



Michigan ELECTION WATCH

The 1992 Presidential Election

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ELECTION REDUX

Once upon a time a popular presidential candidate from the western United States, who was challenging the incumbent, looked for a running mate connected to the eastern establishment. The challenger—who had sought the presidency unsuccessfully four years before—was viewed in some quarters as a dangerous, ill-educated, and inexperienced bumpkin, and he needed a person of refinement, high intelligence, and national political experience as his running mate. The running mate he found met those tests and was an “Old Republican,” committed like himself to smaller government and free trade. The team won, ousting the incumbent president, and four years later won reelection in a landslide. Throughout two full terms, the president and vice president enjoyed as close a working relationship as any in history, and they basked in public popularity.

In his eighth year in office the outgoing president, now old and tired, identified his vice president as the man he would most like to see succeed him. Dutifully, his party nominated the veep to run for president. His principal claim to the highest office was his loyalty to the president; even his friends found his oratorical skills wanting, and few people could cite as outstanding his contributions to public policy. The candidate, in turn, picked as his running mate a relatively obscure and not well-regarded senator; the choice baffled many.

The vice president won election to the presidency with about 70 percent of the electoral college. His victory largely was based on the popularity of the old president. As one commentator wrote: “It was the affection, gratitude, and admiration of the living age, saluting for the last time a great man.” As it turned out, the now retired president got out of town just in the nick of time—the storm clouds of poor economic times were gathering. The new president was delivered a disastrous downturn in the economy, and by reelection time his administration had about it something of the air of a lost cause. Although he won his party’s renomination, there was little enthusiasm from his own party for a second term.

Meanwhile, highly regarded and nationally renowned figures in the opposition party chose to pass up the presidential race. The other party nominated an innocuous candidate, whose main strength was that he had not offended anyone, but it hardly mattered. The economy was so bad that the challenger ousted the president (as one historian noted: “He simply had been caught up on a kind of political tide”), winning 80 percent of the electoral college and sweeping into office majorities for his party in both houses of Congress. The defeated president remained cool and amiable in defeat. A political figure found him “calm and unruffled as the bosom of a lake under the tranquil influence of a summer’s sun.”

So went the presidential election of 1840. The defeated president, Martin Van Buren, left the White House to his successor, William Henry Harrison. Van Buren’s mentor and predecessor, frail and very elderly

Andrew Jackson, had lived long enough to see his immense popularity decline and his heir apparent defeated for reelection.

So went the presidential election of 1992.

THE CLINTON VICTORY

Bill Clinton won the presidency because he was not George Bush. A similar force was at work for William Henry Harrison (he was not Van Buren) and Franklin D. Roosevelt (who was not Herbert Hoover). Clinton faced a tougher fight in the Democratic primaries than in the general election, and more than a few prominent Democrats—Mario Cuomo, Bill Bradley, Dick Gephardt, Sam Nunn, and even Al Gore—must lie awake nights thinking about what might have been. Clinton may make a great president, but many Democrats justifiably could claim that they would have been stronger candidates and brought more experience and depth to the White House. Perhaps one of these days a minority party will wake up and, as in parliamentary democracies, select an opposition leader who by experience, depth, and breadth has the national stature to debate a sitting president's policies throughout his term and thereby earns the right to nomination.

Foreign journalists, accustomed to sharper, ideological cleavages in their nations' political parties, must have struggled to find significant policy differences between Bush and Clinton. Differences between them about policy tended primarily to be differences in degree and timing (e.g., how quickly to reduce defense expenditures).

Except for the Ford-Carter and Kennedy-Nixon races, I can think of no presidential elections since 1924 in which the contenders held narrower differences of opinion. In their understandable zeal to recapture the presidency, Democrats stripped their appeal to voters of the liberalism and activism associated with Hubert Humphrey and Walter Mondale. Ironically, 1992 was a year in which Democrats could have run with their hearts, not their minds, and still won.

THE SPECTATOR IN THE WHITE HOUSE

In 1988 I wrote that George Bush reminded me of Alistair Cooke's description of the Prince of Wales: "He was at his best when the going was good." I was partly wrong. Bush flashed brilliance in his handling of the Persian Gulf crisis, when the going was bad. But he then sat on his 90 percent approval rating rather than making the most of it. When the inevitable economic contraction hit, Bush *watched* rather than *reacted*. He also watched the demise of communism, passing by an enormous opportunity to remake the world, stabilize the economy of eastern Europe, and maintain balances of power to mitigate rampant nationalistic fervor. He watched too as the federal deficit and spending skyrocketed.

With the exception of the Persian Gulf War, history will record George Bush as one of our spectator presidents, men content to let events take their course. Not an evil trait, passivity has its strengths; certain times, in fact, cry out for the comfort of steady, cautious leaders. Bush's high approval ratings in 1989 and 1990, years in which he pursued few policy changes, bear this out. President Bush, sadly, encountered in his last year a public that favored dramatic change and activism, an unsuitable milieu for this amiable and passive optimist.

ROSS PEROT

Ross Perot was a hollow victor in the presidential election. No one, including George Bush, took a bigger licking from the national media and kept on ticking. Perot's influence may extend farther beyond the 1992 election than either Clinton's or Bush's. He pushed the nation to examine its spend-now, pay-later attitude.

Perot informed voters about the scale and consequences of the national debt. He did a great service to both parties in softening the public to sacrifices to come.

Perot also defied conventional wisdom about presidential campaigns. He purchased half-hour blocks of network television to walk the public through issues, rather than just pound simplistic pieces of rhetoric into 15- and 30-second sound bites. Perot may have made future campaigns safe for "infomercials"; the nation now needs a way—probably involving taxpayer-paid or free broadcast time—to treat the discussion of national issues as something more meaningful than toothpaste, cars, and candy bars. In the 1988 presidential campaign more money was spent in the fall on television ads by the Hershey Corporation than by either Bush or Dukakis; General Motors purchased four times the television time as did Bush and Dukakis combined.

Perot provided a halfway house for independent voters and those whose links to either major party are fraying. His support spanned a broad ideological spectrum, though largely middle class, white, and male. With a platform committed to balancing the federal budget, campaign finance reform, increasing the access of small businesses to capital, leveling the playing field in international trade, and shaking up the education system, a new Independence Party, which has sprung forth largely because of Perot, may not threaten the two major parties immediately, but some believe it could quickly become a significant force.

PRESIDENT-ELECT CLINTON

The *New York Times* (September 28, 1992) ran an insightful analysis of the evolution of Bill Clinton's political career in Little Rock. In 1978, at 32, he was elected governor of Arkansas. He raised car license fees to finance highway repairs, pushed for a new system of rural health clinics, and sponsored hearings to limit clear-cutting in state forests. He put forth ambitious plans to improve education, develop industry, and increase energy conservation. At 34, he lost reelection.

Of all events in the president-elect's political life, none shapes Bill Clinton's leadership style as clearly as this loss. With it he also lost much of his verve to take risk. The lesson he learned was that there is great danger in pushing through a public agenda ahead of public opinion. He became adept in the art of accommodation, particularly with business leaders. Ernie Dumas, who wrote editorials at the now defunct *Arkansas Gazette* once said: "His greatest drawback is he does not like to make enemies." It has paid off for him. He was reelected governor and now will be president.

Bill Clinton is a weather vane. He dedicates himself to consensus. Some political leaders *drive* public opinion (for example, Harry Truman, Ronald Reagan, and Lyndon Johnson), but far more see themselves as the conciliatory, consensus-building negotiators of differences in public opinion (Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and George Bush). While untested by the White House, Clinton certainly evidences all the characteristics of the latter group.

From a public policy standpoint, it can be more advantageous to be an enemy than friend of consensus-building politicians, as they often are more eager to win over the people who voted against them than they are to reassure the people who voted for them. It was the Republican Eisenhower who cemented the New Deal, activist role for the federal government, the Democratic Kennedy who slashed income tax rates, the Republican Nixon who opened up China, and the Democratic Carter who deregulated airlines and pledged loan guarantees to protect Chrysler Corporation. Certainly, George Bush disappointed many Reagan conservatives.

I look for ardent liberals to be disappointed in Clinton's policies and appointments. We likely will see Republicans (moderates, of course) in his cabinet, appointment of centrists to the federal judiciary, and precious few expansions of Washington's regulatory authorities. Even if by temperament Clinton were

inclined toward aggressive liberalism, he faces the restraining force of the federal deficit. A conservative friend said to me in 1986: "Reagan has fixed the liberals for good." He meant that Reagan's tax cuts and budget deficits would stymie Democratic Congresses and presidents in creating new federal programs and ambitious spending. My friend was right: Reagan is getting the last laugh.

President-elect Clinton probably knows that much of what he can accomplish in a four-year term must be accomplished in his first six months in office. He may have to move very fast to keep up with Democrats on Capitol Hill. Holding solid majorities in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, Democratic members of Congress eagerly await a veto-proof Democratic White House. They have fasted for 12 long years. Clinton may find himself forced to play disciplinarian, much as Bush has, but over his own party.

By having stayed less than specific on many issues, Clinton avoids the problem of welshing on pledges. The downside, of course, is that his election falls short of a specific policy mandate from the people who elected him.

I am struck by the similarities between governors Clinton and Blanchard. Like Clinton, Gov. Jim Blanchard was hit by an early defeat (not an electoral loss, but a public opinion and political party disaster that arose from a temporary income tax hike in 1983). Both grew cautious, anxious not to get too far ahead of public opinion. Both struggled to find ways to convince the business community of their policy affinity and won only grudging support from organized labor. Both pride themselves on their fiscal and policy conservatism. Even their campaign ads bore similar messages: Tough on crime (Clinton: death penalty; Blanchard: boot camps), tough on welfare, and strong on economic development. Moreover, many of their messages could be mistaken for those run a generation ago by Nixon. Blanchard fought liberal Democrats in the legislature almost as frequently as conservative Republicans. The same fate may befall Clinton with the U.S. Congress. I believe that those in Michigan who are familiar with Governor Blanchard's administration and policies are ideally situated to predict the operating style and policy initiatives of the Clinton White House.

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