

The Urban Agenda follows a pattern seen in several

disparities.

Large-scale planning and infrastructure initiatives, such as the Opportunity Corridor, similarly involved extensive stakeholder engagement. Surrounding neighborhoods and existing residents saw only indirect benefits, particularly in terms of income growth and wealth building.

Urban Agenda approach

Organizers of the Urban Agenda say the initiative differs from past efforts because it includes public tracking of outcomes, a designated backbone organization, and sustained engagement across sectors.

Transparency alone, however, does not guarantee results, said Margy Waller, a public policy consultant and former advisor on federal anti-poverty initiatives.

"Dashboards can be powerful if they are tied to consequences," Waller said. "The question is whether poor results will lead to course corrections, policy changes or new investments, or whether the data simply documents disparities everyone already knows exist."



Greater Cleveland Partnership includes, Blaine Griffin City Council President, Stephanie Howse-Jones Councilwoman Ward 7, Lillian Kuri CEO, Cleveland Foundation, Tony Richardson CEO, Gund Foundation, Baiju Shah CEO, Greater Cleveland Partnership, Sharon Sobol Jordan CEO, United Way of Greater Cleveland, Michael Baston President, Cuyahoga Community College, Tania Menesse CEO, Cleveland Neighborhood Progress, Chris Ronayne Cuyahoga County Executive, Dr. Jill Gordon Dean, Levin College of Public Affairs and Education at Cleveland State University, Dale Miller President, Cuyahoga County Council, Greg Brown Executive Director, PolicyBridge, Marsha Mockabee CEO, The Urban League of Greater Cleveland, Randy McShepard Vice President of Public Affairs and Chief Talent Officer, RPM. Credit PolicyBridge

competitiveness mandate," said Randell McShepard, Chairman and Co-Founder of PolicyBridge, at the signing event at the Greater Cleveland Partnership.

At the same time, the announcement outlines only a structure for collaboration rather than a plan for implementation. No specific policy proposals, program changes, or funding commitments are identified, and no timelines or benchmarks are publicly defined.

What the experts say

Experts who study urban poverty and regional economic development say that distinction is significant.

"Setting shared goals and creating a coordinating body are important first steps," said David Erickson, a senior fellow focused on community development at the

previous Cleveland initiatives that emphasized cross-sector collaboration as a path to economic improvement. Over the past two decades, efforts such as the Greater University Circle Initiative aligned major institutions around neighborhood investment and redevelopment.

While those efforts produced physical development and institutional cooperation, their impact on poverty reduction and household wealth was limited.

Business-led regional collaborations, including Cleveland Tomorrow and later the Greater Cleveland Partnership, promoted coordinated economic growth strategies that contributed to downtown development but did not significantly narrow racial or neighborhood economic

The community wants and needs resources

For residents, the central issue is whether institutional alignment will translate into concrete changes, such as new policies, shifts in funding priorities, or changes in how major employers and institutions operate, that measurably improve incomes and reduce poverty.

Past experience suggests coordination alone has not been sufficient. As experts note, the long-term impact of the Urban Agenda will depend less on who signed the agreement and more on what decisions follow it.

Ron Calhoun is the publisher of The Cleveland Observer.

SUBSCRIBE SCAN HERE:



SCAN TO REGISTER

\$60
annual U.S. mail
subscription

CLEVELAND OBSERVER

The Cleveland Observer is a community-based nonprofit monthly newspaper dedicated to providing information and resources that will uplift and enhance the community.
Copyright 2026

PUBLISHER
Ron Calhoun

EDITOR
Lisa O'Brien

PRINT EDITOR
Rosie Palfy

PARTNERS
The Cleveland Foundation

ADVERTISING
sales@cleobserver.com

ADVISORY BOARD
Sheila Ferguson, Ron Harris,
Devon Jones, Mark Silverberg

PRINT LAYOUT / GRAPHICS
Ron Calhoun

info@cleobserver.com
11459 Mayfield Road #302
Cleveland, OH 44106
(216) 236-8081

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of each writer, and not those of the publisher, editor or any other entity.

Article Submission Policy

The Cleveland Observer will consider article submissions electronically via email or through theclevelandobserver.com. Registration required. Submitter must provide name, e-mail address, and phone number with submission.

**NO REPRODUCTION
WITHOUT PERMISSION.**

The articles are reviewed using The Cleveland Observer's AI-assisted editorial workflow. All AI-generated recommendations were reviewed and approved by a human editor.

Two cases continue to shape Cleveland police debate



By Renee Matthews Jackson

Thirteen years after police fired 137 shots at a vehicle carrying Timothy Russell and Malissa Williams, killing both, and 12 years after Tamir Rice, a preteen playing with a toy gun at Cudell Park, was fatally shot, the city remains under federal oversight, and debates over policing and reform continue.

These two cases, one involving an unarmed couple and the other a child holding a toy gun, drew national attention and prompted sweeping reform efforts. Yet years later, the question remains: Has any meaningful change in policing taken root in Cleveland?

On Nov. 29, 2012, a high-speed police chase ended in a school parking lot in East Cleveland. Officers fired 137 shots into a vehicle occupied by Timothy Russell and Malissa Williams. Both were unarmed and died at the scene. Thirteen officers discharged their weapons. Officer Michael Brelo was later charged

information was not relayed to responding officers. A grand jury declined to indict Loehmann or Officer Frank Garmback. A later federal review also declined criminal charges. In 2016, the city agreed to pay Rice's family \$6 million to settle a civil lawsuit.

According to the Ohio ACLU Report on Cleveland Policing, A 2014 federal Department of Justice civil rights investigation stated, "there is reasonable cause to believe that the CPD engages in a pattern or practice of excessive force in violation of the Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution."

Federal oversight and reform

The Rice shooting, combined with the 137-shot case, intensified scrutiny of the Cleveland Division of Police. In December 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice found that the department engaged in a "pattern or practice of excessive force" and violated residents' constitutional rights.

In 2015, Cleveland entered into a court-ordered consent decree with the DOJ. The agreement required sweeping reforms, including revised use-of-force policies, expanded crisis intervention training,

and although the department has complied with most of the decree there is still room for ongoing accountability.

Policy vs. perception

Since 2015, Cleveland has adopted new use-of-force standards emphasizing de-escalation. Officers receive crisis intervention training aimed at improving responses to people in mental health crises.

The department also revised policies regarding interactions with juveniles, requiring officers to consider age and developmental factors before using force. Voters approved the creation of the Cleveland Community Police Commission, a civilian oversight body with authority over police policy and disciplinary recommendations.

Yet accountability remains a concern. The NAACP Cleveland Branch released a statement Tuesday urging city leaders to reconsider halting the consent decree. "We are concerned about ending federal oversight while critical reforms remain incomplete," the organization said. "Residents report they have not yet experienced meaningful change in their daily interactions with law enforcement."

Neither the 137-shot case nor the Rice shooting resulted in criminal convictions. "Legal standards for prosecuting officers in use-of-force cases are high, often requiring proof that an officer willfully violated constitutional rights, according to the DOJ.

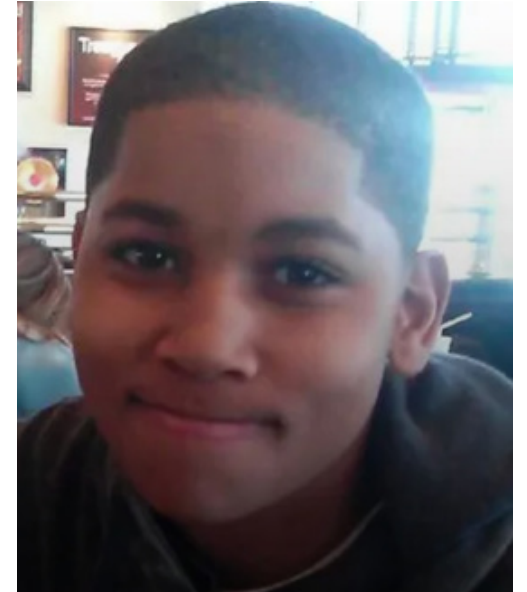
State of the city

For many residents, the impact of these cases extends beyond policy language. The Rice shooting became a rallying point in national protests and a defining moment for the Black Lives Matter movement.

While reforms have reshaped procedures and increased transparency including expanded body camera use, community trust remains fragile. Advocates argue that trust depends not only on new policies but on consistent behavior, clear accountability and meaningful community input in public safety decisions.

Thirteen years after 137 shots and almost 12 years after Tamir Rice's death, Cleveland's experience reflects a broader national tension: reform is possible, but it is incremental and often contested.

The consent decree remains active. Oversight structures are



Tamir Rice, shot by police while playing with a toy gun. Credit: Facebook

in place. Training standards have changed. Yet the ultimate measure for many residents is whether interactions with police feel safer, fairer and more accountable than they did in 2012 and 2014.

The legacy of Russell, Williams and Rice continues to shape Cleveland's public safety debate. The question that endures is not whether reform has begun, but whether it has gone far enough for future generations to see lasting change.

Consent decree update

On Feb. 5, the City issued a press release about its consent decree compliance advancements. According to the city, the federal monitoring team conducted seven compliance audits and reported substantial progress in several reform areas, which officials cite as evidence supporting the motion to end federal oversight.

On Feb. 19, city officials announced they had filed a joint motion with the DOJ in federal court seeking to terminate the consent decree. The following day, Northern Ohio U.S. Senior Judge Solomon Oliver Jr. held a hearing but did not issue a ruling. According to WKYC, Oliver said he would review the motion and determine what additional process or testimony may be required.

Renee Matthews Jackson is an actor, poet, and educator from Cleveland, Ohio. She holds an AA in Theatre, BA in Nonprofit Administration, and a MA in New Media Journalism.



Timothy Russell and Malissa Williams. Credit: Facebook

but was acquitted of voluntary manslaughter after prosecutors could not prove which officer's bullets caused the deaths. The chase began after police mistook the sound of a car backfiring for gunfire.

Two years later, on Nov. 22, 2014, Cleveland Division of Police Patrol Officer Timothy Loehmann shot Tamir Rice within seconds of arriving at Cudell Park. He was accompanied by Officer Frank Garmback who was the driver of the patrol car when they stopped near Rice.

Rice had been playing with a toy airsoft gun. A 911 caller had reported that the gun was "probably fake," but that

stronger supervision, improved data collection and enhanced community engagement.

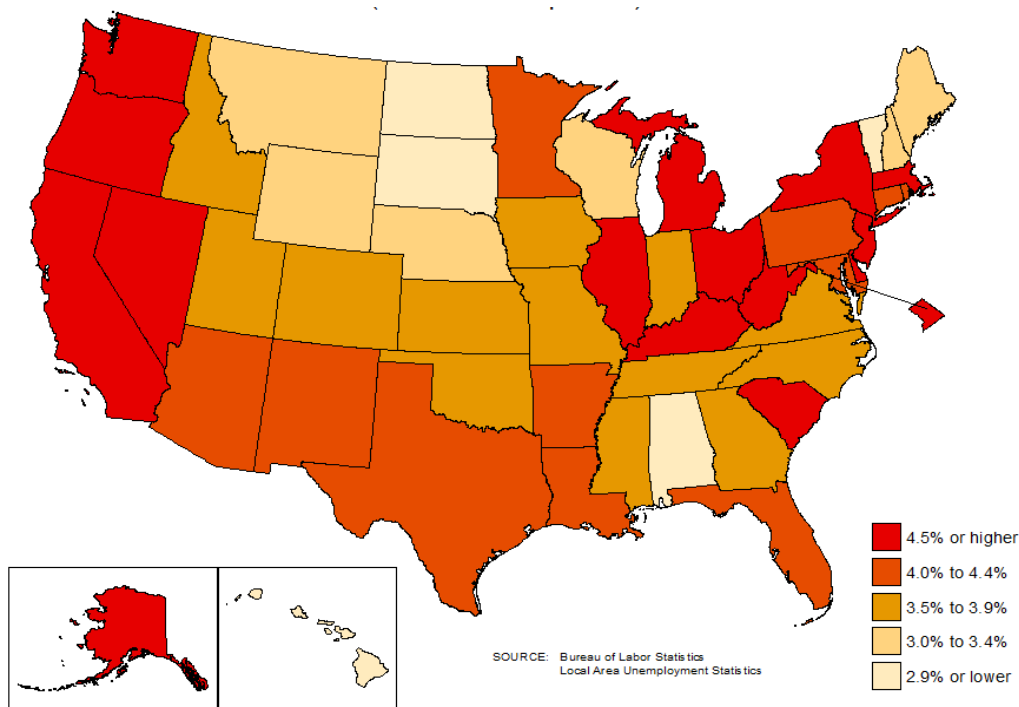
An independent monitor has issued periodic reports on the city's compliance. In 2025, an independent monitor reported that "substantial progress" was made in areas such as accountability, transparency and community engagement. Still, the consent decree remains in place a decade later.

The decree was given a five-year monitoring process and was signed and implemented on May 26, 2015, according to the Ohio ACLU. The city's police department has reflected both progress and persistent gaps



Job data shows uneven recovery in Cleveland

From front page



for inflation) increased 3.8% in December while inflation stood at 2.7%, but those gains have not erased the damage from two years when prices rose faster than paychecks, according to the BLS. **Cleveland layoffs hit key sectors hard**

Among the nation's 56 largest metropolitan areas,

Cleveland saw the highest unemployment rate increase by 0.8 percentage points between July 2024 and July 2025, according to the BLS metropolitan area employment data. Manufacturing and hospitality employment declined in the Cuyahoga region over the year.

Ohio lost 4,300

manufacturing jobs year-over-year in December 2024, split between durable goods (4,000 jobs) and nondurable goods (300 jobs), according to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. Manufacturing layoffs hit Cleveland particularly hard as part of broader industry trends affecting Northeast Ohio's traditional economic base.

The combination of rising unemployment and sector-specific job losses in Cleveland points to structural shifts in the region's economy. While some workers find new positions, others turn to multiple part-time jobs or exit the labor force altogether.

What it means for Cleveland

Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland research shows differences in purchasing power gains across income groups. The bottom 40% and middle 40% of income earners ended 2024 with around 4.5 percentage points more cumulated wage gains than inflation since January 2019, while the top 20% gained close to 3.5

percentage points, according to the Cleveland Fed's October 2025 Economic Commentary.

The research shows that despite experiencing higher inflation, lower-income households also saw higher wage growth, resulting in modest purchasing power gains. However, these gains accumulated over six years and followed a period of volatile price increases that strained household budgets.

What's ahead

Despite improvements in some economic indicators, many workers continue to rely on multiple part-time jobs or face reduced employment options in manufacturing and hospitality. Economists increasingly point to job stability and wage growth as key indicators beyond unemployment rates.

Ray'Chel Wilson is a Certified financial therapist and FinTech founder.

Cleveland arts expand online, access varies

From front page

artists have also pursued digital platforms, including Instagram Live, YouTube and membership sites like Patreon, to showcase work and build audiences.

These tools allow creators with limited budgets to bypass traditional gatekeepers, publish directly to followers, and potentially monetize content.

Social platforms enable artists to share live performances, studio sessions, and visual art showcases, building community through direct engagement. Research suggests that the internet and social media have reshaped how arts organizations and creators engage audiences, making art experiences more participatory and interactive than ever.

For some independent creators, digital platforms also serve as key revenue streams, paralleling the push by larger institutions to sell tickets or solicit donations online. However, not all platforms make monetization easy, and algorithmic visibility, who sees what content, can vary widely based on follower numbers and platform dynamics.

Barriers to digital inclusion: Who gets left out?

Despite the expansion of online offerings, meaningful access is not uniform. Digital equity remains a significant concern nationwide; communities without reliable broadband, affordable devices, or the skills to navigate internet resources are at a disadvantage. National digital inclusion efforts by organizations such as the Institute of Museum and Library Services highlight that increased digital literacy and

broadband access are essential to truly expanding cultural access.

In Cleveland, access gaps reflect broader patterns seen in many U.S. cities: neighborhoods with lower household incomes often face poorer internet connectivity, limiting residents' ability to engage with virtual content. Paywalls for premium content, subscription fees for concert streams, and platform-specific barriers further complicate access.

For some audience members, digital access may still depend on attending in-person events for free Wi-Fi or community support.

In Cleveland, barriers to digital inclusion are also shaped by racial disparities in broadband access. According to a 2020 analysis cited by the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, the average broadband adoption rate for households in Cleveland's majority-white neighborhoods is 81.2%, compared to just 63% in Black-majority neighborhoods. This affordability gap can limit who is able to fully participate in livestreamed performances, virtual exhibits and other forms of online cultural programming.

These disparities underscore a key tension: while digital platforms have democratized access in theory, they can inadvertently reinforce inequality in practice.

Digital access doesn't always mean revenue for all

Institutional digital programming aims to expand audiences and, in some cases, generate revenue or donations. Premium subscriptions like those offered by Adella may provide new funding streams for orchestras,

while online donation tools allow museums and nonprofits to solicit community support directly.

Yet the relationship between digital access and revenue is complicated. Some research indicates that audiences increasingly expect digital content to be free, creating pressure on organizations to balance open access with financial sustainability.

This tension poses a dilemma: institutions must attract online audiences while still securing the funds needed to sustain high-quality programming.

Independent artists face similar challenges. Digital platforms may offer monetization tools, but competition for attention on social media and subscription platforms often means that only creators with significant followings can earn substantial income. Emerging and mid-career artists may find that digital exposure alone does not equate to financial stability.

From global models to local reality

As Cleveland's cultural institutions and artists continue to embrace digital platforms, the potential to engage wider and more diverse audiences grows. Museums and orchestras are no longer bound by geography; virtual visitors from around the world can experience local art and music in real-time or on demand.

Yet national and global models of digital access also remind us that thoughtful strategy is necessary to ensure inclusion. Whether through multilingual content, accessible design, or open-access collections, digital initiatives must be deliberately shaped to serve diverse

communities and reduce access barriers.

For example, the Cleveland Museum of Art's open-access digital collection allows users to view more than 60,000 artworks online at no cost, while moCa Cleveland has hosted free virtual artist talks and community programming accessible without paid admission. These initiatives demonstrate how institutions can expand participation by reducing financial and geographic barriers to engagement.

Digital expansion with equity

Cleveland's arts organizations and independent creators have made significant strides in using digital platforms to broaden their reach and engage new audiences. From streamed orchestral concerts and interactive museum tools to artist-driven social content, the city's cultural offerings are more accessible than ever before.

However, increased digital access does not automatically guarantee equitable cultural participation. As institutions continue to innovate online, addressing the persistent gaps in technology access, broadband infrastructure, and platform affordability will be key to ensuring that all Cleveland residents can engage meaningfully with the city's rich artistic landscape.

Konner Hines is a member of the Honors College and a marketing and human resources student at Baldwin Wallace University

Analysis: Bibb and Griffin clash shapes power struggle at City Hall



By Renee Matthews Jackson

Editor's note: This analysis examines key public disagreements between Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb and City Council President Blaine Griffin. The timeline synthesizes publicly reported events and official statements across multiple years.

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb and Cleveland City Council President Blaine Griffin have clashed publicly at times over policy, oversight and the direction of city government, reflecting broader tensions between the executive and legislative branches. This analysis examines how those disagreements developed, how they have shaped key decisions at City Hall, and what recent developments may signal about the working relationship moving forward.

The breaking point came in September 2025 when the Bibb administration demanded Griffin fire City Council staffer Steven Rys. Rys allegedly downloaded more than 2,000 files from the city's public records system, including sensitive personal data.

PBS reported that Griffin refused, accusing the mayor's team of attempting to "strong-arm" the legislative branch and warning that the dispute could lead to "legislative constipation" for Bibb's agenda. But this confrontation did not emerge overnight. It was the culmination of years of mounting tension over transparency, access to information, and competing visions for Cleveland's future.

January 2023: Budget tensions emerge

During a six-hour council meeting in January 2023, members pushed back against Bibb's spending priorities. Axios reported that the confrontation centered on casino revenue allocation and participatory budgeting legislation.

Council members advocated for neighborhood investments while questioning how American Rescue Plan Act ARPA funds would be distributed. Council member Mike Polensek said, "I want to see a nice lakefront like everybody else does, but ... someone's going to have to show how the lakefront is going to benefit Hough and Central and Collinwood and West Park and all the neighborhoods that we were told would benefit from the original Browns stadium."

Polensek later told the



Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb. Credit: City of Cleveland.

mayor's chief financial officer that the council was not prepared to "rubber-stamp" proposals, according to PBS.

January—May 2023: Participatory budgeting dispute

In early 2023, City Council declined to move forward with a proposal from People's Budget Cleveland PB CLE to use \$5 million in ARPA funds for a participatory budgeting pilot program, according to WKYC. Bibb supported the initiative, while Griffin and a majority of council members opposed it, arguing the funding would divert resources from street repair, youth programs and education, Signal Cleveland reported.

May 2023: West Side Market funding disagreement

The council president proposed reducing \$5 million to \$10 million from Bibb's \$15 million ARPA proposal for West Side Market renovations. Griffin said he wanted to prioritize investments in "edge and middle" neighborhoods instead, according to WYSU 88.5 FM. The mayor pushed back on social media, reporting that the market required significant infrastructure upgrades.

July 2023: Tensions rise after council meeting absence

Following a shooting that injured nine people on Cleveland's near West Side, members of city council criticized the Bibb administration for not attending a scheduled council meeting. Griffin called the absence "completely unacceptable." The administration responded by accusing council of "political grandstanding" and taking a "summer recess" from violence issues, according to Ideastream Public Media. The two leaders met the following day in an effort to ease tensions.

November—December 2023: Public comment debate

Tensions flared over proposed changes to council's public comment period that would have limited speakers to council business, following weeks of pro-Palestinian remarks urging the mayor to recant his support of Israel, according to WKYC. Bibb told reporters he is a "firm believer in free speech" and that "democracy is messy, but it's



Cleveland City Council President Blaine Griffin. Credit: Cleveland City Council.

democracy," while noting he does not control city council.

Fall 2023: People's Budget battle (Issue 38)

Bibb and Griffin both opposed Issue 38, the People's Budget charter amendment. Griffin warned it could have a "devastating impact on the city" and lead to "massive layoffs," according to Ideastream Public Media. Griffin's Council Leadership Fund PAC raised more than \$95,000 to defeat the measure, which ultimately failed, 51.06% to 49.94%, according to Cleveland 19 News.

April 2024: Gaza ceasefire resolution debate

Bibb declined to sign city council's Gaza ceasefire resolution after months of protests, saying he supported President Joe Biden's diplomatic efforts and describing the conflict as a "complicated, nuanced issue," WVXU reported. While not a direct clash between Bibb and Griffin, the episode highlighted policy differences between the mayor and some council members on international issues.

October 2024: Council scrutiny of Browns stadium settlement

In October 2024, council members criticized a \$100 million Browns stadium settlement during a three-hour hearing. Council Member Brian Kazy said the mayor had "lied with the dogs" and now has "fleas." Griffin called for greater council oversight and transparency, arguing the deal could threaten downtown economic development. The hearing reflected continued skepticism among some council members about whether taxpayers received adequate value.

September 2025: Steven Rys records access dispute

On Sept. 18, 2025, representatives of the Bibb administration told Griffin that City Council staffer Steven Rys should be removed after downloading more than 2,000 files from the

city's public records system, warning that the issue could lead to public allegations and potential federal scrutiny, according to WKYC.

The dispute centered on a shift in Rys' access patterns. During former Mayor Frank Jackson's final year in office, Rys downloaded 13 files in 2021. After Bibb took office in January 2022, downloads increased to 508 files in 2022, 422 in 2023 and 950 in 2024.

The city raised concerns that some files accessed through the public records portal contained sensitive personal information, including Social Security numbers and medical data, according to Signal Cleveland.

Griffin rejected the administration's ultimatum and held a news conference criticizing what he described as political pressure from the mayor's office. He warned council could slow-walk legislation — invoking a phrase he said longtime Councilman Mike Polensek often uses, describing potential "legislative constipation" if tensions continued, Ideastream Public Media reported.

In a Sept. 23, 2025, letter to council members, Griffin defended Rys and criticized the administration's handling of the dispute. The letter was made public through Signal Cleveland.

Update:

According to Cleveland.com and remarks during recent city council budget hearings, the Bibb administration has ended its outside investigation into council staffer Steven Rys' file downloads as Mayor Justin Bibb and Council President Blaine Griffin said they plan to move on from the dispute.

Recent developments suggest the dynamic between the administration and council may be shifting, even as policy differences remain.

Renee Matthews Jackson is a published writer, actor and educator who holds a master's degree in new media journalism and has spent decades involved in community activism.

Your Donation Helps

Clevelanders reporting on Cleveland problems and Highlighting great Clevelanders
Your support will keep us informing you and our print content free.



Donate



Power and pushback: Who can stop a president?



By Angela Hay



SCAN TO LISTEN



President Donald Trump Credit: Instagram

The United States government was designed as an elegant system of checks and balances. Power is negotiated among federal, state, and local authorities, as well as among the legislative, judicial, and executive branches.

However, during his second term, which began in 2025, President Donald Trump has frequently bypassed both federal and state authority to advance his own agenda for the nation. As cities like Minneapolis and Los Angeles struggle to protect their citizens from government overreach, the question has arisen: Who can actually stop a president?

In Cleveland, the answer to this question shapes lives. It determines whether food reaches the Greater Cleveland Food Bank, whether MAGNET can help local manufacturers compete, and whether federal dollars flow to neighborhood development corporations in Union-Miles and West Park.

A year after Trump's inauguration, some checks and balances are still effective, but others have failed.

The courts: mixed results

Federal judges have blocked some of the administration's most aggressive moves. Four judges ruled against the executive order attempting to end birthright citizenship, calling it unconstitutional.

Courts also stopped a sweeping freeze of federal funding in late January 2025 that threatened everything from AIDS research to infrastructure projects. This forced the administration to withdraw funds on a case by case basis, rather than in one mass effort.

But these victories tell only part of the story. In June 2025, the Supreme Court ruled that federal courts are not authorized to issue nationwide injunctions beyond what is necessary to provide relief to parties in a case. The legal issue in question was an executive order that restricted birthright citizenship, as protected by the 14th Amendment.

This makes it much harder to halt executive actions nationwide. The court overwhelmingly sided with the Trump administration in 2025, creating a pattern where lower courts block actions, but higher courts often reverse those wins.

For Cleveland, this legal back-and-forth has meant

uncertainty. The Greater Cleveland Food Bank lost 553,000 pounds of food valued at \$1 million when deliveries scheduled between April and July were canceled due to sudden federal cuts to U.S. Department of Agriculture food purchase programs.

Planned Parenthood's Cleveland clinic closed after Title X funding was frozen. Even when courts intervene, the damage often happens before relief arrives.

Ohio sides with Trump

Democratic attorneys general in 22 states have filed 71 lawsuits against the administration, but Ohio is not among them.

Attorney General Dave Yost joined 17 other Republican attorneys general supporting the birthright citizenship executive order, arguing it would save states money. While Democratic attorneys general meet regularly to strategize legal resistance, Ohio's top lawyer Yost has aligned with the administration on key policies.

Congress: Legislators stand aside

While Trump defunded whole agencies, cut spending, fired federal workers, and launched trade wars, congressional oversight disappeared.

With the legislature under Republican control, Democrats have minimal leverage. For example, when Democratic members of Congress tried to conduct oversight visits to immigration detention facilities, the administration secretly re-imposed a policy blocking unannounced visits, forcing lawmakers back to court.

Cleveland Rep. Shontel Brown D-OH has pushed back in statements and interviews by criticizing the administration's decision to pull funds from Ohio workers. In a December 2025 press release, Brown called Trump "the greatest threat to Ohio manufacturing," citing "reckless

tariffs" and the funding freeze. After \$175 million in Manufacturing Extension Partnership funding was frozen in April, Congressional pressure forced the administration to release it. When funding was frozen again in December, pulling money from six Ohio centers, the same pressure didn't work.

Even when members fight back, the administration usually wins in the end.

What is actually working

According to Just Security's litigation tracker, challengers have won 184 cases while the government has won 95, with 235 cases still awaiting rulings. Courts remain the most effective check on executive power but require

a great deal of time, money and resources.

When Cleveland nonprofits warned they could not keep their doors open without Community Development Block Grant money, the city eventually received its usual \$28 million, but only after threats and uncertainty had taken a toll on community leaders.

So far, wins against the Trump administration have been defensive and often temporary. Trump signed more than 215 executive orders in 2025, outpacing Biden's entire four-year tenure. Each challenge requires resources, time and coordination that most communities don't have.

The lesson

Can the president be stopped? The answer is unclear. Courts can slow things down, but they can't stop everything. States can resist, but only if they want to. Congress can investigate, but only if the majority party cares to check its own president.

Cleveland residents have watched federal dollars disappear from food banks, health clinics, and neighborhood programs. When checks and balances on federal power fail, local communities absorb the impact.

Angela Hay is a journalist and body positive movement instructor in Columbus, Ohio.

TURN YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA INTO A PAID SIDE HUSTLE

Are you active on Instagram, TikTok, X, or Facebook?

We're looking for local social media influencers and digital creators to help expand our online presence. No huge following required. Just real engagement and an authentic voice.

- ✔ **Paid opportunities**
- ✔ **Flexible schedule**
- ✔ **Remote & part-time**

Help amplify meaningful stories while earning on the side.

Interested? DM us or email: info@cleobserver.com

Follow us: [TheClevelandObserver](https://www.instagram.com/TheClevelandObserver)

AI therapy expands, experts urge caution



By Jennifer Bailey

Editor's note: This story contains discussion of suicide. Help is available if you or someone you know is struggling with suicidal thoughts or mental health matters. Call or text 988, the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, or visit 988lifeline.org

With the growing involvement of artificial intelligence (AI), the lives of Americans and people around the globe are changing markedly. Questions that were once reserved for Google or asking professionals in their respective fields are now being asked of AI programs like ChatGPT, Gemini and Microsoft Copilot.

Along with knowing the hottest restaurant, writing papers, and medical advice, people are also turning to AI for mental health support. The technology's accessibility, instant responses, and agreeable nature significantly contribute to its appeal.

Although its responses can be supportive, there have been instances where individuals struggling with suicidal ideation have been encouraged by AI to end their lives, including Sewell Setzer, a 14-year-old boy in February 2024, and Adam Raine, a 16-year-old boy in April 2025, according to NPR. As AI becomes more sophisticated and nuanced, experts are questioning whether AI can or should replace human therapists.

Understanding AI

The American Psychological Association reported that AI already assists mental health professionals, helping with scheduling and note-taking. Recently, there has been an appeal to transform AI's role through programs like Woebot, an AI that supports individuals struggling with mental health. Along with Woebot, ChatGPT is also being used as a resource for those struggling with mental health.

However, the two AIs differ: one is rule-based, and the other is generative. A rule-based AI is programmed with a set of rules, scripts, or instructions. Allison Darcy, a research psychologist, alongside other programmers, medical doctors and psychologists, created Woebot, a cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)-based, according to a 2024 report by "60 Minutes".

According to Harvard University Information Technology, generative AI is "a type of artificial intelligence that can learn from and mimic large amounts of data to create content such as text, images, music, videos, code, and

more, based on inputs or prompts." In short, it learns and then creates responses based on internet data, making it less predictable, according to a 60 Minutes report.

Dr. Vipin Chaudhary, chair of the department of data sciences in the school of engineering at Case Western Reserve University, disagreed with the label of rule-based AI. As he reports that if the entity is completely rule-based, it is a program or automation, not an AI. Chaudhary goes on to say that true AI learns, reasons, and interprets data.

Why people are turning to AI for mental health support

Whether rule-based or generative, AI continues to be a popular resource for seeking mental health support because it offers people a sense of being heard and understood, provides instant responses and is cost-



Credit: when-ai-meets-therapy-

effective.

There are no waitlists or insurance hoops to jump through. The accessibility to mental health services continues to be an issue for many in the U.S., where the need for mental health services remains high. This speaks to the rising problem that the American people are stressed, burned out, and feeling unheard.

Darcy also mentioned that there has been little change in the structure of psychotherapy since it was established in the 1890s, and innovation is needed to help meet the growing need for mental health support, according to a report by 60 Minutes.

However, the generative abilities of AI have had some challenges with individuals who struggle with their mental health. It wasn't until after Raine's death that his parents discovered their son's struggle with suicidal ideation. He used the technology as a personal confidant; the AI even offered to write a suicide note for him, NPR reported.

The limits of AI

At the center of therapy is the relationship, and although AI can create a very believable experience, there are key components that AI

is unable to replicate: empathy, relational accountability, and recognizing avoidance.

Empathy: The ability to understand and share the feelings of another. This is a human experience.

Relational accountability: This involves understanding your role in how you have impacted another person. When a human-to-human strong and safe therapeutic relationship exists, both parties can experience vulnerability and trust, which is a cornerstone for personal growth and self-acceptance.

Recognizing avoidance: Human therapists can notice patterns of avoidance and dissociation. Therapy is hard and uncomfortable; however, it is these same factors that prepare the way for personal growth and healing. Responding vs. relating: AI responds, but humans relate.

their interactions were protected under HIPAA, like conversations with a therapist would be. That's not the case."

As long as the client doesn't report plans to hurt themselves or others, what is discussed in session stays private and privileged. Conversations with AI are not protected or privileged; it's data.

The human element

The above components fall under the umbrella of something called holding space. Holding space is the creation of an environment where one feels safe and supported. AI provides access, while therapists provide connectedness and understanding of the human experience.

Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in the middle. Bridging the gap between AI and human mental health support is a work in progress; apps like Woebot and Therabot are attempting to narrow the gap.

Woebot is accessible through insurance, while Therabot offers a chatbot for mental health support and will connect you with a Therabot-affiliated therapist. Whether it is related to the economy, the U.S. political climate, or personal struggles, Americans need mental health support.

The goal should be to provide it in a way that creates safe accessibility that promotes connection and growth.

If you or someone you know is struggling, help is available 24/7 by calling or texting the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988 or visiting 988lifeline.org.

Jennifer Bailey is a wife, mother of three, and a therapist. She is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Registered Drama Therapist.

Human therapists relate to the human experience, understanding the complexities of emotions and the challenges of life.

Confidentiality: Licensed professionals are bound by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and ethics codes. HIPAA is a protection of a patient's sensitive information from disclosure without the person's consent.

Pardis Emami-Naeini, a researcher who studied chatbots, said, "One major misconception was that many participants believed



THE CLEVELAND OBSERVER



STAY INFORMED

Point your phone camera at the QR code to get information about free events, local community, City Council meeting, and free events.

Let your voice be heard.

Opinion: Battle of the mind and the modern conquest for data and algorithms



By Devon Jones

Opinion | Technology & Society

Researchers and lawmakers are raising concerns about a new kind of power struggle, centered on data and algorithms. These systems decide what billions of people see online every day.

The world still faces traditional conflicts. The 2025 Global Peace Index reports 59 active state-based conflicts worldwide. But today, influence is not just about land or weapons. It is also about information, and who controls it.

From Facebook's recommendation system to federal action against TikTok, leaders are debating how digital platforms shape public opinion.

What Is an algorithm?

An algorithm is simply a set of instructions that tells a computer what to do. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "a process or set of rules to be followed in calculations or other problem-solving operations, especially by a computer."

On social media, algorithms decide which posts show up in your feed. They decide which videos go viral. They even decide which ads you see.

Some experts use the term "algorithmic colonialism" to describe what happens when powerful companies use these systems to collect data and shape what people see online. Instead of taking land, they collect information and attention.

Do algorithms affect politics?

Research shows algorithms can affect what content people see. A 2022 report by NBC News found that Facebook's 2018 algorithm change boosted engagement for local Republican Party groups more than Democratic groups.

The study did not say the



change decided elections. But it did show that the system increased visibility for some political pages. At the same time, social media use remains high.

According to the Pew Research Center's 2025 social media fact sheet, YouTube and Facebook are still among the most widely used platforms in the United States. TikTok is especially popular among younger users.

The more people use these platforms, the more influence their algorithms have.

Visibility Concerns about digital control increased after Congress passed H.R. 7521. The law requires TikTok's Chinese parent company to sell its U.S. operations or face a possible ban.

In a Jan. 30 column for The Guardian, media scholar Paolo Gerbaudo argued that platforms may not directly censor speech. Instead, they can limit how many people see certain posts. Content may still exist online but become harder to find.

This kind of control over visibility can shape public debate without users realizing it.

How advertising uses your data

Algorithms also shape what we buy. According to the University

of Southern California's Applied Psychology program, the average person sees about 5,000 ads per day. More than 5.3 trillion display ads appear online each year, as explained in USC's article on the psychology of advertising.

Many of these ads are targeted. That means companies use your search history and online behavior to decide which ads to show you.

Privacy and data lawsuits

Questions about data collection have also led to lawsuits. According to BBC News, Google agreed to a \$68 million settlement over claims related to data collection practices. The company did not admit wrongdoing.

In a separate report, BBC News said Apple agreed to a \$95 million settlement over allegations involving its Siri voice assistant. Apple also did not admit wrongdoing.

These cases show that courts are starting to examine how companies collect and use personal data.

Who controls the digital world?

Some experts argue that people and countries should have

more control over their digital systems.

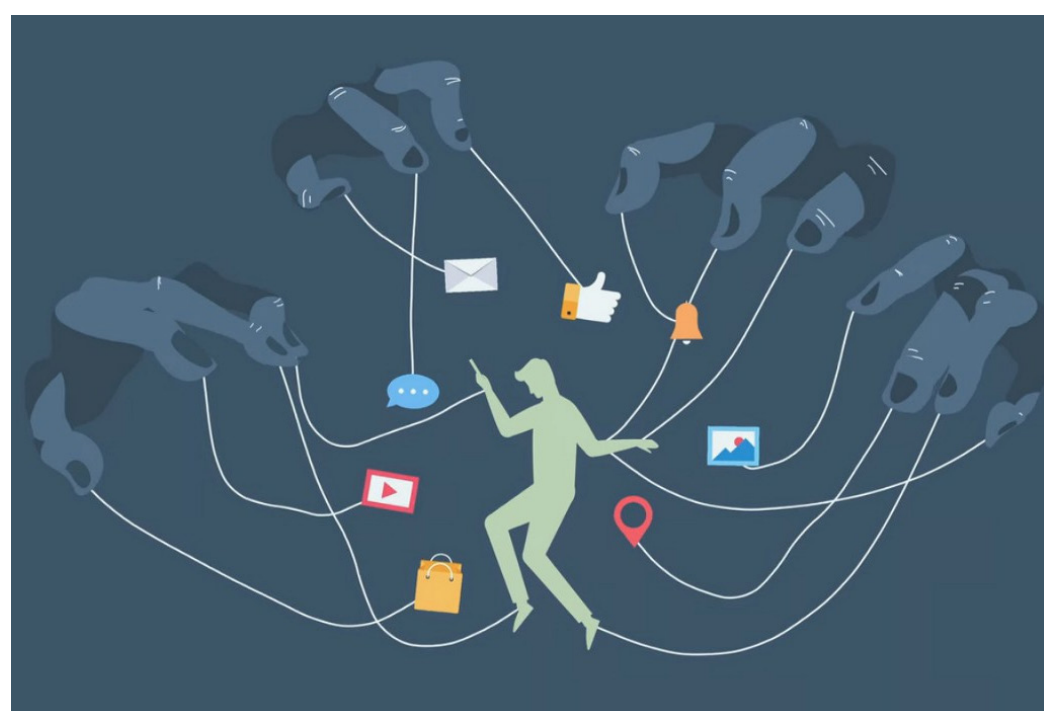
This idea is often called digital sovereignty.

The basic question is simple: Who controls the rules that shape what we see online?

As more of our lives move to the internet, algorithms will continue to shape how we get information, shop and form opinions.

The battle may not be over land anymore. It may be over attention — and the systems that quietly guide what we believe is important.

Devon Jones is a research associate at Case Western Reserve University and program manager at the Cleveland Observer. He co-founded Crown Connections Nonprofit Consulting and co-hosts the Neighborhood Hero's Podcast.



Join Team TCO

Now hiring in several positions.
Independent Contractors:

PRINT-LAYOUT DESIGNER

VIDEOGRAPHER

SALES REPRESENTATIVE

WEBSITE MANAGER

JOURNALIST

REPORTER



Join Our Team

www.cleobserver.com



Join Our Team