



Michigan ELECTION WATCH

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A Most Unconventional Year

by Craig Ruff

Nothing about this year's elections seems routine. The public's mood stirs angst and bewilderment among candidates (most particularly, incumbents), pundits, and the media . . . and vice versa. This paper discusses the volatile public and possible presidential scenarios that may spring from such an unconventional political year.

THE PUBLIC MOOD

Americans are losing their political moorings. Politically, Americans are roaming the landscape, looking for a party, cause, or person that connects them to their government. The traditional source of such connectedness—partisanship—is discredited. In a national CBS poll taken May 27–30, more American voters (35 percent) identified themselves as “independents” than as Democrats (31 percent) or Republicans (28 percent). Absent loyalty to political parties, voters focus on personalities, as they have done so often in the past.

Historically, American voters have turned often to nonpolitical figures to lead the country. These men, from our first president to Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor, Ulysses S. Grant, and Dwight Eisenhower, have been war heroes. Until World War I, every war produced at least one presidential candidate who, to voters, rose above partisan politics and whose experience proved that he had the steel and mettle to get the job done. This year, the popular outsider comes from business, not the military. It says much about the times that voters are seeing entrepreneurship as the same sort of proving ground for the presidency as battlefields once were.

Politics itself has become entrepreneurial. Men and women need no blessing from a political party to seek any elected office in the land, including the presidency. Many voters, perhaps a majority, do not seem to want a politician (according to Webster, one versed in the art or science of government) in the White House. Convoluted as the reasoning is, the more tested and bruised by political battles and experience, the less “qualified” a candidate may appear to many voters. Today, Americans spin the television dials looking for an outsider to be the nation’s premier politician. Many of us are looking for a savior, and television can produce a savior *du jour*.

As political parties have lost their dominant influence, ever-narrowing special interest groups gain greater sway. Voters who cannot find sufficient commonalities of interest to bond with others in a broad-based political party find a new home within a group of like-minded laborers, businesspersons, or issue advocates. Federal political action committees have grown from 608 in 1974 to 4,172 in 1990. The narrowing of interests—pluralism run rampant—has created a political gridlock in which a consensus of hundreds of groups is required before a government decision can be made. The implosion of common pursuits has exploded the political universe like the “big bang” theory.

In spite of contracting self-interests, it is said that Americans want a summons to action, a call for courage, and leadership for sacrifice. The priest Savonarola tried that in fifteenth century Italy. He told citizens to bring all their vanities—books and godless possessions—to a gigantic bonfire in the heart of town. For days, the townsfolk burned their earthly goods, and then they burned Savonarola. As Paul Tsongas discovered, sermonizing for sacrifice is a risky business in politics as well as religion.

The public mood today is rancorous and inconsistent. Raging against government for its excesses, Americans, through their associations, demand the protection of tax loopholes. Raging against the tyranny of a more powerful government, Americans plead for stronger, more decisive leadership. Raging against special interest politics, Americans jealously guard the crumbs that fall from governmental budgets into their laps. Raging against a debt-ridden public purse, Americans slaughter candidates whose remedies include higher taxes or spending cuts. Because politicians cannot satisfy the mutually exclusive demands the public places on them, the public lashes out. A columnist in Canada's *Globe and Mail*, William Thorsell, described American culture and politics this way.

A political system built on the overt bartering of interest against interest has lost the ability to judge value. Value is confused with gratification. Gratification is confused with happiness. The pursuit of happiness leads evermore insistently toward decline.

THE PRESIDENTIAL SCENARIOS

President Perot is no more remote a possibility than President-Second-Term Bush or President Clinton. The case *against* any one of the three getting elected overwhelms the logic and evidence *for* each getting to the White House. Recent national polls give Ross Perot a slight or healthy lead over Bush, with Clinton close behind. September and October are the months that decide elections and presidents, however, and they are an eternity away. As of now, some possible scenarios are as follows.

Scenario One: *The Clintons Move to Washington*

Bill Clinton takes July's Democratic national convention by storm, with spirited rhetoric and an inspired choice of running mate. He immediately eclipses Perot and Bush in postconvention polls. He falls slightly behind Bush following the August GOP convention but still leads Perot. Economic indicators fall in September and October, raising renewed concern about joblessness and new concern about inflation, heretofore in check. The international scene is calm. In debates, Perot and Bush bash one another while Clinton clings to higher ground. Bush's team finds it difficult to run negative campaigns against both challengers and so targets Perot. Perot spends his advertising budget lambasting the White House, but opinion polls record drooping popularity in October, as the media unveil past improprieties and Perot unveils Perot. By late October, the Clinton and Perot barrages against Bush's status quo policies have taken their toll: Two-thirds of Americans want a new president. Clinton benefits from Perot's precipitous drop: The discontented rally to Clinton. With strong support among Reagan Democrats in the Midwest and Northeast and among blacks in the South, Clinton wins about 25 states and gains close to 300 electoral votes, 30 more than needed. He beats Bush in a 47-44 percent vote, with Perot settling for 9 percent. Clinton's winning coalition resembles the Carter majority in 1976. Bill and Hillary say goodbye to Little Rock.

Scenario Two: *Bush Is Back*

Behind in polls, Bush moves the nation with a brilliant acceptance speech at the Republican national convention. The late August polls show Bush ten points ahead of both Clinton and Perot, who are within a point or two of one another. Perot's \$100-million TV buys keep him competitive throughout the fall, and just as important, he has 3 million volunteers going door-to-door canvassing for support. Clinton's character

comes under renewed scrutiny for a string of misstatements and mistakes. (Bush does not win elections; his opponents lose them.) By mid-October, Bush clings to his 10-percent margin over both challengers, now locked in battle to be the preeminent challenger. Perot and Clinton, seeking to knock the other out of that role, persist in mutually destructive negativism, leaving the high ground to Bush. Economic confidence edges up. Without warning, a world trouble spot erupts. The nation is riveted. The voters recall the Persian Gulf and begin identifying international knowledge and peacemaking prowess as qualities desirable in a president. Bush winds up with 48 percent of the vote, Clinton gets 35 percent, and Perot claims 17 percent. Bush wins 40 states and 450 electoral votes. Not since James Monroe in 1820 has a president won reelection immediately following one who served two full terms. Barbara and George gather the family and celebrate.

Scenario Three: *President Perot*

Perot counters both parties' nominating conventions with his own grass-roots rallies and convention. He manages to steal enough postconvention media coverage each time to stay above 20 percent in polls. He selects a highly respected running mate from within the political establishment. Armed with \$100 million in TV ad buys and 3 million volunteers, Perot's organization credibly offers voters a new political base, centered on a person rather than a philosophy. Facing up to his six-foot-plus challengers at the debates, Perot succeeds in discrediting the choices of the two mainstream parties and establishing himself as the only decisive, goal-directed agent of change. September polls show Bush ahead, but Clinton and Perot, running neck-and-neck, are only 6 or 8 percent behind. Bush's operatives and advertising go after Clinton, who embarrassingly stumbles into trap after trap. Wall Street sells off equities, anticipating the worst—a Perot win. The sell-off triggers a plummet in consumer confidence and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The public mood for change solidifies. By mid-October, Democratic officeholders, fearing negative coattails, drop Clinton like a hot potato. Clinton falls ten points behind Perot, now virtually tied with Bush. Bush exhibits fear in public speeches, and his error-prone and testy exchanges with the media leave the voters disgusted at his weakness. By the weekend before the election, nearly all the undecided voters, believing that Clinton's candidacy is doomed, gravitate to Perot. Perot wins only 38 percent of the popular vote, with Bush and Clinton receiving 35 and 27 percent, respectively. But with a solid bloc of western, southwestern, and midwestern industrial states and a smattering of southern states, Perot ekes out an electoral college majority. To reduce the federal deficit, Ross buys the White House.

Scenario Four: *Yikes!*

Despite some close calls, in only two presidential elections (1800 and 1824) has a candidate failed to win a majority of the electoral college, thereby leaving the selection to the U.S. House of Representatives. Many speculate that, given Perot's potential strength, this could be the third such election in our history. Absent an electoral college majority, presidential fortunes are tossed into the Congress.

Under current law, electors convene on December 14 in each state and cast ballots for president and vice president. The number of electors is determined by the state's congressional districts; each state is entitled to two electors (representing the two U.S. senators) plus one elector for each congressional district. For example, Michigan will have 18 electors, representing two senators and 16 members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Electors are named by political parties as surrogates for their presidential and vice presidential nominees and usually are elected statewide and cast unanimous ballots for the candidates who carried the state. Losing candidates typically receive no electoral votes from a state. In Maine and Nebraska (with Florida likely to follow suit shortly), electors are elected by congressional district and cast their ballots based on which presidential candidate won each district. In all states, electors by law may freely cast ballots for anyone. Tallys from each state are sent to the president of the Senate (the vice president).

On January 6, 1993, at 1:00 p.m., the president of the Senate will preside over a joint meeting of the U.S. House and Senate. The electoral college vote is presented. If no candidate receives a majority of the college's votes (270), the House immediately proceeds to an election of the president.

State by state, the newly elected members of the U.S. House of Representatives caucus; each state delegation casts one vote for one of the three leading vote-getters for president or abstains. Currently, rules provide for secret balloting, but it is likely that the Congress will amend those rules to require an open, public recording of each member's vote. The votes of twenty-six state delegations are necessary to win election to the presidency.

If such an election were held today, Bill Clinton most assuredly would be our next president, regardless of how well he performs in a three-way race. Thirty-one states have a Democratic majority in their House delegation, only ten have a Republican majority, eight are tied, and one, Vermont, with a single member, has an independent who also is a Socialist. Mr. Sanders of Vermont has the same voting power as the fifty-two members of California's House delegation. If either party controls 26 delegations, we can count on that party's nominee being the next president. (Some pundits claim that members of Congress may cast votes against their party's nominee if another candidate carried their district or state handily. Please do not buy that conjecture. In Washington, D.C., if nowhere else, partisanship still counts for a lot.) That augurs well for Clinton; there is simply no way for the Republicans to gain majorities in House delegations from 26 states. However, the turmoil of the Congress and reapportionment well may deprive the Democrats of absolute majorities in 26 state delegations. Michigan, for example, may swing from an 11-7 Democratic edge to 9-7 Republican or an 8-8 tie. No presidential contender may be able to win the 26 votes needed by virtue of deadlocked delegations that abstain.

The Senate, by 51 votes, cast as a body, not by individual state delegations, selects the new vice president from the *two* leading electoral college vote-getters. Absent the essential 26 House delegation votes to elect a president, the new vice president automatically becomes president. The Senate, which certainly will remain in Democratic control, would pick Clinton's running mate. But what happens if Clinton's electoral college tally dips below Bush's and Perot's? The Democratic Senate then would have to choose Dan Quayle or Perot's running mate (think about that when Perot discloses his choice). Minority Republicans have a device to stymie the Democrats in either case. The U.S. Constitution requires that two-thirds of the Senate be in session to form a quorum for the vice presidential vote. Republicans could take a walk and prevent the Democratic majority from voting.

If *neither* chamber fulfills its duty, the new Speaker of the U.S. House (likely, Tom Foley) becomes acting president. If Foley declines, the office goes to the outgoing secretary of state (likely James Baker). It is not farfetched, however, that Foley and Baker might forego the "honor" because of the absence of popular support and the inevitable chaos.

The nation could have bipartisan leadership in the executive branch. The House of Representatives might select as president George Bush or Ross Perot, while the Senate selects Clinton's running mate as vice president.

CONCLUSION

The times create circumstances and circumstances create leaders. The imprudence, impatience, anger, boredom and malaise, pessimism, disjointedness, greed, and detachment of our times have created political circumstances that could result in a presidency of Bush, Perot, Clinton, Quayle, Perot's or Clinton's running mate, Foley, or Baker. The current wrath of the American public could generate something more far-reaching

and consequential than a decision about who will sit in the Oval Office from 1993 to 1997. The public might conclude that their government institutions need fixing.

If the American people despise and distrust their governance, our times and circumstances may dictate change not in leadership but rather in the nation's institutions of governance. No institutions have changed less in the last 200 years than those of government. No institutions carry greater force, and no institutions are more paralyzed. Science, technology, communications, worldwide economic competition, and global turbulence have rendered many organizations obsolete. While more resilient than most, our government can withstand the winds of change only so long. The twenty-first century assuredly will hasten the pace of change.

The hullabaloo of ninety-two may cost us a few political leaders and reward us with a new form of governance. The year may end not with a whimper, but a bang. It may establish in the public's mind that a new compact between the governed and governors must be written, and the public will expect their government to produce accountable, cohesive, and strong leadership *in the public's interest*. The new compact may be predicated on a wisdom that anarchy within government is in nobody's best interest; that government can be more than a broker of ever more rampant and self-serving special interests, more than an agent restraining social and economic change, and more than a laughably incoherent and sadly ineffectual entity; and that government's problem lies less with its servants than with its archaic and arcane constraints.

For a people so weary of ill-governance and nongovernance, the path of federal constitutional change looks less perilous by the day. The tired and entrenched members of the three branches of federal government will not accept change easily; they certainly will not lead it. As in 1776, another unconventional year, the people can shape their governance, if they have the will to.

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