



Michigan COMMENTARY

Election Forecast

by Craig Ruff and Gerald A. Faverman

In August, our last political commentary carried a prophecy of a close presidential race and few changes in the Michigan political landscape. With two weeks to go, George Bush enjoys a handsome lead. If it holds, a larger-than-anticipated margin of victory for Bush could alter the partisan fortunes of state candidates.

PRESIDENT

In March, we wrote that Bush would win the White House. The only note of caution was that the economy (if in decline) could be the Achilles' heel of the Republicans. It has evolved that the strength of the economy has been the Achilles' heel of the Democrats. Low unemployment and inflation and world peace have robbed Dukakis of the most compelling reasons for independent and weakly partisan voters to reject four more years of Republican rule in the White House.

Political candidates are always hostages to fortune, and a dramatic event or two could turn the current tide (either producing a Bush landslide or a narrow Dukakis victory). A large proportion of voters have been unstable throughout 1988, not enamored of either presidential candidate. In a Chilean-like election, a majority of voters might vote "no" on both Bush and Dukakis. These caveats aside, Bush is close to wrapping up the election.

Most national polls the week of October 17-21 show a Bush lead of 7-10 percent. The Cable News Network tracking poll consistently has depicted a Bush lead of 8-11 percent for the past three weeks.

An electoral college majority is 270. As of now, we put seven states and the District of Columbia in Dukakis's column (Massachusetts, New York, Minnesota, Hawaii, Rhode Island, Maryland, and West Virginia), for a total of 86 electoral votes. Question-mark states are: Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Arkansas, Iowa, Oregon, Wisconsin, and Washington, with 75 electoral votes. All other states are safely for or leaning to Bush (377 votes). To win, Dukakis must take all the following states, in each of which Bush now holds a lead: California, Michigan, Illinois, and Ohio. **The best guess today is that Bush will win a 377-161 electoral college majority and a 53-47 percent victory in popular vote.**

In Michigan, we expect Bush to win by 6 points. In 1980, Reagan defeated Carter in this state by 7 percent; in 1984, he beat Mondale by 19 percent. A Bush victory by 6 percent or more in Michigan introduces some drama into the state's unexciting array of political contests. We look for a low turnout, perhaps on the order of 3.6 million votes cast, down from the record 3.9 million in 1980 and below the 3.8 million in 1984. A low turnout likely will favor Republicans.

U.S. SENATE

In August, we prophesied no net change in the Democrats' 54-46 majority in the U.S. Senate. Democratic prospects in several states (such as New Jersey, Connecticut, Ohio, Wisconsin, and North Dakota) have improved since August. But a big Bush win brightens Republican hopes of an upset or two. Overall, we look for a Democratic net gain of one or two seats.

Don Riegle is not vulnerable. Republican Jim Dunn's challenge has been woeful. Pundits predict a Riegle landslide approaching 70 percent; we think it will be closer to 60 percent but still very much a landslide.

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Very few House districts swing from one party to another. Reagan carried into office 32 new Republican members of the House in 1980. Bush will not, even if his national margin approximates Reagan's. The 1980 election was a repudiation of Democratic policies, carrying bad news for Carter and congressional Democrats. The 1988 edge for Bush represents less a rejection of the Democrats than contentedness with current affairs, helping incumbents of both parties. **Look for a very small GOP gain in the U.S. House of about eight seats.**

Until last week, everyone in Michigan had focused on the hotly contested congressional campaigns in the districts of GOP incumbents Bob Davis and Carl Pursell. **With Bush's surge, Pursell and Davis, while still vulnerable, appear to be in good shape.** Suddenly, attention has turned to two Democratic congressmen, Dave Bonior (Macomb County) and Howard Wolpe (Kalamazoo), who may be troubled by Bush coattails. **We believe that Bush would have to win Michigan by 15 percent or more in order for Republican challengers to upset either Bonior or Wolpe.** Wolpe, in particular, faces a surprisingly aggressive challenge and TV blitz from Republican Cal Allgaier. Doug Carl's challenge to Bonior has been weaker.

MICHIGAN HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Throughout the late summer and early fall it seemed that only two Republicans (Jim Conners in the U.P. and Tim Walberg in Lenawee County) and two Democrats (Agnes Dobronski in Dearborn and Bill Browne in Utica) were in serious jeopardy of losing their seats. But if Bush's margin over Dukakis approaches 10 percent, such Democratic incumbents as Ken DeBeaussaert, Sharon Gire, and John Maynard in Macomb County, Jim Docherty in St. Clair County, Debbie Farhat in Muskegon County, Kay Hart in Genesee County, Roland Niederstadt in Saginaw County, Wilfred Webb in Oakland County, and Mary Brown in Kalamazoo County may have closer-than-expected races. Republican Conners still faces trouble because of the heavily Democratic seat he represents. Walberg may benefit from a heavy Republican turnout and be saved by Bush coattails. An open seat, vacated by Democrat Rick Sitz of Taylor (downriver Wayne County), is strongly Democratic but could fall to the Republicans if the Bush appeal to blue-collar Democrats solidifies.

Offsetting Republican optimism is the fact that Democratic incumbents are well financed, running scared, buffered on the ballot by a Riegle landslide, and benefit from the "feel good" mood of voters. Republicans gained no House seats in Reagan's 1980 victory. In his 1984 landslide, six Democratic seats

were lost to Republicans in part due to overconfidence and disbelief that coattails were all that important. The Democratic incumbents in tough districts are not taking anything for granted this year.

All in all, GOP prospects for gains in the Michigan House have improved. Republicans hoped for a gain of one or two seats a month ago; now, they believe a gain of six seats is possible. Look for a Republican gain of two or three House seats, reducing the Democrats' current 63-46 majority (with one heavily Democratic seat vacant) but not enough to regain control of the chamber, held by the Democrats since 1967.

STATEWIDE RACES

Notwithstanding the tendency of 20 percent or more voters to cast "no" votes on ballot referenda, it now appears that all four proposals will be approved. Proposals C and D create environmental and recreational bonding programs, popular with environmentally chauvinistic Michigan voters. Proposal B (perhaps the most innocuous proposal ever to make the ballot) writes into the state constitution protection of rights for crime victims. Not enough criminals in the state can vote "no" to jeopardize its passage. Proposal A, which allows voters to decide whether to ban Medicaid funding for abortions (the pro-choice position is "no" and the right-to-life position is "yes"), is capturing all the attention. Short of a come-from-behind miracle tied to television advertising, pro-choice forces face defeat, although conceivably by as narrow a margin as 4 percent.

All candidates for the statewide educational posts (the governing boards of MSU, Wayne State, and U of M plus the State Board of Education) understand beforehand that their fortunes are largely tied to the respective heads of their partisan tickets. We wrote in August that a narrow Bush win or a Dukakis victory would give the Democrats a clean sweep of the educational posts. If Bush takes the state by six or eight points, we may see (as we did in 1980) a mix of Republican and Democratic victors; in this circumstance, possibly because of some name recognition, the likely winners are Republicans Barbara DuMouchelle (State Board of Education), Richard Van Dusen (Wayne State Board of Governors), and Deane Baker (U of M Board of Regents) and Democrats Murray Jackson (Wayne State Board of Governors), Lawrence Crawford (State Board of Education), and Robert Weiss (MSU Board of Trustees). If Bush's victory is by eight points or better, a clean Republican sweep could be in the cards. The major party candidates for the educational posts are:

	State Board of Education	Wayne State Board of Governors
DEM	Lawrence Crawford	Vicki Kremm
	Stephen Economy	Murray Jackson
REP	Barbara DuMouchelle	Hattie Massey
	Marilyn Lundy	Richard Van Dusen
	MSU Board of Trustees	U of M Board of Regents
DEM	Barbara Rom	Thomas Lewand
	Robert Weiss	Nellie Varner
REP	Thomas Reed	Deane Baker
	Edward Liebler	Clifford Taylor

For state supreme court, incumbents Charles Levin and James Brickley remain prohibitive favorites to win reelection. No one else in the field is even close.

Six newly created seats on the court of appeals are at stake, two in each of Michigan's three appellate districts. In District 1, Maureen Reilly and Thomas Brennan are favored over Richard Hathaway and Gladys Barsamian. In District 2, Mark Cavanagh is favored, and a close race is foreseen among Richard Kuhn, Kathleen Jansen, and Marilyn Jean Kelly for the second seat. In District 3, Richard Griffin is favored, with a close race likely between Judy Hughes and Janet Neff for the second seat (Thomas Koernke should finish far behind).

CONCLUSION

It is customary for fence-sitting voters to wait out the Olympics and World Series before focusing on politics and settling on their choices. While Bush today holds a significant national lead and a seemingly large edge in Michigan, electoral fortunes could be destabilized by last-minute shifts. Dukakis could turn on exuberance (despite Governor Blanchard's cheerleading with the candidate last week in Kalamazoo and Saginaw, Dukakis still appeared uncomfortable as a "rah-rah" politician). Bush or Quayle could make a serious mistake. The stock market could crash. An overseas troublespot could blow up, which might benefit either side. Reagan could pull out a major October or November surprise (no doubt he and James Baker have one ready should it be needed). Dukakis could turn mean-spirited or dispirited, or he might spread himself too thin and run out of advertising dollars in key states. Dukakis, in a half-hour national broadcast, could charm the nation and successfully persuade voters he has been unfairly maligned by GOP attacks.

Forecasting major developments is risky. Less risky is a prediction that current trends favor Bush, strategies for the last two weeks are in place and not apt to change, and a majority of voters are gaining increasing comfort in (if not enthusiasm for) a Bush presidency. Even less risky is a prediction that nearly all legislators will win reelection, for incumbency (whether Republican or Democrat) is the single best commodity in U.S. politics.