



Michigan ELECTION WATCH

Footnotes to the 1992 Elections

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In no particular order, we offer thoughts and musings on the November 3 elections.

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM VS. THE WAY IT WAS

- *Perot will self-destruct and, like all independent and minor party candidates for president, will end up with 10 percent or less of the national vote.*

This conventional wisdom was dead wrong. Getting 19 percent of the vote, Perot took a licking from the media and pundits and kept on ticking. Credit his relaxed and human performances in the debates, competitive spending on advertising, message of economic sacrifices, and many voters' pox on the other candidates. We have not heard the last from Mr. Perot, who spent about one-third of one year's investment income on the campaign.

- *Big voter turnout helps Democrats.*

Curtis Gans, the final arbiter of national voter turnout, says that 100 percent of the turnout increase this year over 1988 (about 55 percent of people of voting age cast ballots this year compared to 50 percent in 1988) can be explained by Perot's attracting new voters. Democratic voters turned out in about the same numbers as four years ago, and Republicans cast fewer ballots.

Perot voters insulated many Republican candidates from what could have been long Democratic coattails; after voting for president, probably a majority of voters statewide cast ballots for Republicans. For example, the 20 percent Perot vote in Michigan saved Dorothy Beardmore, Republican candidate for the state board of education and the only Republican of eight candidates to win statewide office. Compare 1992 to 1976. In 1976 Republican Gerald Ford carried Michigan by 197,000 votes, but not a single Republican won for the eight education posts. In 1992 Clinton beat Bush by 309,000 votes, but Beardmore won and another Republican came within 61,000 votes of winning a seat on the University of Michigan Board of Regents.

Many people believe that Governor Blanchard's defeat in 1990 was attributable to a huge dropoff of Democratic voters in Wayne County. Compared to the 19.1 percent of the statewide vote cast by Wayne County residents in 1990, the percentage this year was 19.6 percent. Detroit's contribution to the total state vote rose from 7.8 percent to 7.9 percent. Simply put, the 1992 turnout was about the same as in 1990 in both heavily Democratic and less Democratic areas.

- *Clinton won a landslide.*

By beating President Bush by 5 percent, Bill Clinton won a healthy victory but hardly a landslide. I calculate that a shift from Clinton to Bush of 264,000 votes combined in eleven states would have given Bush an electoral college majority. That represents about one-quarter of one percent of the 104 million votes cast nationally.

- *Clinton, as a minority winner, lacks a mandate to govern.*

Winning 43 percent of the national vote, Clinton joins the ranks of other "less-than-a-majority" presidents, including Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, John Kennedy, and Richard Nixon. Going back to the first presidential election in 1788, the winner of the White House has failed to get a majority of the popular vote in 11 of 51 elections. The only mandate that counts is the opportunity to sit in the Oval Office for four years.

- *Clinton was a sure winner.*

Two weeks out, with Perot taking a percent and a half a day away from Clinton and Bush inching his way up, the election could have resulted in a three-way dead heat. Perot's appearance on "Sixty Minutes" two Sundays before the election galvanized public attention on his persona rather than his policies. It eroded his support immediately. By the Friday before the election, Perot had regained his stride, again eating away at Clinton's margin, and Bush was gaining a point a day. Then came the Weinberger indictment and the reopening of "Irangate" questions. Bush's momentum stopped dead in its tracks. (A *Times Mirror* survey found that 25 percent of voters made up their minds in the final seven days of the campaign.) While it is possible and perhaps likely that Clinton would have won without these two events, a case can be made that his five-point winning margin would have evaporated had they not occurred.

- *The polls were accurate.*

The pre-election polls were very accurate, though underestimating by a few points support for both Bush and Perot. Exit polls, however, were very inaccurate. Nationally, the exit poll used by the four networks predicted a Clinton plurality over Bush of 11 percent. In Michigan, exit polls predicted a 13 percent Clinton edge. (He carried the state by seven.)

- *Undecided voters go to the challenger.*

For the first time in memory, the incumbent (Bush) gained the majority of voters going into election day proclaiming themselves undecided. Typically, at least three out of every four fence sitters wind up voting for the challenger (e.g., Engler in 1990, Dukakis in 1988, and Mondale in 1984).

- *It's the economy, stupid!*

For months, everyone said that the only issue was the economy. Maybe, but only if very broadly defined. In a WLNS-TV exit poll in mid-Michigan, we found that only 24 percent of voters claimed that "jobs" was the number one issue in the presidential race. The "deficit" was named by 16 percent; "taxes," 15 percent; "health care," 12 percent; "education," 11 percent; "family values," 10 percent; "abortion," 6 percent; and "the environment," 5 percent. Seventy-six percent opted to identify an issue other than jobs as the most important problem facing the country and most important issue in the campaign.

- *It's celebration time for pro-choice advocates.*

In terms of presidential judicial appointments, pro-choicers should celebrate. But it is right-to-lifers who, as single-interest voters, are more unified and effective in influencing elections. Back to the WLNS exit

poll: Of the 6 percent of voters who said that abortion was the most important issue in the presidential election, 57 percent voted for Bush and only 37 percent voted for Clinton. More Americans may hold a pro-choice position, but as a group, right-to-lifers are less apt to be influenced by other issues and more likely to vote as a bloc.

- *John Engler came out a loser.*

Voters turned thumbs down on Proposal C and President Bush, but the governor may have won a triple header. (1) He gets the credit from many tax weary Michigianians for trying to cut property taxes (leadership counts) and probably wins the legislative policy majority to bring property tax relief without a public plebescite. (2) By having a Democrat in the White House, Governor Engler has history on his side should he seek reelection. Only four times since 1933 has the party in power in Washington produced a gubernatorial winner in a mid-term election. Each of those (Engler in 1990, Milliken in 1970 and 1974, and Williams in 1950) produced among the smallest electoral wins in history. The other eleven times the party out of power won the statehouse, typically by large pluralities. (3) Finally, the governor may end up with a Republican-controlled state House of Representatives, giving him an ability to win policy and political victories on the way to the 1994 elections.

- *Incumbents will take it on the chin this year.*

Here are the reelection rates for legislators:

94 percent	U.S. House members (in public opinion polls the institution has an approval rating of about 20 percent)
100 percent	U.S. House members from Michigan
91 percent	U.S. Senators
93 percent	Michigan House of Representatives

So much for the anti-incumbency mood.

The theory of limiting terms and the practice of limiting terms are about as far apart as one can imagine. In 1990 Michigianians, whose economic confidence and political efficacy were waning, took out their governor but few state legislators. In 1992 again the chief executive, this time the president, became the lightning rod for voter unrest. The anti-incumbency guillotine appears to extend to the executive authority but no farther.

- *Congressional Republicans fared well.*

Democrats either netted one new Senate seat or gained nothing (a runoff in Georgia on November 24 will decide). Republicans gained about nine seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. Democrats, however, had more Senate seats at stake (19 compared to 15 Republican seats) and entered the election with a 266-166 edge in the U.S. House. Reapportionment alone, adding seats in Republican territory in the Sunbelt, should have produced GOP House gains of at least twenty seats. Democrats have a lock on the U.S. Congress. Since 1933 Republicans have controlled the Senate in only ten years and the House in only four.

- *Partisan allegiance of voters counts for a lot.*

Nothing explains outcomes from the White House to the statehouse to courthouses like the partisan allegiances of voters. Democratic areas sent Democrats; Republican territories elected Republicans.

There was not a single state legislative race that went against the party-leaning odds; every incumbent who lost was facing an electorate that was about evenly divided between the two parties.

- *Clinton's win was a generational cry.*

The comment comes from state Agriculture Director Bill Schuette; he is right. Like Eisenhower passing the mantle to Jack Kennedy, George Bush is bestowing upon Bill Clinton the right of a new and younger generation to govern.

- *Desire for change won the election for Clinton.*

A close kin to the above, the six-letter word *change* explains Clinton's victory. In the WLNS exit poll, 34 percent of voters said that change was the major reason that they voted for one presidential candidate over the other two. Among this group, 68 percent voted for Clinton (30 percent for Perot). Bush carried the day among voters whose primary reasons included weighing personal character, not liking other candidates, and having similar partisan allegiances. Bush even carried, albeit by a small margin, voters who said that they were persuaded on issues and positions.

- *All politics are local.*

Former U.S. House Speaker Tip O'Neill gets the credit for this maxim of politics, which was proven right in the election. How else can the defeat of state House Speaker Lew Dodak be explained. Small things can get the most powerful politician in trouble with the folks back home.

- *Politics are concerned with things as they are.*

This is Tom Pendergast's advice to young Harry Truman. Voters' memories are short; their vision limited. They are in a time warp and vent their frustration and express their approval at the polling place based on how they feel things are going at present.

- *Ballot proposals are tough to sell in Michigan.*

Groups contemplating petition drives beware: It is a lot easier getting an initiative or constitutional amendment on the ballot than it is motivating 51 percent of people to vote for it. Term limits (Proposal C) passed easily; the other three proposals failed. Anticipating an issue that will win public favor, ask yourselves three questions: (1) Will a vast majority of voters study the issue, (2) will a vast majority of these studious voters conclude that it is in their self-interest to vote "yes," and (3) will a vast majority of studious and supportive voters conclude that a "yes" vote will not severely hurt other people? If you predict "yes" answers to all three, go ahead and put something on the ballot; if not, don't.

- *The Michigan Education Association will emerge a winner.*

It did. It was the single strongest organizational supporter of Bill Clinton in Michigan's primary. (Recall how the AFL-CIO-UAW stayed on the sidelines, offering luke warm support for Clinton?) Also, know that the MEA was the strongest opponent of proposals A and C; both were defeated. While the organization placed a high priority on maintaining Democratic control of the state House of Representatives, a goal it may not have achieved, it still has immense regard in the Democratic legislative caucuses and solidified its position as the state's most potent and best-financed political organization.

BEST OVERALL ANALYSIS FOR WHY BUSH LOST

Hands down, the best and most succinct analysis of why Bush lost comes from Peggy Noonan, speech writer for presidents Reagan and Bush. In a *New York Times* op ed piece (November 5, 1992), Noonan writes:

In a way, the election was always a choice between depression and anxiety. When voters imagined picking up the paper Wednesday morning and seeing a headline that said: "Bush Wins In Close Race," their hearts sank. When they imagined "President Clinton!" their hearts raced. Forced to choose between melancholy and nervousness they took the later; it seemed the more awake, and so the more hopeful choice.

CONSEQUENCES FOR THE POLITICAL PARTIES

A minority party bears a similarity to the Donner party: its members eat their own. Nationally, the GOP faces a tremendous task of fending off a fundamentalist, right-wing takeover (or did that occur at the 1992 national convention?). Particularly if the far right consumes the GOP, President Clinton hews to the center, and the congressional Democrats follow his moderation, the Democratic Party is in position to regain the favored spot as the nation's centrist party, its largest party, and the party most apt to stay in control for a long time. Fortunately for Michigan Republicans, Governor Engler becomes leader of the phalanx to ward off such a fringe challenge.

While the hard right envisions winding up in control of the Republican Party, where do liberals go? The year 1992 was a good one for Democrats but, aside from a handful of Senate victories, awful for liberals. Genuine liberals have been in the political wilderness since the robust days of LBJ's Great Society; twenty-five years is a long time to be out of power. Liberalism seems exhausted of intellectual vision and public favor.

In Michigan, Democrats stayed in or regained power in ministerial positions: university board members, secretary of state, and attorney general. They control both U.S. Senate seats and a 10-6 majority of the state's members in the U.S. House of Representatives. But the really big fish got away in the last two elections; for a state party, no goal is as important as controlling the state legislative houses and the governorship. On Wednesday morning after the November elections of our last two even-numbered years, Democrats have awakened shocked and utterly bewildered. How could they have lost the governorship? How could they have lost control of the state House of Representatives?

Both parties are a bit demoralized just now. They are also wary of Perot, acknowledging that one in five voters turned his (most Perot voters were male, not female) back on the two-party tradition.

WHAT IS AT STAKE IN THE 1994 ELECTIONS?

Oh, let us have a few minutes peace . . .

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