



Michigan ELECTION WATCH

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Presidential Politics

by Craig Ruff

Tom Pendergast is a legendary figure in American politics. For several decades at the turn of this century he and his family ran a Democratic organization in Kansas City, Missouri. In his biography of Harry Truman, David McCullough attributes to Tom Pendergast the view that *politics are concerned with things as they are*.

These eight words explain why Bill Clinton is running strongly and why George Bush is struggling. Voters, concerned with things as they are, bemoan their economic straits, are anxious about the job security of friends and family, are convinced that the nation is on the wrong track, distrust government and other institutions, and are eager for change.

No two statistics define this presidential race better than the following:

- Ninety-five percent of Americans believe that the nation requires *real change* (CBS-New York Times poll, September 1).
- Forty-eight percent of Michigianians believe that they or a member of their household will lose their job in the next year (Public Sector Consultants, Inc./Michigan Hospital Association poll, July 1).

If voters looked back, Bush might win reelection for his leadership in the Persian Gulf war. If they look forward, Bush might win reelection for possessing the knowledge of world and domestic affairs necessary to deal with unforeseen crises. Long term, the public is optimistic about the country. The July 1992 Public Sector Consultants, Inc./Michigan Hospital Association statewide poll reveals that 75 percent of Michigianians believe that America's best days are yet to come. But politics and voters are concerned with the here and now, and Bush appears there and gone.

Clinton's lead, which is about 10 percent nationally, seems insurmountable because of the continuing drips of poor economic news and the hardening of the public's discomfort with the Bush presidency. While it would be foolhardy to call a presidential election this early, every quantitative and qualitative indicator points to a Clinton victory. The best measurements of an incumbent president's strength are all negative for George Bush (large majorities believe the country is on the wrong path, disapprove of Bush's performance in office, and want a change). Economic numbers, too, depict a stubborn sluggishness and low levels of consumer confidence.

Survey research findings and economic statistics only take you so far in analyzing a campaign. The art of politics consists of reading moods, sizing up enthusiasm, and sensing intensity of feeling. On this plane of analysis, too, Clinton looks like a winner. Democrats are becoming enthusiastic about

Clinton and losing their apprehensiveness about his character and electability. A genuine fervor among rank-and-file Democrats is growing for the Arkansas governor, and it is not simply an enthusiasm born of "anybody-but-Bush" resignation. Meanwhile, most Republicans are disheartened and many downright angry about Bush's policies and political performance. This is the first presidential election since 1964 and Goldwater's nomination in which some Republican officeholders are running away from or politely absenting themselves from association with their nominee.

Working against Bush, too, is the exaggerated but nonetheless genuinely felt pessimism of so many Americans. Jimmy Carter aptly named a comparable mood in the late 1970s a *malaise*. Americans harbor appallingly low levels of confidence about the state of public morality, the economy, America's role in the world, and homelife conditions. They see the modern presidency as a lighthouse and the person sitting in the White House as their guide. If Americans feel off course, they blame the person in the Oval Office.

The political parties' reversal of fortunes is ironic. Throughout the Nixon, Ford, Carter, and most of the Reagan years, the Democratic Party held a wide lead over the GOP in the allegiance of voters. Nevertheless, with the exception of the fragile victory by Carter in 1976, Democrats resigned themselves to presidential defeat. Partisan allegiance today is about evenly split, representing an enormous gain by the Republican Party over its standing in the 1960s, but it is the Republicans in 1992 who seem resigned to defeat.

Strategists of both parties know that victory can be snatched from the jaws of defeat. Nobody, including the Clinton campaign team, is complacent—for some very good reasons.

Both Clinton and Bush are like captains of ocean liners speeding across the North Atlantic. They know that an iceberg had been in their path some time ago. Is the iceberg still there? Has it moved safely out of either man's course? The iceberg, of course, is Ross Perot, and the two captains and their crews are wary and know that their strategies could be stale by the next morning.

I can only assume that Perot will reenter this race, and, unlike other observers, I believe that he will do so to win rather than simply to be mischievous. Perot will match in spending the roughly \$50 million of public funds that Clinton and Bush have received. He will reemerge as the public-spirited Cincinnatus, disdainful of what, in his opinion, is the patronizing, negative, and self-indulgent rhetoric of Clinton and Bush. He may wait to reenter until a debate "proves" to the nation that the two major parties nominated two minor leaguers. He will launch a frontal assault on the federal debt, call for sacrifice, and pledge to end Washington corruption.

The first 10 percent of the vote Perot gets will hurt President Bush disproportionately. Many Republicans are embarrassed both by the Bush domestic record and the cultural and religious wars the conservatives launched at the GOP national convention; these Republicans will move more easily into Perot's camp than wavering Democrats will. The next 5 to 10 percent Perot gets he will take about evenly from Clinton and Bush. Above 20 percent of the total vote Perot will erode Clinton's chances dramatically. If he gets 30 percent, he will throw the election into the House of Representatives. At 40 percent he will win the White House. From the standpoint of the all-important Electoral College, Perot threatens to take Texas out of the Bush column. If Perot ends up taking 20 to 25 percent of the national vote, he will threaten Clinton's chances in the industrial Midwest and Mid-Atlantic states.

Clinton and Bush fear another iceberg: Voter turnout, or lack thereof. Will many disenchanted Republicans sit out this election? Will African-Americans and the most liberal Democrats stay home? If only 35 to 40 percent of eligible people vote, strange things will happen. The question is, happen to whom? Governor Blanchard lost reelection in 1990 because of low turnout in heavily Democratic cities, most particularly Detroit. In this century, the outcome of the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon race—decided by less than 100,000 votes combined in three or four states—could be held reasonably to have been decided on voter turnout. If the presidential race tightens, watch for turnout (high or low) to be a deciding factor in key states.

The possibility of a galvanizing event is also lurking out there. It could take the form of an ad-lib comment by one of the candidates, an international crisis, or a domestic crisis. A single event, given the volatility of the public and the softness of support for both Bush and Clinton, could trigger a huge swing in opinion, one way or the other.

Unquestionably, the eligible voters are volatile this year. Since August 26, national polls have shown Bush getting between 36 and 45 percent and Clinton receiving between 46 and 58 percent of voters' support. Clinton's lead in the course of just the past three weeks has fluctuated widely and rapidly between 5 and 21 points! The first polls released after hints of reentry by Perot showed him getting between 18 and 20 percent and reducing Clinton's margin to a half-dozen points.

While November 3 seems just around the corner, it is generally true that one in three or four voters do not lock in their presidential choices until the World Series, with game one set for October 17. Between now and the first pitch of the World Series, almost anything could happen in this race. At the moment, however, Clinton is clearly ahead, economic signs augur continuing public discomfort with the Bush presidency, and it appears that the mood for change and the concern for things as they are will sweep Bush out of the White House.

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