

Michigan COMMENTARY

Political Musings

by Craig Ruff, President and Senior Consultant for Public Policy

AROUND THE COUNTRY

President Clinton and his Democratic Party haven't been exactly on a roll this year. Republicans have captured Democratic-held U.S. Senate seats in Texas and Georgia, the governorships of Virginia and New Jersey, and the mayoral posts in New York and Los Angeles. When was the last time you could say "as New York City goes, so goes Georgia and Virginia"?

Two huge concerns—crime and government inefficiency—are working for Republicans. Law and order, nearly always the proprietary trump card of the GOP, rings true to people who don't feel safe anymore. And regardless of how bucolic your neighborhood, who truly does feel safe? And although Texans' public school system and education funding scheme combine the effectiveness of a placebo with the fairness of Judge Roy Bean, what did Texans do on November 2? They authorized one billion dollars in bonds to build not schools, but prisons.

Joining law and order in the mantra of Republican candidates is fiscal responsibility, a.k.a. sound management/cut the waste/"run this place like a business." How else to explain wins by Republicans Riordan and Giuliani in Los Angeles and New York City, the latter being a place where it may be that Spanish-American War veterans outnumber Republicans. These cities are virtually ungovernable, nearly bankrupt, and unpardonably inefficient. Election day exit polls found 55 percent of New Yorkers volunteering that their city is unlivable and they want out. Staten Island residents did the rest of the boroughs one better: They voted to secede from the city, and, subject to Albany's approval, will do so.

With customary hyperbole, Rush Limbaugh and crowd are crowing that the off-year elections prove that voters hate taxes of any kind. However, election results on fiscal issues were mixed. Washingtonians

rejected a plan to repeal newly enacted tax increases but imposed a consumer price index-plus-population-growth cap on state spending. Ohioans approved borrowing \$200 million to improve parks. Californians extended the life of a half-penny sales tax dedicated to police and fire services. Colorado voters nixed a gouge-the-tourists tax that would have funded, of all things, tourist promotion efforts.

To the seemingly least contentious referendum on anyone's ballot, Maine voters gave their blessing to shipping low-level radioactive waste to Texas. We'd like to know a little bit more about the 27 percent of downeasters who voted "no." Stand by to see what, in exchange, Texans wish to ship to Maine.

Sociologists are having a field day analyzing ethnic polarization in voting. Dinkins won 95 percent of NYC's black voters; Giuliani won 77 percent of the white vote. Side-by-side *New York Times*' headlines capture the delicacy of the politics of race and governance in racially mixed cities: "Giuliani and Dinkins Join in Call for Unity in Goals" and "Blacks Embittered by Dinkins Loss." In other contests, race did not supplant partisanship, character, and ideology as a factor motivating voters: In Minneapolis and Seattle, cities in which whites comprise three of four residents, black mayors were elected and reelected, respectively.

AROUND MICHIGAN

In our own state, however, racial polarization was evident. Dennis Archer and Sharon McPhail split Detroit's black vote evenly; Archer's winning margin came exclusively from his 86 percent share of the white vote. Not to belittle the stature gap between these two candidates, their themes and programs, or their relative organizational resources and personal campaign skills, the Detroit contest always appeared to me to offer black voters a choice between one candidate (Archer), representing a sharing of fate (with suburbs, the state, and the nation), and the other (McPhail), representing a mastery of fate.

The outward-looking versus inward-looking contrast perplexed and divided black voters. On the one hand, people recognize that private investment/job opportunities and federal/state/county relief (in the form of money and regulatory freedom) come from the outside world. On the other hand, having gained control of schools, public works, and city policies, blacks understandably feel uneasy about the possibility of white outsiders (particularly the one million emigrés from the city) reinjecting themselves into community decisions and undermining the city's self-determination.

Office-swapping engendered by term limits already is setting in. The elections of Democratic state representatives David Hollister and Charlie Harrison as mayors of Lansing and Pontiac, respectively, throw into limbo the partisan control of the state House of Representatives. Between January 1, 1994, when they are sworn in on their new jobs, and the dates their old House seats are filled in special elections, the Republicans will enjoy a 55-53 seat majority. That is sufficient to pass legislation, but insufficient to welch on the bipartisan agreement reached last year to share power (rotating Speakers and committee chairs).

Contrary to what some think, I believe that Governor Engler will call the special elections early rather than delay as long as the constitution allows, particularly if he recruits strong candidates. In low-turnout special elections, Republicans generally fare better. (For example, early this year they won a Bay City Democratic Senate seat and retained a Jackson County Republican House). The last time the House was evenly divided (in 1967), the GOP gained outright control through winning a special election in a Democratic district. Neither the Lansing nor Pontiac district soon to be open is safely Democratic.

The December special election to fill the late Paul Henry's congressional seat pits Republican state Senator Vern Ehlers against Democrat Dale Sprik, but contrary to what one might think, the GOP does not have a lock on this seat despite its being in traditionally Republican country. Even in the Reagan landslide of 1980, Sprik tallied 46 percent against incumbent Republican Harold Sawyer. The last time a special election was held in the district—when Gerald Ford resigned to assume the vice presidency, a Democrat (Richard VanderVeen) was elected. Ehlers, however, is the heavy favorite. As-

suming he wins, the Republican majority in the state Senate shrinks by one. Given the quixotic nature of some GOP state senators and the rebellion by several arch-conservatives over replacement taxes for schools, this may be the one seat that Governor Engler can ill afford to lose, even temporarily. With Ehlers gone, a domino effect begins, and state representatives Tom Mathieu (a Democrat) and Republicans Ken Sikkema (a respectable second-place finisher to Ehlers in the congressional primary) and Rick Bandstra may seek to fill Ehlers's senate seat.

THE BIG PICTURE

Taking stock of everything voters did a week ago, I think it can be said that politicians face an unappeasably unhappy people. The public is inconsolable. They scream "CHANGE," but have no ideological rudder. They trust anyone from outside the political castle. But as soon as the invader marches across the drawbridge and inhabits the castle—inspiring momentary euphoria in the people—he becomes their enemy. Simply entering a place of power means to many that one will lose one's honor, honesty, common sense, and capability.

To paraphrase candidate Clinton's byword, it's *not* the economy, stupid. Nor is it crime or taxes. It's alienation. The people invested with the position and power to make public decisions are not trusted. The march across the drawbridge—what we call the political honeymoon—now is counted in weeks, if not days. When the vice president of the United States begs Ross Perot, the ultimate outsider, to debate him on the merits of NAFTA (during which they both sank to the occasion), you know the people on the outer side of the drawbridge are winning the war of public confidence.

The guy from Hope is sitting on a powder keg of congressional paranoia, where the fear of losing that umpteenth term is palpable. And the guy from Beal City has the same problem. Consider the legislator's conundrum:

My constituents want change. But they do not trust me to make that change. The people they *do* trust often have the most to lose from change (teachers, doctors, school superintendents, and cops). And these people—the trusted—lobby me to maintain the status quo.

A heavy policy agenda of NAFTA, health care reform, and K-12 reform rushes headlong into a wall of increasing legislative caution. Politicians can't have it both ways—embracing change and ruffling no feathers. More to the point, the public can't. The public must place trust in their political leaders and

stop treating them like pariahs. Otherwise, we invite inertia.

Not that any politician can say so, but right now I believe the public—not their leaders—is the problem.

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