



## **Michigan ELECTION WATCH**

August 14, 1992

### **The Primary Election**

by Craig Ruff

One of every five eligible Michiganders voted in the state's August 4 primary, a higher turnout than normal. With no statewide issue or office on the ballot, the one million voters concentrated on local races (for the U.S. House of Representatives, state House of Representatives, and county and township offices) and a scattering of millage questions. With local issues and personalities dominating, the thousands of election outcomes tell little about the overall public mood, let alone forecast November results. Nonetheless, voters struck a few themes.

#### **THE THEMES**

- The voting power of Detroit African-Americans reasserted itself. A large and unified turnout of black Detroiters produced solid victories for U.S. Representatives Barbara-Rose Collins and John Conyers and for embattled Wayne County Sheriff Robert Ficano. The same turnout nearly toppled Wayne County Prosecutor John O'Hair. Detroit turnout may be a key to Michigan's presidential vote come November; its lack thereof deprived Gov. James Blanchard of reelection in 1990.
- Ostentatious media buys are a poor substitute for zealous, organized volunteers and personal campaigning. GOP congressional winners include frugal underdogs Peter Hoekstra, who knocked off incumbent Guy VanderJagt; Joe Knollenberg in Oakland County; and state Senator Nick Smith in the 7th district. Heavily outspent by two rivals, refusing PAC and large contributions, and buying no television ads, state Rep. Margaret O'Connor nevertheless came in a strong second in the 8th congressional district GOP primary.
- State legislative incumbency is worth its weight in gold. Of the thirty-nine state representatives who faced primary challenges from nonincumbents, only three lost (Republicans Ralph Ostling and Georgina Goss and Democrat Chester Wozniak). The renomination rate ran about 92 percent, not shabby in this anti-incumbent year. Three legislators (Democrats Hansen Clarke and Jerry Bartnik and Republican Alvin Hoekman) paired against other incumbents lost. (The incumbent-versus-incumbent situation exists this year because of the redistricting following the census.) A half dozen other state representatives faced very tough races but won.
- Significant turnover occurred at the county and township levels. From one end of the state to the other, county sheriffs, prosecutors, clerks, and commissioners and township supervisors and trustees were ousted. It was almost as if the voters expressed dissatisfaction with American politics by striking down those public servants in closest proximity; familiarity seems to have bred contempt. Many battles at the township level center on the question of closing the door to newcomers. For some years, "no growth" advocates, urging strict zoning to check new development, have been dominating suburban township politics. In Macomb and Oakland counties and outstate as well, pro-development forces this year ousted many entrenched officials. The economic times and costly legal battles with developers have softened many suburbanites' passion for open spaces.

- The “year of the woman” was evidenced in some races, but certainly not uniformly around the state. For the 1st District Court of Appeals, among nine candidates—with electable names like Gillis, Callahan, Maher, and Cahalan—Helene White and Cynthia Stephens placed first and second, far outdistancing the rest of the pack. Teola Hunter easily won the Democratic nomination for Wayne County clerk against a Cavanagh. It was a mixed bag in state legislative primaries. In nineteen competitive legislative races involving women candidates, ten lost and nine won. Those who fell were Juanita Watkins (13th District), state Rep. Goss (20th), Patricia Godchaux (40th), Polly Diehl (67th), Marsha Wilcox (73d), Denise McNamee (81st), Julia Heilig (84th), Carol Thomas (96th), Linda Howard (100th), and Jackie Shrader (103d). Those who won were Deborah Whyman (21st), state Rep. Barbara Dobb (39th), state Rep. Shirley Johnson (41st), Penny Crissman (45th), Mary Schroer (52d), Lynn Rivers (53d), Beverly Hammerstrom (55th), and Michelle McManus (104th). In the only inter-gender contest between incumbents, Jessie Dalman defeated Alvin Hoekman in the 90th district GOP primary.

- In the “year of living dangerously” for political prognosticators, the primary delivered only one blockbuster surprise: the defeat of Congressman Guy VanderJagt. Even there, west Michigan sensors had been telling us for weeks to expect an upset. If, as VanderJagt said after his defeat, he was a victim of the anti-incumbency tide, it was an inch-wide, terribly discerning one. As mentioned earlier, several state lawmakers easily could have been toppled but survived; it would not have surprised political watchers had ten or twelve incumbents, rather than six, lost their seats. Those who were defeated had been given low odds of winning renomination.

- Reapportionment and retirement already drained the Michigan delegation to the U.S. House of Representatives of one-third of its present members (six of eighteen), and Mr. VanderJagt’s defeat will leave Michigan with, at most, eleven veterans. Incumbent Democrats David Bonior, Bob Carr, William Ford, and Dale Kildee face at least some threat this fall; the remaining incumbents are sure bets to return to Washington. Few states ever earn the congressional seniority that Michigan will lose this year.

## LOOKING AHEAD TO NOVEMBER

The primary elections did little to change the parties’ prospects in the war for control of the Michigan House of Representatives. Furthermore, the disastrous summer for the Bush administration dims Republican hopes for riding long presidential coattails. At this point, Republicans will take a Bush win, no matter how slender.

Bush has become a bit of moldy cheese within his own party, whose leaders are aghast at the incompetence, incoherence, and nonchalance of the White House political operation. The most reliable numbers in gauging an incumbent’s reelection chances (based on answers to: Is the country on the right/wrong path? Do you approve/disapprove of his performance? Should he be reelected?) point to a Clinton win, and a big one at that. Still, the volatile public mood and memories of Bush’s comeback in 1988 make Democrats nervous.

No longer seduced by dreams of a Bush landslide, state GOP strategists now must rely on legislative candidates’ winning through their own energy, steel, and persuasiveness. Michigan Democrats have thrived for years in races fought on these terms, and now they may have the added advantage of some help from the top of the ticket. Many believe that Clinton coattails may be able to drag in a half dozen or so Democratic challengers in districts that normally would send Republicans to the state House.