



Michigan ELECTION WATCH

Elections for the United States Congress

by Craig Ruff

In 469 separate elections (435 of the U.S. House of Representatives and 34 of the U.S. Senate), voters will honor winners this November by seating them in the nation's least respected and most vilified political institution, the United States Congress. Consistently this year, the Public Sector Consultants/Michigan Hospital Association statewide polls of Michigianians put approval of that federal institution at about 20 percent; those who *strongly* support the work of Congress number one percent.

Americans are hard pressed to rationalize how they can simultaneously (a) hate Congress, (b) select its members, and (c) reelect those members 95 percent of the time. The cognitive dissonance may be resolved in a typical voter's mind as follows: "I do a decent job finding a person of integrity, courage, and empathy, but voters in all other districts or states elect disreputable, cowardly, and out-of-touch people." Hmmm.

Turnover in Congress this year is likely to be the highest in fifty years. Re-elect numbers (the percentage of respondents in a poll who say that they are inclined to vote again for their member of Congress) are in the mid-thirties, ten or more points lower than normal. That may presage a reelection rate lower than 95 percent. Reapportionment, death, and retirement have taken their toll as well; 65 members of the House and 7 senators have decided to retire, and 2 representatives and a senator have died recently. Party primaries led to the ouster of one senator (Dixon in Illinois) and 19 representatives (one more than the record set in 1946).

It is fairly safe to say that the U.S. Senate will lose 10–12 of its 100 current members (in each even-year election, only a third of the senators' six-year terms expire) and the U.S. House of Representatives will lose 115–135 of its 435 members. Such a turnover threatens the modern political record, set in 1948, when 134 members of Congress lost or retired.

The current partisan rosters in Congress are as follows:

	Senate	House of Representatives
Democrats	57	266
Republicans	43	166
Independents		1
Vacant		2

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

That the House will change dramatically following this election is a given. The loss of many senior members, with excellent committee assignments, will lead to much scurrying for favor, committee hopping, and realignment of key committees. The election also likely will bring to the House quite a few

October 2, 1992

additional women and people of color. The number of women in the House could reach 45, up from 29. The new House can anticipate 16–22 new members of color. These changes will produce a more liberal and activist Democratic caucus.

Incumbents, even in relatively safe districts, are running scared in the face of a “throw the bums out” mood among voters. You see very few “Reelect So and So” bumper stickers this year. Political outsiders, as challengers to incumbents, are taking every advantage of the mood. Even in the relatively calm election year of 1990, many incumbents of both parties saw their winning margins shrink. It would not surprise people if 30–40 incumbents are toppled this year.

Republicans are likely to add about 25 seats in the new House, but at no threat to the Democratic majority. The gain comes largely because of three side effects of redistricting. The more Republican Sunbelt states gained seats at the expense of northern states. In a few states, such as California, Republicans were able to unravel Democratic gerrymanders and produce more evenly balanced districts. Finally, the federal Voting Rights Act led to creation of more minority-majority districts, which consolidated Democratic voters into fewer districts.

Even with a gain of 25, Democrats would outnumber Republicans 245–190. The new year will mark the beginning of the fortieth year of unbroken, Democratic control of the nation’s lower house.

U.S. SENATE

In contrast to the House, a greater percentage of Senate elections are truly competitive. Senate campaigns involve more recognizable figures, stronger and better financed competition, and more evenly balanced partisan allegiance in the statewide as opposed to district contests used to elect most House members. (Only states entitled to one member of the House elect the representative on a statewide basis.) For these reasons, changes in the Senate will be more newsworthy and dramatic.

Institutions in the Senate, including Ohio’s John Glenn, South Carolina’s Fritz Hollings, and Pennsylvania’s Arlen Specter, are vulnerable. No fewer than 12 Republican and 10 Democratic incumbents are running scared, as well they should. One African-American (Carol Moseley Braun in Illinois) could join the now exclusively white Senate.

Gender change could be dramatic. Three women now serve in the U.S. Senate; one was appointed a few weeks ago to fill her late husband’s seat from North Dakota. The Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill *trial* stimulated the candidacies of several women, and several others have lain in wait for the right opportunity to run. All Democrats, women with a chance of joining the Senate include Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein in California, Ms. Braun in Illinois, Lynn Yeakel in Pennsylvania, Gerri Rothman-Serot in Missouri, and Patty Murray in Washington. Geraldine Ferraro narrowly lost her Democratic primary in New York.

In the Senate, Democrats should gain 1–3 seats, even though they have more (19 of 34) seats at stake. If the Republicans hope to make any net gain, they will have to pull off upsets in seven southern senatorial battles. They have almost no chance of gaining a majority.

MICHIGAN’S CONGRESSIONAL SEATS

Compressing eighteen U.S. House of Representatives’ districts into sixteen, reapportionment combined with retirements and a primary defeat to end the careers of seven Michigan congressmen. The

remaining eleven incumbents all lead in their reelection bids. Six are safe: Democrats Barbara-Rose Collins, John Conyers, and John Dingell and Republicans Dave Camp, Paul Henry, and Fred Upton. Also safe are four newcomers: Democrat James Barcia and Republicans Peter Hoekstra (who ousted Guy VanderJagt in the 2nd District's GOP primary), Nick Smith, and Joe Knollenberg. That leaves six seriously contested seats.

Five incumbent Democrats, nervously surveying the anti-incumbent mood, are leading in their races but cannot take reelection for granted. They are David Bonior, Bob Carr, William Ford, Dale Kildee, and Sander Levin. In most cases, the Republican challengers are having a hard time raising funds; Bush's descent has dried up GOP coffers. Also hurting the challengers' chances are the twin possibilities of lower-than-normal turnout among traditionally Republican voters and Clinton coattails.

In the 1st District, which encompasses the Upper Peninsula and northern counties of the Lower Peninsula, former GOP Congressman Philip Ruppe is in a close battle with former Democratic State Representative Bart Stupak to replace retiring Republican Bob Davis.

The Perot vote is a wild card in the contested seats. Assuming that Perot draws about 15 percent statewide, perhaps as high as 20-25 percent in suburban and outstate areas (he runs weakest in cities and among minorities), it is anyone's guess where his voters will go below the presidential line on the ballot. Since half of Perot voters tend to be ticket-splitters and the other half are about evenly divided among Democratic and Republican sympathizers, they may vote for offices such as member of Congress about the same way as Bush and Clinton voters. Many Perot voters may not cast ballots for other offices. Perot supporters, however, are the voters most disenchanted with the political status quo; many may vote against all incumbents, particularly members of Congress. The Perot factor should not be discounted in the above six contested congressional races.

Democrats currently hold an 11-7 edge in Michigan's U.S. House delegation. As of now, odds favor the Democrats winning nine of the new sixteen districts. But of those nine Democratic-leaning districts, five are at some degree of risk; only in the 1st District do Republicans carry risk. The final partisan makeup of the delegation assumes much greater importance should the presidential election be thrown into the U.S. House. Each state's delegation casts only one vote for president.

Neither of Michigan's U.S. senators are up for election this year.

CONSEQUENCES

If George Bush is reelected, he will face Democratic majorities in the Congress. The federal government will remain in partisan deadlock, and public policy will dribble out of bipartisan negotiation. Bush would face more liberal and probably more combative Democratic caucuses. National health care reform and federal debt reduction, both of which beg for speedy attention, will languish in debate and partisan bickering.

If Bill Clinton is elected, he will have to win over the entrenched Democratic Capitol Hill insiders to his promised reforms. As the outsider Jimmy Carter discovered, being a Democratic president with Democratic majorities does not automatically mean speedy action on the president's agenda. Overhauling health care finance may be made easier by unified governance, but one can hardly be optimistic about a Democratic White House and Congress marshalling the courage and discipline to contain or reduce federal spending that is necessary to alleviate the national debt.

The accumulated \$4 trillion federal debt, the current \$375 billion in overspending, and sluggish economic growth will set a minus-sum game for the new Congress and whomever is elected president. That unenviable reality, for which the American public is unprepared, awaits the *winners* of the November elections.

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