



Michigan ELECTION WATCH

The Race to Control the Michigan House of Representatives

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WHAT IS AT STAKE IN STATE HOUSE ELECTIONS?

The presidential race captures the public's attention, but partisan control of the Michigan House of Representatives is the greatest stake in state government. To all but Lansing insiders, however, the campaign to win control of the House is invisible. Unless you happen to live in one of the handful of hotly contested House districts, you never would guess that this chamber's elections carry so much importance.

Continued Democratic control of the House is not automatic. (Currently, Democrats have 59 seats to the Republicans' 50, and one—in a heavily Democratic district—is vacant.) Population shifts reflected in the 1990 census and the subsequent redistricting made four Democratic districts in Wayne County disappear; these four districts popped up in heavily or nominally Republican areas (one each in Oakland County, Ingham/Livingston counties, Kent County, and Clinton/Ionia counties). On paper, these demographic changes produce a House that should be almost evenly divided: 56 Democratic and 54 Republican seats.

IF THE REPUBLICANS GAIN CONTROL

If the GOP wrests a majority in the House, Republicans will control both legislative chambers and the governorship. This will mean that the party can

- redraw all congressional and state legislative boundaries to the year 2002;¹
- control the flow of all legislation in the 1993-94 session; and
- enact Gov. John Engler's policy agenda, including budget recommendations, repeal of the inheritance tax, a stiff crime package, and reforms in medical liability, teacher tenure, and school finance.

Divided governance has been a way of life in Lansing, much as it has been in Washington, D.C. Michigan voters have entrusted to one party control of both legislative chambers and the governorship for only five years since 1948 (the Republicans in 1963-64 and 1967-68 and the Democrats in 1983).

¹The recent redistricting was accomplished by court order, not by statute. If Republicans end up with a majority in both chambers of the legislature, they would have the votes to pass a redistricting plan to replace the court's, and Republican Gov. John Engler most certainly would sign it. In fact, Gov. James Blanchard and the Democrats almost pulled off such a feat in 1983; but for a procedural technicality and subsequent recall of two Democratic senators, which cost the Democrats control of that chamber, the Michigan political map would have looked much different in the 1980s.

Divided governance assuredly diffuses accountability by the parties for matters that go right or wrong, and also occasionally can cause gridlock on policy issues. However, split control slows dramatic policy change, giving policy makers and the public more time to weigh consequences.

In 1991 Governor Engler won most of his budgetary priorities, including the end of the state's General Assistance program. Faced with a \$1.8 billion deficit, House Democrats eventually accepted the unenviable option of going along with the governor's recommended cuts as opposed to calling for higher taxes. In 1992, with state finances stabilized (temporarily at least), the legislature wrestled with the governor's nonbudget agenda, which included tort reform in medical and automobile insurance liability. The governor scored much less success in these areas.

Nearly everyone believes that the 1993 session will be enveloped in budget politics. Looming ahead is the 1993-94 fiscal year, with a projected deficit in the range of \$600 million to \$1 billion. If Proposal C (Cut and Cap) passes, an additional \$416 million expenditure will be necessary to reimburse school districts for lost property tax revenue. Writing a 1993-94 budget that starts off with a \$1-1.4 billion shortfall makes legislators understandably nervous, particularly since most accounting gimmicks and the easiest spending reductions were exhausted in balancing the 1991-92 budget.

With all due deference to the role of the Republican Senate, the party that controls the House will determine whether the 1993-94 budget is built primarily on deeper cuts in state spending or on higher taxes. A mix of the two most likely is inevitable, but a Democratic-controlled House will hold out for heavier reliance on increased revenues.

Of great consequence too is state government's response to nonbudget issues including medical liability reform, restrictions on assisted suicide, the future role of the Michigan Strategic Fund, coordination of job training programs, and economic development incentives. If Proposal D (AAA's auto insurance rollback) fails, the legislature and governor again will face the complex issues of essential insurance, territorial rating, tort reform, limits on medical benefits, and premium reductions. The impasse between the governor and House Democrats on these insurance issues is what prompted the initiatory petition that appears on the November ballot.

For all these reasons and many more, the 110 elections to the state House are of paramount importance to Michigan.

THE HISTORY OF DEMOCRATIC CONTROL

A clear majority of House districts was carried by Republicans in various statewide races: Milliken in 1970, 1974, and 1978; Ford in 1976; Reagan in 1980; Reagan and U.S. senatorial loser Lousma in 1984; Bush in 1988; and Engler in 1990. Nevertheless, Democrats have won the majority of House seats since 1969. How candidates for other offices fare in House districts does not necessarily predict how legislative candidates themselves will fare.

In some districts, party leanings of voters are so tilted one way or the other as to make general elections moot. A Republican has no chance in the 13 Detroit districts; no Democrat is even on the ballot in 14 Republican districts. About 75 House seats are secure for one party or the other, save for a disastrous year for one party (as the LBJ landslide was for the GOP in 1964). These solid seats are about evenly divided: 37 are safely Republican and 38 safely Democratic. In addition, 10 districts lean Republican, and 11 lean Democratic. Outcomes in the remaining 14 "swing" districts, where neither party

commands allegiance of more than about 55 percent of the voters, determine which party will control the majority in the chamber. Within such districts Democrats have dominated since the 1960s.

In about a dozen districts the incumbent legislator belongs to the minority party; in most of these cases a Democratic legislator represents a Republican-leaning electorate. Only two sitting Republicans, Mickey Knight and Steve Dresch, represent areas that on paper should be held by Democrats. (The phrase *on paper* is to politics something similar to what *odds* is to pari-mutuel betting.) Knight chose to retire this year; Dresch chose to run in the First Congressional District GOP primary, which he lost. Both seats are likely to be recaptured by the Democrats. No fewer than 11 Democrats represent areas that are evenly balanced or tilt Republican: Tom Alley, Tom Mathieu, Mary Brown, Paul Baade, Lew Dodak, Pat Gagliardi, Mike Griffin, Clark Harder, Dianne Byrum, Ken DeBeaussaert, and Lynn Jondahl. With the exception of Dodak, Harder, and Byrum, each replaced a Republican. All are seeking reelection and as incumbents enjoy an edge in winning reelection.

Democrats have held the majority in part because they have focused so intensely on the swing districts. In the last couple of decades Republicans who captured Democratic-leaning swing districts generally served a term or two, then lost (Colleen House Engler, James Connors, Greg Gruse, and Roman Kulchitsky are examples). Occasionally, Democrats in Republican-leaning areas lost after a term or two (Kay Hart and Debbie Farhat come to mind) but with much less frequency. Democrats have mounted far more successful evictions than have Republicans. Because the Democrats have been the majority party in the House, they can offer their embattled members in enemy territory excellent committee assignments and bill sponsorships as inducements to stay and as incentives to their constituents to keep them. Democrats in the swing districts have tended to build longer careers in the House, blocking the way for Republicans to reclaim their seats.

A case in point is Muskegon County. Mickey Knight, the Republican, represented successfully for years a Democratic-leaning district that takes in the city of Muskegon. Knight carried his district by 5,461 votes in 1990, a substantial margin. The more Republican suburban and rural areas of the county are represented by Democrat Paul Baade, who ousted a Republican in 1990 by 2,261 votes. After this year's redistricting, Knight found his district taking in more Democratic areas; Baade, in the swap, gained more Republican areas. Knight could have sought reelection and been an odds-on favorite to win, but he chose to retire. Baade could have moved into Knight's district and easily been elected. But Baade sat tight, with his incumbency giving him a fair chance of winning reelection, and Democrats recruited another candidate to run in the safer district. The outlook today is for the Democrats to win both Muskegon districts.

CANDIDATES AS ENTREPRENEURS

Other forces have helped to secure Democratic majorities in the state House. As Alan Ehrenhalt (author of *United States of Ambition*) argues, Democrats dominate legislative offices throughout the nation in part because people with Democratic loyalties are more apt to run for and run hard to win government office. As Ehrenhalt points out, throughout the 1980s—an era dominated by Reagan and the Republicans—60 percent of the nation's state legislators were Democrats. Democrats see positive roles for government. Republicans tend to distrust and play down the significance of government. Republican Party officials sometimes find it difficult to recruit candidates eager to pound the pavement and zealous in their desire to win a place in a legislative body that they disparage. Ehrenhalt is right: Democrats by definition enjoy government, regard highly the good works of government, support expanded roles for

government, and have respect for public service as a calling. If you like the product, you buy it—or in the case of legislative office, you seek it.

In the end, personalities more than partisanship hold the key to winning the swing districts. In legislative races personal charisma counts for more than ideology. With the diminishing role of political parties, candidates have become entrepreneurs. They have to raise personally much of their campaign funds and recruit their own workers. Once elected they work hard to maintain their own political organization, usually quite distinct from the political party organization. Of far greater help than the political party to legislative candidates are the legislative caucuses. In the House and Senate the parties' central staffs largely have replaced the fund-raising, polling, and manpower resources of the state and local political party committees.

When he served in the state Senate, John Engler recognized the vacuum left by the descent of the political parties and built the Senate Republican office into a resource that could win and maintain GOP control of the upper chamber. Former Democratic Speakers of the House Crim and Owen had done the same in the House for their party, and current Speaker Lew Dodak has maintained the immensely powerful House Democratic campaign machine. Monies from political action committees (PACs) are pooled by the legislative caucuses and targeted carefully to key races. The propriety of also using taxpayer funds for overtly partisan and political activities comes under only occasional questioning. The *New York Times Magazine* (Sunday, September 27) exposed the New York Legislature's outrageous expenditures and election procedures (apportionment and exceedingly complex guidelines for circulating petitions of candidacy) designed to preserve incumbency, but rarely has such an in-depth investigative piece been done on our state's legislature. Perhaps out of concern for that possibility, Senate Majority Leader Dick Posthumus recently moved the Republican senatorial campaign and political operation out of the capitol building and off the state payroll.

FALL PROSPECTS

At this writing Democrats maintain an edge in their bid to retain control of the state House. It is a slight edge, perhaps only a couple of seats. Toward the 56 seats needed for majority, the Democrats enjoy an advantage in 49 districts, the Republicans in 47. Fourteen seats could go either way.

With the rising fortunes of Bill Clinton, Democrats have gained considerable optimism. Coattails could come into play. If Clinton beats President Bush by 10 percentage points in the state, it is hard to see how the Republicans can pick up enough swing districts and protect their core districts to achieve 56 members. A Clinton margin of 20 points could reward the Democrats with a net increase in seats, and they could end up with 62–64 seats. However, Clinton's margin over Bush could shrink, if not evaporate, and if the race closes to within 3–5 points, coattails will have very little effect on legislative outcomes.

The vote for Perot is a wild card. He will siphon off a healthy vote in suburbs, in which lie many of the contested, swing House districts. If Perot wins only 10 percent statewide, he likely will obtain 15 percent or better in Macomb and Oakland counties, out-county Wayne, and exurban areas. Will his supporters vote for offices other than president? How will they split between Republican and Democratic candidates? Will they cast votes against incumbents of both parties?

Voter turnout can affect key races. For a number of reasons this factor gives Democrats an exceptional edge this year. First, presidential elections draw at least 10 percent more voters than gubernatorial, off-year elections; usually these voters, as a group, are less well off and less educated than

off-year voters and more apt to vote Democratic. Second, Democratic and liberal organizations engaged in extensive voter registration drives this year, which could boost turnout both in heavily Democratic cities like Detroit and in swing legislative districts. Third, and perhaps most important, many demoralized and/or disenchanted Republican voters may sit this election out. Particularly in swing districts, getting out the Republican vote may be more difficult than usual.

The anti-incumbency mood is not to be taken lightly. In case voters suffer a lapse of memory about their feelings toward entrenched politicians, Proposal B (term limits) will stare them in the face, albeit at the end of the ballot. Despite talk about limiting terms, the state House renomination rate ran about 92 percent in the August primary; of 39 representatives who faced primary challenges from nonincumbents, only three lost. And public approval ratings for the state legislature are double those for the U.S. Congress. This year incumbents for all offices are skillfully downplaying their length of service and running as agents of change. Holding an office still appears to be worth its weight in gold.

Several House incumbents nonetheless face stiff challenges. They are odds-on favorites to win reelection, but they can take nothing for granted. By party and district, they are the following:

Democrats Dobronski (15), Bams (18), Kosteva (21), Yokich (26), Olshove (29), DeBeaussaert (33), Scott (50), Brown (60), Byrum (68), Baade (91), Dodak (94), and Gagliardi (107); somewhat less threatened are Gire (31), Harrison (43), Jonker (47), and Harder (85)

Republicans Rocca (30), Jaye (32), Robertson (51), Walberg (57), London (81), Strand (82), McBryde (99), and Bodem (106)

To these districts with incumbents must be added various open seats where neither party has a certain win. By geography and district number, they include the following:

Southeast Oakland County District 34
Waterford Township, Oakland County District 44
Washtenaw County District 52
Washtenaw/Monroe counties District 55
Ingham/Livingston counties District 67
Wyoming/Grandville, Kent County District 77
Clinton/Ionia counties District 86
Saginaw/Bay counties District 95
Bay County District 97
Grand Traverse/Leelanau counties District 104
Northern lower peninsula (Gaylord, Grayling) District 105

Each election brings surprises. Particularly this year, with a volatile electorate, upsets almost are inevitable.

THE HOUSE: DISTRICT BY DISTRICT

Following is a list, in district number order, of all 110 House elections. Using a variety of sources, I have divided the campaigns into five categories. *Safe* Republican or *safe* Democratic indicates that the party can count on winning the seat because the election either is uncontested or very one-sided by virtue of the voters' party leanings or the candidate's strength. Typically, the strong party wins 60

percent or more of the vote. *Leaning* Republican or *leaning* Democratic indicates a strong but not insurmountable lead by that party's candidate. In these districts a candidate could win with 60 percent or more, but also could lose if many forces break against him/her. The 14 *swing* districts hold the key to partisan control of the House. In these areas either party could win the seat.

I believe the likelihood-of-election indicators on the list are reasonably accurate reflections of current trends. Obviously, circumstances can change quickly and dramatically as the campaign comes to a close, and since the indicators are not based on survey research, they are very subjective.

Because the list provides only the last name of each major party's candidate and because many pundits predict that gender will play a big role in 1992 elections, I have indicated with a plus sign the women seeking House seats. An asterisk identifies incumbents. If there is no incumbent, I note whether he/she retired or was defeated in a primary or if the district is newly created because of redistricting.

District Number	Candidates	Safe Republican	Leaning Republican	Swing	Leaning Democratic	Safe Democratic
1	R-Bryant* D-Hartmann+	X				
2	R-Ridley D-Hertel*					X
3	R-Harris+ D-Young, Sr.*					X
4	R-Pickett+ D-Young, Jr.* (Clarke lost in primary)					X
5	R-Hatcher+ D-Wallace*					X
6	R-Prus D-Points (Wozniak lost in primary)					X
7	R-Scarberry D-Murphy*					X
8	R-Patterson+ D-Varga*+					X
9	R-Flournoy D-Kilpatrick*+					X
10	R-Taylor+ D-Saunders*					X
11	R-Castillo-Dominguez+ D-Hood, Jr.*					X
12	R-Ashe D-Stallworth*+					X
13	R-Spearman-Leach D-Leland*					X

District Number	Candidates	Safe Republican	Leaning Republican	Swing	Leaning Democratic	Safe Democratic
14	R-James+ D-Bennane*					X
15	R-Thomas D-Dobronski*+			X		
16	R-Carey D-Young*					X
17	R-Juarez D-Keith*					X
18	R-Cabrera D-Barns*				X	
19	R-Bankes*+	X				
20	R-Vorva (Goss defeated in primary)	X				
21	R-Whyman+ D-Kosteva*			X		
22	R-Siml D-Pitoniak*					X
23	R-Barron, Jr. D-Porreca*					X
24	R-Roberts D-Palamara*					X
25	R-Emery D-DeMars*					X
26	R-Lund D-Yokich*+			X		
27	R-Bedra D-Ciaramitaro*					X
28	R-Horton D-Weeks*					X
29	R-Chmura D-Olshove*				X	
30	R-Rocca* D-Lampar		X			
31	R-Perry D-Gire*+				X	
32	R-Jaye* D-Kostiuk		X			
33	R-Kukuk D-DeBeaussart*			X		
34	R-McCullough D-Freeman (Webb retired)				X	

District Number	Candidates	Safe Republican	Leaning Republican	Swing	Leaning Democratic	Safe Democratic
35	R-Wanat D-Gubow*					X
36	R-Stack D-Berman*+					X
37	R-Dolan*+ D-Jurczyk	X				
38	R-Bullard, Jr.* D-Havey	X				
39	R-Dobb*+ D-Nemer	X				
40	R-Jamian* D-Sitner	X				
41	R-Johnson*+ D-Ross+	X				
42	R-Kaza D-Buller (Sparks retired)	X				
43	R-Bueno D-Harrison*				X	
44	R-Galloway D-Glover (Trim retired)		X			
45	R-Crissman+ D-McNealy+ (New)	X				
46	R-Middleton* D-Herronen	X				
47	R-Hill+ D-Jonker*				X	
48	R-Callahan D-Clack*					X
49	R-Romanowski D-Emerson*					X
50	R-Zelenko+ D-Scott*			X		
51	R-Robertson* D-Curtis+			X		
52	R-Ouimet D-Schroer+ (P. Bullard retired)			X		
53	R-Bertram D-Rivers+ (New)					X

District Number	Candidates	Safe Republican	Leaning Republican	Swing	Leaning Democratic	Safe Democratic
54	R-Heningburg D-Profit*					X
55	R-Hammerstrom+ D-Douglas (O'Connor retired)			X		
56	R-Green D-Owen* (Bartnik lost in primary)					X
57	R-Walberg* D-Hill		X			
58	R-Nye* D-Heim+	X				
59	R-Oxender* D-Webb	X				
60	R-Morrison+ D-Brown*+			X		
61	R-Shugars*	X				
62	R-Martin*	X				
63	R-Gilmer*	X				
64	R-Gazan D-Griffin*					X
65	R-Hoffman*	X				
66	R-Munsell*+ D-Mills+	X				
67	R-Gustafson D-Schertzing (New)		X			
68	R-Truscott D-Byrum*+				X	
69	R-Hruska D-Hollister*					X
70	R-Rizor D-Jondahl*					X
71	R-Fitzgerald* D-Davis	X				
72	R-DeLange*	X				
73	R-Horton* D-Ellis+	X				
74	R-Sikkema* D-Kliphuis	X				
75	R-Bandstra* D-Ford+	X				

District Number	Candidates	Safe Republican	Leaning Republican	Swing	Leaning Democratic	Safe Democratic
76	R-Johnson D-Mathieu*					X
77	R-Vorhees, Sr. D-Uskiewicz (New)		X			
78	R-Gnodtke*	X				
79	R-Brackenridge* D-Ziebart	X				
80	R-Middaugh*	X				
81	R-London* D-Docherty			X		
82	R-Strand* D-Willard+		X			
83	R-Rhead (Muxlow retired)	X				
84	R-Allen*	X				
85	R-Dvorak D-Harder*				X	
86	R-Cropsey D-Sloan (New)		X			
87	R-Bender* D-Wuelfing	X				
88	R-Hillegonds*	X				
89	R-Stille D-Dean (New)	X				
90	R-Dalman*+ D-Hansen+ (Hoekman lost in primary)	X				
91	R-Ritchard D-Baade*			X		
92	R-Twining D-Agee (Knight retired)					X
93	R-Randall* D-Ort	X				
94	R-Goschka D-Dodak*				X	
95	R-Litfield D-O'Neill*					X

District Number	Candidates	Safe Republican	Leaning Republican	Swing	Leaning Democratic	Safe Democratic
96	R-Jerševic D-Lefkiades (Niederstadt retired)			X		
97	R-Gougeon D-Wetters (Hickner retired)				X	
98	R-McNutt*	X				
99	R-McBryde* D-Nelson		X			
100	R-Llewellyn D-Kangas (Van Singel retired)	X				
101	R-Bobier* D-Wandrych	X				
102	R-Gernaat*	X				
103	R-Knepper D-Alley*					X
104	R-McManus+ D-Greene+ (Power retired)		X			
105	R-Lowe D-Weiss (Ostling lost in primary)			X		
106	R-Bodem*+ D-Long			X		
107	R-Brower+ D-Gagliardi*				X	
108	R-Pritzl D-Anthony*					X
109	R-Alderson D-Jacobetti*					X
110	R-Wolfe+ D-Shepich (Dresch retired)					X
		37	10	14	11	38

* = Incumbent

+ = Woman

CONCLUSIONS

Other than their vote for president, control of the Michigan House of Representatives will be the most significant decision of Michigan voters on November 3; obviously, the latter will have the more

immediate effect on state government policy making. Next year budgetary and policy matters will be affected keenly by the partisan makeup of the House. As of now, Democrats enjoy a slight edge in the race to maintain majority. Factors including presidential coattails, incumbency pluses and minuses, and the personalities of individual candidates make hard-and-fast predictions impossible. Although 75 seats are not competitive (that is, one party is virtually assured of holding the district), the other 35 seats could fall to either party. It is within these 35 contests, particularly the 14 areas where the partisan balance is very close, that the race for control of the House will be won.

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