



Michigan ELECTION WATCH

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Michigan's Presidential Primary

by Craig Ruff

Peter Mayle's witty book, *A Year in Provence*, includes an ongoing saga of renovations and repairs in his farm house. "Our architect," Mayle writes, "had warned us that building in Provence was very similar to trench warfare, with long periods of boredom interrupted by bursts of violent and noisy activity." This statement perfectly describes politics as well, especially in presidential election years.

Presidential rat-a-tat-tats hit Michigan's bunker barely a fortnight ago. When the ammunition was spent and the voters had spoken, the following had come to pass:

- Bush and Clinton clinched their nominations.
- Buchanan and Brown now can assume only Quixotic roles, vexing the front-runners through guerrilla ambushes.
- Tsongas's message of delayed gratification fell on deaf ears in Michigan; his money dried up; he is out of the race.
- The expected "appeal" last fall of David Duke had evaporated; he got 2.5 percent of the Republican vote.

Partisans spin only good news. Bush's big win (67 percent) effectively knocks Buchanan out of the race and allows the president to be presidential. Clinton's triumphs here (50 percent) and in Illinois (52 percent) secure his nomination, allowing him to unify his party and focus exclusively on Bush's failings.

The parties received bad news, too. The GOP can take little solace in the fact that 46 percent of Bush voters in Macomb County (so-called Reagan-Bush, blue-collar Democrats) voted in the Democratic primary and that, by a margin of 57-43 percent, more people selected Democratic rather than Republican ballots statewide. Democrats should be nervous about an unenthusiastic turnout; Clinton won about 80,000 fewer votes than Governor James Blanchard garnered in a meaningless, unpromoted, and uncontroversial Democratic primary in 1990.

Overall turnout was very low, although not as low as some feared. Fifteen percent of eligible voters (age 18 and older) and 17.7 percent of registered voters made it to the polls. The turnout of 1,026,038 was nearly identical to that in the August primary of 1990 but shameful compared to the 46.5 and 38.7 percent of registered voters who turned out in the 1972 and 1976 presidential primaries, respectively.

The controversy over a closed versus open primary and the declaration of party preference necessary to vote for Democratic candidates probably dampened turnout. In Michigan it is considered a character flaw to admit a partisan leaning and an insult to be asked to divulge it. In contrast to the 35 states where voters must register as partisans to vote in primaries, Michiganians regard such declarations to be an outright invasion of privacy.

While partisanship is anything but shameful, the Michigan public does not share this view. Hence, if the political parties want the public purse to foot the bill for their nominating process, the general public ought to set the rules; and in Michigan, it is clear that the public wants open primaries without disclosure of party preference. If the parties cannot live with that, they are free to create and pay for whatever other process—closed primaries, caucuses, or conventions—they wish.

Local legacies of this presidential primary include reinforcement of Governor John Engler's dominance of the Michigan GOP. Not only did Bush escape embarrassment at the hands of Buchanan, but so did Engler, who clearly masters and controls the Republican Party of Michigan. Among Democrats, Wayne County Executive Ed McNamara and former Governor James Blanchard backed Clinton (as did Mayor Young in the days leading up to the primary). McNamara emerges from this election with significantly more statewide influence. If Clinton wins the presidency, Blanchard seems assured of being invited into the cabinet or offered a plum appointment such as an ambassadorial post.

The presidential primary confirmed the centrist tilt of Michigan Democrats. Many people would find it difficult to define sharp philosophical differences among Clinton, Tsongas, and Bush. Liberal Tom Harkin's candidacy never made it to March 17. Jerry Brown's 26-percent showing in Michigan looked good only in contrast to media-set expectations. The Democratic Party of crusading liberals Phil Hart, Pat McNamara, and G. Mennen Williams barely resembles the party of Blanchard, Ed McNamara, and Speaker Lew Dodak. It would have been unimaginable that a person, like Clinton, who supports the death penalty, urges that welfare benefits be restricted to two years, and leads a "Right to Work" state would win a Michigan Democratic primary in the 1950s and 1960s.

The AFL-CIO-UAW (Big Labor) dominance of the Democratic Party in Michigan, which waned somewhat when Blanchard was governor, is ripe for challenge. In this primary the AFL-CIO-UAW lost on three counts: first, when its standard-bearer Tom Harkin withdrew; second, when labor leaders Owen Bieber and Frank Garrison carped from the sidelines about the woeful, remaining Democratic choices; and third, when the Michigan Education Association (MEA) scored a bullseye by backing Clinton. The MEA has scored and expanded its influential role in Democratic Party affairs. Garrison's sound bites, particularly those directed at Clinton ("We're waiting for the other shoe to drop; when it does, it will be a high heel," and "Clinton is unelectable."), were flippant, arrogant, and benefited only Republicans. Big Labor wields clout because it produces money, precinct delegates, and telephone banks for Democrats. The price for those goods traditionally has been "our way or the highway." March 17 may have set the stage for a deepening questioning of whether Big Labor's litmus tests are worth taking and passing.

This spectator found one very encouraging surprise in the Michigan campaign: Bill Clinton's passionate calls in Macomb County and Detroit for racial healing. Clinton demonstrated two leadership skills. First, he created an issue. Everyone, including Clinton and his pollsters, knows that the number one problem on Michigan's mind is the economy. But leaders not only offer solutions to an overriding problem; they take the public's attention into other fields and onto other planes and define a broader agenda. Clinton did so.

The second leadership skill Clinton showed was taking his opinion about racial harmony into less than safe harbors. Leaders gain respect by persuading, challenging, and provoking far more than they do by taking the Gospel to the believers. On key leadership tests, Democrats in Michigan vested their presidential fortunes with Bill Clinton. He earned it.