



Michigan ELECTION WATCH

June 19, 1992

The Houses of Representatives

by Craig Ruff

Control of the Michigan House of Representatives overshadows all other state political stakes in 1992, but the evacuation of the state's delegation from the U.S. House of Representatives has commanded the lion's share of attention. This analysis updates earlier, speculative discussion of the House campaigns.

THE MICHIGAN HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Outcomes in the 110 individual races for the Michigan House of Representatives will determine whether Democrats share in state policy making in 1993-94, Republicans gain carte blanche power to reapportion all congressional and state legislative districts, and which individual members control the flow and substance of legislation in the lower chamber. Currently holding a 59-50 edge (with one heavily Democratic district vacant), Democrats may be entitled to some nervousness about retaining their uninterrupted, 24-year majority. But Republicans have raised expectations before (in 1972, 1980, and 1984) of gaining a majority only to have the Democrats hold on.

Reapportionment Uncertainties

The appeal in federal court of the new reapportionment maps places some House districts in limbo for future elections, but not 1992. The ACLU and NAACP, with support from the secretary of state and attorney general, are arguing in U.S. district court that the state supreme court's plan diluted the votes of African-Americans. The plaintiffs argue that at least 15 House and 5 Senate districts should contain majorities of minority residents; the state supreme court's plan drew 13 and 4 minority majority districts, respectively, for the House and Senate. At issue will be the relative priority given to full compliance with the federal voting rights act versus the state supreme court's protection of political jurisdictional lines (cities, counties, and townships). The U.S. district court will allow this year's elections to be based on the state supreme court's plan, leaving open the possibility that some boundaries may change in future years.

Incumbents Facing Primaries

More than a handful of incumbents face potentially strong primary challenges, partly because reapportionment has pitted certain incumbents against each other or has added large numbers of new constituents to existing districts or because organized interest groups, such as the UAW and Right to Life, are targeting some legislators. Special interests exert far more clout in low turnout primaries than in general elections.

Democratic legislators facing at least somewhat challenging primaries include: Joe Young, Jr. (pitted against Hansen Clarke), Burton Leland, Michael Bennane, Charlie Harrison, Jerry Bartnik (pitted against Lynn Owen), and Tom Alley. Republicans include: Georgina Goss, Barbara Dobb, John Jamian, Shirley

Johnson, Don Gilmer, Frank Fitzgerald, Jack Horton, and Ralph Ostling. Blossoming challengers and rising anti-incumbency fervor could endanger other incumbents as well.

Partisan Prospects

As George Bush said: "This is a weird year." Control of the state House of Representatives is impossible to call given the eccentricities of the electorate and so many unpredictable factors. These factors include:

- To which party, if either, will Perot voters gravitate below the presidential level? Will Perot voters cast ballots against incumbents regardless of party?
- Will the voters' wrath against incumbents dissipate by November? If not, will voters discern a difference between Washington, D.C., incumbency and Lansing incumbency? (Perhaps state legislators look comparatively good when contrasted with members of the U.S. Congress.) Will there be a softening of support for the term limitation referendum as voters begin to fear the loss of their communities' clout, and will this trigger more traditional support for incumbents?
- How will highly anticipated challengers fare in the coming months? Are they as good on the stump, hard driving and energetic, and people-pleasing as the parties' recruiters think?
- How will incumbent Democrats' positions on the "Cut and Cap" referendum affect their chances? How will incumbent Republicans' positions on auto insurance rollbacks affect their chances?
- Will Governor Engler's popularity affect legislative races, and if so, what will be the public's rating of the governor come November?

The Perot factor could determine partisan control of the state House. Clear thus far is his appeal to independent voters as well as partisans disgruntled with both parties' presidential nominees. Perot could draw votes disproportionately from either Bush or Clinton, and those voters may or may not return to their partisan roots in casting ballots in legislative races. Many may decline to vote for other offices. Also, his appeal to independent voters may elicit a much larger than normal turnout from people with no partisan leanings and little recognition of or respect for incumbency.

When the state court panel's redistricting plans came out, I calculated, based on incumbents' strength and the partisan leanings of districts, that 51 state House districts should be carried by Democrats and 48 by Republicans, and that 11 could go either way. With candidate filings, I calculate partisan prospects as follows:

Safely Republican Districts	42
Districts Leaning Republican	6
Uncertain Districts	11
Districts Leaning Democratic	19
Safely Democratic Districts	32

In short, either party could win control, or the House could be left deadlocked at 55 members of each party. Securing the election of a majority, 56 members, is a reach for both political parties. The Democrats have a slight edge. The large number of districts "leaning Democratic," most of which would be safe in a conventional year, stems from uncertainty about whether the typical advantages of incumbency will hold. Unlike elections in which many purportedly safe incumbents lose (for example, 1964, 1966, and 1984), presidential, partisan coattails are less apt to be a factor than this searing mood of discontent with the "ins" of both parties.

THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Capitol Hill watchers foresee 100 or more of the 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives exiting this year. Eighty-three freshmen were elected in 1982 and 118 in 1948, the two greatest turnovers in recent times. About seventy members of the House have announced retirements or been defeated in primaries thus far. In Michigan alone at least six of our eighteen congressmen will retire and not be back in 1993. By the end of this year the combined longevity in office of the state's U.S. House delegation will total 304 years: A third of those years, at a minimum, will be lost.

In Public Sector Consultants' prophecy contest earlier this year, only a smattering of entrants predicted that 13 or fewer members of our state's delegation would return next year. Many of this state's shrewdest political watchers who entered the contest answered this question incorrectly, but then who foresaw in January developments such as

- reapportionment ending outright the careers of four members (Carl Pursell, Dennis Hertel, William Broomfield, and Howard Wolpe) and leaving more vulnerable two others (Dale Kildee and Bill Ford);
- scandal (bounced checks) weakening the reelection fortunes of John Conyers and ending outright the career of Bob Davis;
- public approval of the U.S. Congress plummeting to a low of 20 percent (in the Public Sector Consultants-Michigan Hospital Association *Public Opinion Monitor* poll in late March); and
- the retirement of Bob Traxler.

Looking Ahead to the August Primary

A few incumbents cannot look past the August primary. Democrat John Conyers faces State Sen. John Kelly and Martha Scott of Highland Park. Fellow Detroiters and Democrat Barbara-Rose Collins takes on former mayoral candidate Tom Barrow. Republican Guy VanderJagt is challenged by former State Rep. Mel DeStigter. All three incumbents are favorites to win their primary and general elections. (Only three members of Congress from Michigan have lost primaries since World War II.) In this most unconventional political year, however, every incumbent is disquieted by his or her vulnerability.

Looking Ahead to November

Only 5 of the current 18 congressmen are certain to return in 1993: Democrats Sander Levin and John Dingell and Republicans David Camp, Fred Upton, and Paul Henry. The two Detroit districts (Conyers and Collins) will go Democratic in November; Republicans can count on VanderJagt's district and the open, Seventh (mid-south) and Eleventh (Oakland County) districts. Among these safe seats, Democrats can count on four winners and Republicans, six. In the remaining districts, prospects get murkier.

The First District (U.P. and northern lower peninsula) is, on paper, a Democratic-leaning district. Following Davis's withdrawal, former Congressman Phil Ruppe (R) entered the race. Ruppe's primary challengers are State Rep. Stephen Dresch and Traverse City businessman Bill Kurtz. Either former State Rep. Bart Stupak or Cross Village businessman Mike McElroy will win the Democratic nod. The seat could go either way in November.

Leaning Democratic, in descending order of relative safety for Democrats, are:

- Fifth District. Now held by retiring Democrat Bob Traxler, this district has become more Democratic with reapportionment. The spirited Democratic primary, probably the most closely watched in the state, involves state senators James Barcia and John Cherry and Traxler aide Don Hare. On the

Republican side, either State Rep. Keith Muxlow or former Saginaw mayor and General Motors lobbyist Stewart Francke will win nomination.

- Ninth District. Incumbent Democrat Dale Kildee has not faced stiff competition since first elected, but the Genesee-Lapeer-north Oakland County district has become more Republican under reapportionment. Four Republicans seek their party's nomination. This may be a race to watch by fall.
- Thirteenth District. In November incumbent Democrat Bill Ford will square off against Republican State Sen. Bob Geake or University of Michigan professor Raymond Tanter. Set in eastern Washtenaw and northwest Wayne counties, this district augurs well for a Democrat, but Ford's ardent Big Labor and New Deal-brand of liberalism, twenty-eight years on Capitol Hill, and crustiness could become a metaphor for what is wrong in Washington.
- Eighth District. In November incumbent Democrat Bob Carr will face Republican State Rep. Margaret O'Connor, Brighton businessman Dick Chrysler, or newcomer Sandy Pensler.
- Tenth District. Incumbent Democrat David Bonior will face GOP State Senator Doug Carl as he did in 1988 when Carl won 46 percent of the vote. The new district tilts Republican. Bonior's organization is one of the best in the state. However, he faces a testy electorate over his \$26,000 in bank overdrafts.

Winning all five of these seats but losing the First District, the Democrats would gain a 9-7 edge in the delegation, down from the current 11-7 advantage they hold. That would be the way to bet today.

CONCLUSION

While most eyes will train on the presidential race, interest groups and political parties in Michigan will be preoccupied with the 110 campaigns for state House of Representatives. Several congressional campaigns loom as hotly competitive. Future *Election Watches* will keep you updated.

© 1992