



Michigan COMMENTARY

Consensus, Conflict, and the Engler Agenda

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What is John Engler's real political agenda? On the surface, this is a strange question to ask, given that Governor Engler has been a major political figure in Michigan for the past twenty years. The "Engler Agenda," at least in general terms, should not be a surprise, but the question persists.

Arts supporters, social service advocates, industrial policy advocates, and others are perplexed about the direction this administration is likely to take. Initial speeches make the governor sound like a warmed-over Ronald Reagan, intent on reducing government, relying on individual initiative, and using tax cuts to fuel economic recovery. Is moving the Reagan Revolution from the White House to the State House really the agenda, or is Engler developing a new "Michigan populism" emphasizing conservative social and economic beliefs of the "average" resident?

As a legislative colleague of John Engler for twelve years, it seems to me that the uncertainty about his agenda is rooted in lack of understanding of the political, philosophical, and ideological tenets held by the governor and his staff. This *Commentary* seeks to clarify those tenets.

LEADERSHIP: CONSENSUS OR CONFLICT

Michigan is used to consensus-building, philosophically moderate, and pragmatic executive leaders. G. Mennen "Soapy" Williams, George Romney, William Milliken, and James Blanchard based their leadership styles on two beliefs. First, society is "healthiest" when there is a broad consensus as to the direction of public policy. The governor's role is to be a catalyst in forging that consensus. Second, Michigan voters are "moderate" politically and generally support a humane and progressive government. The jury is still out on whether Engler will subscribe to these beliefs. I suspect that he operates from a different leadership model.

Sociologists and political scientists long have debated the nature of change within society. Does it come about when a broad consensus develops about how to improve society for the benefit of all, or does it occur through conflict among competing theories, ideologies, or economic interests? Aristotle argued that society must be perceived as part of nature, and mankind as part of an organic whole. Therefore, conflict among parts of the whole makes little sense. The "functionalists," following Aristotle's thinking, have argued over time that individuals and societies tend toward consensus and that conflict is atypical or dysfunctional.

The opposing view, often termed "Hobbesian," sees individuals as competitive and self-serving. The state needs to be organized in such a way as to protect individuals from one another and to protect the material possessions of each. In a Hobbesian world, change comes about by competition and conflict, not consensus. In recent times, sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf has written about the need to understand the nature of change from the assumption of competition and conflict as givens, not as unusual or dysfunctional.

These two perspectives permeate much of social thinking, whether Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism, Adam Smith's free market economics, or a Utopian world view. Most political debate can be interpreted in terms of the underlying beliefs about the nature of mankind and whether conflict or consensus is the norm.

A corollary is that political leadership consists of forming coalitions (consensus building) or marshaling an army of "true believers." In the first two months as governor, Engler clearly is operating from the latter point of view. His inaugural address and State of the State Message referred to the mandate given to him: property tax relief, no new taxes, and budget reductions. It is difficult to perceive an electoral margin of 0.01 percent as



a mandate, but an effective general first must create the impression that an army is behind him. One way to build an army is to structure the debate so that the public is forced to enlist in one camp or another.

The Engler strategy is to draw a significant distinction between his administration and the nonbelievers. Whether it is cutting social services in order to support education or reducing all of state government in order to provide property tax relief, the call is for citizens to choose and not "wimp out" by wanting government to attempt to do all things for all people.

The conflict paradigm is consistent with Engler's political history. His successful challenge of Republican incumbents Rep. Russell Strange and Sen. Jack Toepp ^{were} predicated on drawing clear lines of difference between him and his opponents. Engler's leadership style in the Senate was based on conflict with the House (Speakers Gary Owen and Lew Dodak) and Governor Blanchard.

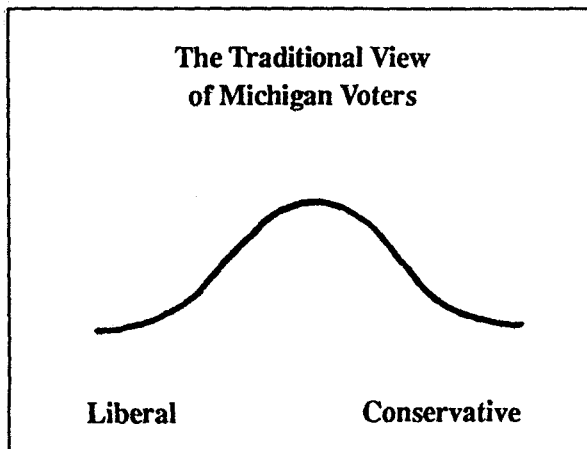
The \$64 question is: Will Engler continue the leadership style of divide and conquer, or will he revert to the more consensus-building style of his predecessors? To date, it appears he is opting for a new paradigm of leadership (more on this later).

PUBLIC SUPPORT

In a democracy, political leadership depends on the support of the voting public. Engler's leadership style and strategy ultimately are based on his views of the public. Understanding those views thus gives the political observer an understanding of the pressures Engler faces in maintaining his current leadership paradigm.

I believe the Engler style ultimately will change because of two important factors. The first is a growing trend for the voting public to move toward the political middle (assuming it presently is polarized), and the second is the tradition of Michigan gubernatorial leadership.

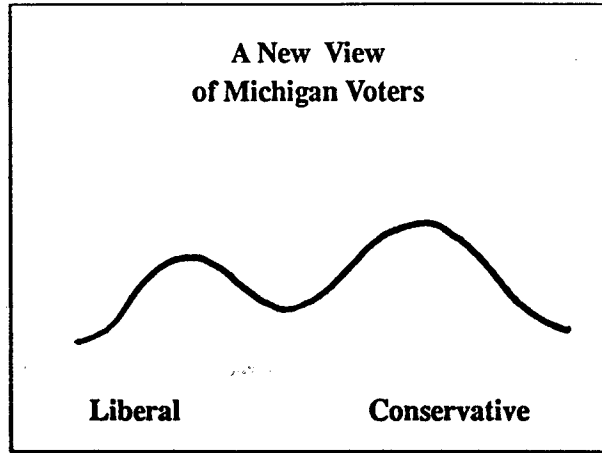
Regarding the first factor, in an attempt to explain why extremist candidates seldom fare well in U.S. elections, political scientists point to the marketplace competition for votes. Anthony Downs, in *Economic Theory of Democracy*, was a pioneer in explaining the force toward the middle. He and others see U.S. voters as distributed normally (in a bell-shaped curve) along an ideological continuum. Studies show that, generally, the greatest number of voters fall in the middle of the ideological spectrum. The parties or candidates compete to gain 50 percent of the vote. Since an extreme position is unlikely to garner enough votes to win election, candidates drift toward the middle.



This theory can be used to explain the political strategies of former governors Milliken and Blanchard. For each, the strategy was to position himself slightly to the right (for Blanchard) or to the left (for Milliken) of the middle of his political party. This assured many liberal votes and a handful of more conservative votes (for Blanchard) or many conservative votes and a handful of more liberal votes (for Milliken). The key to success in Michigan was to be perceived as a conservative Democrat or a liberal Republican.

In 1982 an interesting thing happened in Michigan. Richard Headlee, a conservative businessman, was a very strong challenger to the moderate Blanchard. Under the "centrist" theory, Blanchard should have won easily, since Headlee was clearly the extremist candidate. Yet, Headlee won 46 percent of the vote. Moderate Republican candidates in other midwestern states received much lower percentages. What happened?

In essence, I believe the high unemployment rate (17 percent), the election of Ronald Reagan, and the rise of the fundamentalist right increased the polarization of the voting public. Instead of a normal ideological distribution, there was a substantial shift to the political right. Governor Blanchard, faced with the state's fiscal problems and without bipartisan support, pushed through a tax increase that further polarized the state. The *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* reflected this polarization in editorials strongly supporting or opposing the plan; two state senators were recalled, and control of the state Senate shifted to the Republicans. John Engler benefited from this polarization by becoming Senate Majority Leader.



The two recalled senators represented districts that voted for Headlee for governor and then proceeded to elect mostly Democratic candidates. The districts, one in Oakland County and one in Macomb County, were bastions of blue-collar, conservative Democrats. They were the only two districts in Michigan to support Headlee but elect Democratic state senators.

As the economy improved and the tax increase was rolled back to pre-1983 levels, politics reverted to the traditional consensus style and reflected a moderate ideology. For Blanchard, praised for having the courage to do what was right for the state in pushing the income tax, approval ratings increased dramatically. He reached out to build coalitions with business and labor leaders. He concentrated a lot of time and energy on cultivating support in traditional Republican areas. Blanchard's eschewal of controversy in favor of consensus building served him well through the 1986 election.

THE 1990 CAMPAIGN

In 1990 circumstances reverted to the conditions of 1982. Blanchard again faced a political opponent who enjoyed drawing distinctions and emphasizing ideological differences. As Engler told me after his first campaign trip through the state, Governor Blanchard "has a lot of friends, but few allies." To have allies, you need a battle. Engler, in contrast, had more allies than friends. Again as in 1982, Blanchard faced an economic and political environment he could not control. Along with the rest of the country, Michigan entered a recession that made people skeptical about their economic future. The unemployment rate rose. Consumer confidence hit its lowest point in 30 years during October. On the political front, Congress was investigating the "Keating Five" for improprieties. The national press was full of stories about petition drives to limit the terms of elected officials. Congress and President Bush were discussing the various ways to increase taxes while protecting the wealthy. It appeared that incumbents were in trouble.

In October 1990, PSC's *Public Opinion Monitor* surveyed 800 Michigan voters. We asked them about their trust in government and whether they believed their public officials. We developed an "Incumbency Trust Scale" to measure the public's attitude toward elected officeholders. In the October survey, 67 percent of the respondents defined themselves as either critical or cynical about the political system; the remaining 33 percent were either "believers" or "optimists." These definitions correlated directly with support for or opposition to the incumbent governor. (See "Politics and the People: Alienation and Anger," *Public Opinion Monitor*, November 1, 1990.)

Percent Supporting Blanchard	
Believers	71%
Optimists	56%
Critics	41%
Cynics	30%

In fall 1990 the Michigan electorate was under considerable economic and political stress. I believe the polarization was similar to that in 1982. People wanted a candidate who offered strong solutions to the state's economic difficulties. As the public divided into conservative and liberal camps, the "moderates" diminished. This situation enabled John Engler to become governor, as voters left the centrist Jim Blanchard to seek a tougher approach to the state's fiscal problems. The polarization was particularly evident in Macomb County, where traditional Democratic voters left Blanchard and voted for Engler.

Polarization also was evident on the abortion issue. Engler did extremely well in Kent County, a Right-to-Life bastion, winning by more than 50,000 votes. His tally correlated directly with voting on Proposal A in 1988, which opposed abortion.

The polarization theory helps explain the strategy used by the incumbent governor. I believe Blanchard, sensing polarization and alienation, decided to go on the offensive. His negative ads attacking Engler as an incumbent officeholder, his "Willie Horton style" law-and-order ad early in the campaign, and his theme that Engler would be a change for the worse were efforts to play to the disaffected public. One fascinating aspect of the 1990 election was that Blanchard adopted the strategy and style expected to be used by Engler, who chose a relatively low-key response. In some respects, Engler won because of appealing to the traditional consensus-building style. Blanchard's strategy made him, not Engler, the more divisive candidate.

Blanchard's strategy did not work. He lost the disaffected and more conservative voter and tarnished his image as a consensus-building moderate. Engler won, with the help of a polarized electorate and without exposing the leadership style he would use to govern.

ENGLER'S CHOICES

The challenge to John Engler is relatively easy to understand. What does he do if the voters return to the middle in 1994, as they did in 1985-90, and seek a consensus-building governor? Does Engler attempt to maintain the polarization through creating and exploiting divisive issues? Does he shift to a more moderate stance and consensus building once the state's budget difficulties are resolved?

Engler can continue a polarization strategy by pushing certain "hot buttons" among the electorate. Some issues are divisive by their very nature. Five stand out in Michigan politics: Detroit versus the rest of the state; social welfare versus working taxpayers; racial issues, such as busing; abortion; and tax policy. At present, Engler appears to be pushing four of the five polarizing buttons.

If we assume the state's economy rebounds, the unemployed find work, families regain their confidence in the future, and optimism prevails, then interest in strong solutions and tough candidates will diminish. The politics of divisiveness will seem mean-spirited and counterproductive. Michigan voters are likely to demand that the governor work toward bringing people together. Most of the public is not comfortable with controversy and wants consensus building from political leaders. To use former Governor Thomas Kean's phrase, the "politics of inclusion" will be demanded. People will respond negatively to the polarizing use of the five issues listed above.

Given this scenario, Engler faces a tough choice. His personal inclination and that of his key staff is to create controversy and stress areas of disagreement between himself and the Democratic House. These areas are likely to be social services policy, schools of choice, abortion, and tax expenditures. If Engler were to opt for consensus building, he would stress educational quality, environmental quality, solid waste disposal, "workfare," improvements in roads and telecommunications, and an economic development agenda emphasizing free enterprise and limited government involvement.

Another factor facing the governor is Michigan's historical political culture. Each state has its own, according to political scientist Daniel Elazar, and it affects all aspects of state government. Elazar suggests three types: (1) individualistic states, where reliance on individual initiative and freedom has been strong; (2) traditionalist states, where governance has rested with a traditional governing elite; and (3) moralistic

states, where the public has demanded that government continually seek to improve itself and the conditions for the people. Elazar classifies Michigan as a moralistic state. Illinois and Ohio, in contrast, are classified as individualistic.

Along with Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Oregon, Michigan is rightfully proud of its progressive tradition of clean, open, and innovative government. We point with pride to a strong civil service system, a beautiful park system, the Mackinaw Bridge, open housing laws, a fair tax system, nationally recognized universities, a strong mental health system with community-based treatment programs, and support for people less well off. This progressive history continually will tug at Engler to return to the political middle. The press and opinion leaders continually will challenge him to return to the Michigan legacy. x l

Just as states have political cultures, so do different regions in Michigan. The political culture of Grand Rapids differs significantly from that of Detroit. As a friend expressed it to me, Engler is a "Beal City Republican." Oriented toward individualism and rugged "farm values," Engler is more likely to see the world as an Indiana individualist than as a Michigan moralist.

An individualist political culture also fits well with the current revival of populism in U.S. governance. Historically, it has been based on appealing to the average voter instead of the social and economic elite. Ben Wattenberg's 1968 book identifying the "silent majority" proved to be the philosophical treatise for the 1970s. The silent majority, intensely patriotic and socially conservative, was courted successfully by Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush.

In *The Politics of Rich and Poor*, Kevin Phillips suggests that the average American voter has been used by the Republicans to concentrate wealth in the hands of a few. He predicts that politicians of the 1990s will be successful with the "average" American if they work to give him or her a better deal from government.

Engler's version of populism is to appeal directly to the voter interested in property tax relief. The alienated and the cynical believe government is too large and is more interested in helping itself than the average citizen. Engler's proposal to cut funding for the arts is part of an appeal to the average voter, as is his proposal to eliminate assistance to able-bodied people currently receiving welfare benefits. These are proposals with which the elite may feel uncomfortable but to which the average Michiganiaan may subscribe.

Yet, as governor, John Engler ultimately will want to be leader of all the people, and this should mean he will drift toward the middle. Divisiveness and populism work at election time, but in governing a state, the politics of consensus and progressive government are likely to win out.

THE NEXT PHASE

Engler is currently under pressure ideologically and politically to continue a divisive, conservative leadership style. This is compounded and reinforced by the need to resolve the state's fiscal difficulties. The loyal, dedicated ideologues, fresh from the electoral war, will control the Engler administration and agenda for the first part of the governor's term. He has filled his personal staff with a number of dedicated campaign workers.

As the times change and become less polarized, and as the gravitational pull toward the middle becomes stronger due to Michigan's history, I believe Engler will emerge as a centrist, consensus-building governor. His initial inclination to fight legislative Democrats will give way to the pragmatic realities of managing a diverse state, and Engler is a pragmatist. He understands government. He understands elections. He cleverly has created and taken advantage of divisions and polarizations within society. He also will see the difficulty of swimming against the currents of a moderate electorate and a moralistic political culture.

Whether a governor becomes more consensus oriented may depend on his or her personal ambitions. William Milliken had little desire to be elected to a national office, and he concentrated more on governing than on politics and electioneering. James Blanchard always was interested in returning to Washington but the

opportunity did not arise. Much of his strategy, however, was based on being prepared to seek higher office. At this time it is unclear what John Engler's personal aspirations may be. If he has an eye on the U.S. Senate, he will need to draw distinctions between himself and Senator Riegle, which means continuing with a divisive style. If he wants to remain governor and win public esteem, consensus building will be needed.

Perhaps the governor can forge a new style of leadership for Michigan. Perhaps this state has become fundamentally less progressive, less moralistic, and more divided on political issues. In this case, Engler will be the first of many controversial governors. Personally, I believe his term will see two phases—the political and the consensus phase. Stay tuned.

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