



Michigan ELECTION WATCH

Looking to November 3 and Beyond

by Craig Ruff
President and Senior Consultant for Public Policy

THE MICHIGAN BALLOT

Entering the polling place on November 3, you will find a "bed-sheet" ballot, one of the longest in the world. You will find the ballot organized as follows:

Federal offices	President/vice president; representative in Congress
State offices	Representative in the state legislature; members of the State Board of Education; members of the Board of Regents of the University of Michigan; members of the Board of Trustees of Michigan State University; members of the Board of Governors of Wayne State University
County offices	Prosecuting attorney; sheriff; county clerk; county treasurer; register of deeds; drain commissioner; county commissioner
Township offices	Supervisor; clerk; treasurer; trustees; park commissioners
Judicial offices	Justices of the supreme court; judge of the court of appeals; judge of the circuit court; judge of the district court; judge of the probate court.
Proposals	Proposal A (to limit annual increases in homestead property tax assessments); Proposal B (to limit terms of office); Proposal C (to exempt portion of school operating property taxes); and Proposal D (to reduce automobile insurance rates). You may find local referenda as well.

OVERUSE OF THE BALLOT

On an absentee voter ballot guide before me (for voters living in the city of East Lansing), I count 78 individual names. If you live in a township, your ballot will have 90 or more names because it includes township offices, whereas elections for city offices occur either in the spring of even-numbered years (e.g., Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti) or in November of odd-numbered years (e.g., Detroit and Lansing).

Rare is the person who can identify more than a dozen names on a typical Michigan ballot, let alone spell out their qualifications for office. The long ballot (1) obscures the accountability of public servants, (2) fatigues voters during the advertising bombardment leading up to election day as well as in the polling booth, and (3) takes out of democracy almost all semblance of ideology. But just try to convince people that relieving them of the power to elect would enhance their power to hold their public officials accountable!

The most dysfunctional aspects of the Michigan ballot are the elections of education leaders and judges. It takes a long stretch of reason to defend electing university boards by partisan, statewide ballot. The practice's proponents argue that it protects the autonomy of the three largest state universities because it insulates governing board members from political pressure they could feel if they were appointed by the governor and their nominations ratified by the legislature. I believe that is nonsense. The ballot process instead creates a totally absurd politicization of education issues (imagine running a university on a Republican versus Democratic basis). Finally, it entrusts to serendipity the institutions' need for geographic and professional balance, fund-raising and development talent, skilled financial oversight, minority and gender representation, and global education and business experience. Based on the last 30 years' party convention nominations and voter choices, serendipity is not all it's cracked up to be.

The state's judiciary similarly suffers politicization. In the nation's most bizarre selection process, Michigan forces state supreme court wannabees to grovel at partisan conventions, win partisan nomination, campaign for votes while never discussing an issue that may come before the high court (to discuss cases would defy judicial canons), and face voters on the nonpartisan section of the ballot.

PRESIDENT/VICE PRESIDENT

Usually there are two pairs of major candidates for president/vice president; this year there are three, and the Clinton/Gore team enjoys a healthy, probably insurmountable, lead over Bush/Quayle and Perot/Stockdale. Voters may be surprised, however, to find on the ballot *four other presidential candidates* and their running mates. A particular oddity on the Michigan ballot this year is the presence of Robert Tisch. He has founded the Tisch Independent Citizens Party and is the ticket's candidate for vice president. Tisch was the proponent of tax slashing in the late 1970s and early 1980s; his other qualification for the nation's second highest post is serving Shiawassee County's drain needs.

CONGRESS

Sixteen members of the U.S. House of Representatives will be elected on November 3. Probably the closest race will be in the First Congressional District, which takes in the Upper Peninsula and a large portion of the northern lower peninsula. Republican Philip Ruppe faces Democratic candidate Bart Stupak. In other races incumbent Democrats Bob Carr, Dale Kildee, Sander Levin, William Ford, and David Bonior face spirited challenges. The current four-man Democratic edge probably will narrow to two.

STATE LEGISLATURE

Among the 110 contests for seats in the Michigan House of Representatives, about 35 are truly competitive, that is, either party could win them. All things being equal, Democrats enjoy a slim edge, probably two seats, in their bid to maintain control of the chamber. But if Clinton wins big, besting Bush by 15 percentage points, Democrats could add several seats to their current 60-50 margin.

EDUCATION BOARDS

Democrats can make significant gains and win majorities on the education boards. Republicans control by 5-3 margins the state Board of Education and the MSU Board of Trustees; the U of M and Wayne State boards are evenly divided, each with four Republicans and four Democrats. On the November ballot the two seats at stake on each board currently are held by Republicans. If Clinton wins big, it is more than likely that the entire Democratic slate for these boards will win, creating Democratic majorities on all four boards.

SUPREME COURT

There are two contests for the state supreme court. In one—for a full eight-year term—incumbent Dorothy Comstock Riley (the Republican convention's nominee) faces Robert Roddis (an independent) and Court of Appeals Judge Marilyn Kelly (the Democratic Party's nominee). In the other, to complete the last two years of former Justice Dennis Archer's term (he resigned), incumbent Conrad Mallett, Jr. (appointed by Gov. James Blanchard to fill the vacancy on an interim basis and nominated by the Democratic convention to finish the term) faces Jerry J. Kaufman (an independent) and Michael Talbot (the Republican convention's nominee). Both incumbents are favored to win, but challengers Kelly and Talbot are solid candidates with fair recognition. It will be interesting to see if the voters' anti-incumbency mood stretches into the nonpartisan portion of the ballot.

STATEWIDE PROPOSALS

Of the four referenda, that with the best chance to pass is Proposal B (limiting terms of office). Public Sector Consultants/Michigan Hospital Association polls since October 1990 consistently find that two-thirds of Michiganders support the concept of term limitation. The public locked into the concept months if not years ago. Editorial and advertising opposition may soften support, but I don't believe it will be enough to defeat the measure.

Proposal A (capping the growth of property assessments) has the next best chance of winning. Its simplicity is a plus, and little information has been disseminated about its negative consequences. Its loss would not be a shock (such proposals historically fail), but neither would it be surprising for it to win narrowly.

Proposal D (trading off lower automobile insurance premiums for benefit reductions) is tough to call. Vexing as auto insurance costs are, the public generally is skeptical about the promise of a free lunch. Opposition advertising has been shrill and has focused on consequences, such as reduced medical benefits. The sponsor, AAA, is a highly regarded and credible entity in Michigan, and if the insurer's considerable number of members vote in support, it could push Proposal D over the top. This one could go either way.

Proposal C (cutting property taxes and capping assessments) carries the greatest direct and indirect consequences for state fiscal policy. Property taxes have confounded this state's politics and policy making for 20 years. Governor John Engler, like governors William Milliken and James Blanchard before him, has given the voters the opportunity to constitutionally restructure K-12 education funding and reduce school reliance on the property tax. However, 11 property tax referenda have faced voters since 1972, and only one—the so-called Headlee Amendment—was adopted, and that by a narrow margin. Proposal C is apt to fail because of its complexity and because of concern about its consequences (state versus local control of education, potential harm to education, and how—through tax shifts, spending cuts, or normal revenue growth—the state will make up lost revenue).

The politics of referenda merit comment. I am convinced that about 25 percent of voters are almost certain to cast a "no" vote on any proposal. They are cynical about the motives behind the issue, they lack the time or discipline to study it and therefore are predisposed to fear change more than the status quo, or they disdain having to make many decisions about public policy that they feel should be made by their elected representatives. (The state constitution can be changed only through a statewide referendum, but many referenda involve statutory, not constitutional, changes.) This means that passage of a referendum requires convincing about two-thirds of the balance of voters (67 percent of the remaining 75 percent) that the measure (1) involves sound public policy, (2) is in their best personal interest, and (3) its implementation will not severely harm others. This is an uphill fight for a referendum's proponents. Any doubt suggested to voters by editorial writers or opponents can lead to defeat. If the proposal is complex, voters are hard pressed to

take the time necessary to understand the measure's costs and benefits—assuming they can fight through the rhetoric to get to the facts—sufficiently to resolve that the proposal is in their best interest. Election polling, becoming an epidemic, cannot predict referenda outcomes reliably because many, if not most, voters do not become motivated to bone up until the weekend before the election. Many take their cue from newspaper editorials on the Sunday before the election; others seek guidance from friends, relatives, or coworkers—who probably aren't much more enlightened about the facts—as late as Monday.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF NOVEMBER 3, 1992, FOR MICHIGAN

A Clinton win will bring an initial upswing in consumer and political confidence. Desirous of change, people will be relieved that a new course is to be charted. Understandably, Democrats will be ecstatic, particularly if they retain control of the state House of Representatives, protect their congressional incumbents, and gain majorities on the education boards. It would be icing on their cake to *add* to their state House margin, see Marilyn Kelly upset Dorothy Comstock Riley, and have Proposal C defeated, thereby embarrassing Governor Engler.

Governor Engler could face a triple defeat: He is campaign chair for Bush in Michigan, visible in the GOP fight to gain control of the state House, and the stimulus behind Proposal C. Defeat of the proposal could carry the most enduring problems for the governor. During the 1990 campaign he pledged to secure property tax reform, and if he fails to achieve it from the electorate, he will be hard pressed to win it through legislative action, particularly if the Democrats retain House control. If by November 1994 Michiganders still have not seen property tax relief, the governor will face (as did Governor Blanchard in 1990) a lot of questions from voters.

Ironically, Governor Engler may benefit from a Clinton victory and continued Democratic control of the state House. In mid-term elections, such as will be the case in 1994 when Governor Engler's term expires, the party *not* holding the White House usually benefits. Since 1933 the Michigan governor and the U.S. president have been of opposing political parties more than half the time. Furthermore, in 11 of 15 mid-term elections since 1933 the gubernatorial candidate of the president's party has lost. Thus, if Clinton wins—and particularly if the economy remains sluggish—1994 could be a bountiful election year for Republicans. If the governor fails to get property tax relief or other policy initiatives enacted in 1993 and 1994, he can, of course, blame the failure on Democratic control of the House and the resulting gridlock of state government.

Adoption of Proposal B (term limits) will induce anxiety in state legislators about their next job in public or private life. With state House terms limited to three, representatives elected this year can last seek reelection in 1996; senators, limited to two terms (eight years), can seek reelection in 1998. The dynamics of term limits will be fascinating: Will legislative retirements increase? Will legislative and executive agency staffs gain more influence? Will personal fund-raising decline? Will office-hopping (moving from one to another legislative chamber or to other public offices) dramatically increase? Will stronger or weaker candidates for office emerge?

If both proposals A and C lose, Michigan property taxpayers will witness assessment increases next January that will set off a major stir. Assessments were frozen by law in 1991 and 1992, and assessors will make up for inflation in 1993. Taxpayers are in for a shock. Whether and how public opinion will drive legislative property tax and school finance reform early next year are key questions for Michigan's policymakers.

We wish you well in sorting through the candidates and referenda on the November 3 ballot. We will issue analysis of the results.

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