

Michigan COMMENTARY

Opposition Parties

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The American political party out of power resembles the minority shareholder of a private corporation. Each can slow down and tinker with decisions. The minority party, however, like the minority shareholder, relies entirely on the majority for noblesse oblige.

The minority party in America is an aimless hulk. Lacking coherence, it lies vulnerable to takeover by fringe groups. Its members scramble to lay claim to its leadership. Devoid of leadership, it cannot muster a bully pulpit. From the political wilderness, it carries on guerrilla warfare against the party in power, but typically it is not strategically organized.

Unlike opposition parties in parliamentary democracies (Japan, England, France, Germany, and Italy), the opposition parties in the United States wield somewhat greater day-to-day influence over policy (i.e., the tinkering benefit). America's opposition parties, however, unlike those of the parliamentary democracies, lack a unified and coherent philosophy, identifiable leader, and certainty about who they would send to govern if their party wins the next election.

Between elections in America, minority parties speculate about future standard-bearers: Who will Republicans nominate for president in 1996? Who will Democrats nominate to run for Michigan governor in 1994? All the minority parties can do is speculate, because there are no mechanisms, other than the 1996 national convention or the 1994 statewide primary, to designate and define the program of each party's future presidential and gubernatorial candidates.

American politics needs stronger and more coherent opposition leadership. Voters should not have to wait until a few months prior to an election to get to know the alternative to the party in power.

Each of the following plans to invigorate minority parties is articulated according to the needs of the present minority party. The basic processes would still apply, however, should the parties in the minority change.

NATIONAL

In the wake of Clinton's victory, about 2,500 Republican officeholders will be evicted from federal jobs. Out of 100 U.S. senators, 43 will be Republican; of 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives, only 175 will be Republican; of 50 governors, 20 will be Republican. Who leads the national Republican Party? The answer is no one. Among members of Congress, Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole pounced early on the designation (in theory if not name) of opposition leader; however, few see Dole, who turns 73 about a month before the 1996 GOP National Convention, as a presidential contender.

Even before November 3, pundits had a field day speculating about who will be the GOP's presidential nominee in 1996. Kemp, Baker, Quayle, and Senator Gramm, along with Governors Engler, Weld, Wilson, Campbell, Thompson, and Edgar, and myriad others, have had claims that they intend to run foisted on them. Similarly, pundits in 1988 anticipated seeing Democrats Cuomo, Bradley, Gephardt, and Bentsen in the 1992 presidential arena. Not one even sought the nomination. So much for punditry.

Step One

The Republicans ought to name a national opposition leader, who would begin now to lay the groundwork for a 1996 presidential race, sharpen the policy debate, and command media attention. The party ought to create a national leadership convention composed of the following:

- 43 Republican senators,
- 175 Republican members of the U.S. House of Representatives,
- 20 Republican governors,
- 99 majority leaders (or speakers) and minority leaders of each state legislative chamber (each state has two houses except Nebraska, which has a unicameral body), and
- 150 national Republican committeepeople (committeeman, committeewoman, and party chair from each state).

The leadership convention should meet no later than January 30, 1993. Delegates should select one person to hold the title, "National Republican Leader," for a two-year term. By virtue of selection, this individual would be viewed by the national media, elected Republicans, and GOP party leaders as the chief spokesperson on national policy matters. The Republican National Committee and its chair would continue to function, as they now do, as the fund-raisers, organizers, and candidate recruiters for the political party, but the national policy leader would be the "Leader." It would be up to this Leader to construct an apparatus, task forces, committees, and such groups to formulate positions on federal issues and to guide her/him on priorities and policy options. The party should allot a sum annually to reimburse the Leader for travel and other expenses.

One might ask, How can a sitting governor, U.S. senator, or U.S. congressman spare the time to serve as national party Leader? The answer varies from person to person and according to the tolerance level of each person's constituents as well as the daily demands of the office. Undoubtedly, most governors have their hands full managing their states' executive branches, lobbying the legislature, communicating with the public, and molding state policy. In the case of President-elect Clinton, Arkansas residents allowed him ten months of nonstop campaigning. If the proposed system had been in place prior to the 1992 election, residents likely would have allowed him to spend one day per week over four years developing and enunciating national policy positions for his party. A governor of a much larger and more complex state, such as New York, California, or Michigan, might not have that luxury, but state residents might see merit in lending their chief executive to the nation for one day each week in exchange for national stature and the possibility that their governor might later move into the White House.

Elected officeholders—rather than the party's precinct state and national delegates—should dominate the leadership convention. By making this change, the party would lessen the risks of fringe elements dominating the convention. Few people have a greater, vested interest in winning elections and winning majorities than those who serve as minorities in legislative bodies. Pragmatism is their driving force.

Most important, the Leader should be viewed not only as the preminent policy "wonk" for the party, but also as the presidential nominee-designate for 1996. The Leader would select people, who, in parliamentary systems, would be called the "shadow government." These individuals would become the eyes and ears and policy spokespersons in such specific areas as transportation, domestic economy, trade, foreign affairs, education, and health care. They would go toe-to-toe against the president and his cabinet officers on policy issues and command media attention for their roles and expertise as the loyal opposition.

Step Two

In January 1995 the leadership convention would reconvene. Its delegates, many of whom would be new, would select a Leader for a two-year term. Presuming that the incumbent performed well, delegates would reelect her/him. Should Republicans fare poorly in the mid-term elections of 1994, the Leader fail to

capture national attention, or the minority's policy positions seem out of sync with the delegates, obviously another choice could be made.

As in the 1993 leadership convention, the elected Leader would become the presidential nominee-designate for 1996 and the party's chief policy spokesperson. In addition, the shadow government could change.

Step Three

Rid us of the presidential primaries. Voters get fatigued by the endless presidential campaigning. The political parties ought to have the self-confidence and mettle to tell voters, "It's our choice who runs in November. It's your choice who wins in November." The millions of dollars spent on presidential primaries could be saved or diverted to constructive, issue-directed advertising.

The Republican National Convention will meet in the late summer of 1996. With more than 1,000 people serving as delegates and representing the nation's states and congressional districts, it is the broadest and largest meeting of party leaders. Delegates would have the freedom to dump the Leader and select a different presidential nominee, but more than likely, they would have a high comfort level with the Leader, recognize the Leader's national stature gained over two or four years of media attention, and nominate her/him for president.

MICHIGAN

Democrats hold both U.S. Senate seats, 10 of 16 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, 17 of the state Senate's 38 seats, and probably 55 of the state House's 110 seats. They hold the majority of the statewide ministerial posts (attorney general, secretary of state, and 21 of 32 statewide education posts). Nevertheless, for all their wealth, Democrats must be viewed as Michigan's minority party because they lack any one of the three central policymaking vectors of state government: governorship and majority control of the two legislative houses.

Who speaks for Michigan's Democrats? The state party's chair, Gary Corbin? The state Senate minority leader, Art Miller? The state House leader, Curtis Hertel? The senior U.S. senator, Don Riegle? The ranking member of the U.S. House, John Dingell? Who is the party's governor-presumptive? When so many lay claim to leadership, it appears to the public that no one leads.

Pundits are speculating now about who the Democrats might field in the 1994 gubernatorial race: former Governor Blanchard, former Congressman Bill Brodhead, outgoing Congressmen Howard Wolpe and Dennis Hertel, state Senator Debbie Stabenow, state Representative Lynn Jondahl, Wayne County Executive Ed McNamara, and former state Commerce Director and state Senator Doug Ross. The party does not benefit from delaying until the summer of 1994 the decision of who will challenge the Republicans for the governorship.

The Democrats in Michigan need a leader who would confront the governor's policy pronouncements, offer alternatives, possess an imprimatur of the party's confidence, and compete with the governor for media attention. The Democratic Party, in short, needs a person perceived today as the likely 1994 gubernatorial nominee.

Step One

Michigan Democrats should convene a statewide leadership convention, composed of the following:

- 17 state senators,
- 55 state representatives,
- 2 U.S. senators,
- 10 U.S. congressmen,

- 23 statewide, elected officials,
- one state party chair, and
- county or congressional district party chairs.

These delegates, among whom elected officials dominate, should select the state's Democratic "Leader." That individual should be viewed as the Democrats' policy spokesperson in Michigan and the gubernatorial candidate-designate for 1994. The Democratic State Committee would continue to function as the primary organizing and fund-raising force. The Leader would create mechanisms, such as committees, on which to deliberate and would suggest policy positions for the party; s/he should also create a shadow government for the state. Democratic experts in transportation, health care, education, and other issues should challenge the governor and his department heads on their policy views and recommendations.

Step Two

Rid us of the gubernatorial primary! Let political parties convene in 1994 and select their best, most electable candidates. The public will wail about losing its direct vote, but two-thirds of eligible voters sit out primaries and they are costly both to the candidates and to taxpayers, who foot about one-third of primary campaign costs. Let the nomination be controlled by the political parties, and let the voters decide among the parties' nominees.

The Democratic convention in 1994 could ratify the leadership convention's choice as candidate. Delegates to the party convention could also conclude that the Leader failed to seize public and media attention or they could challenge forcefully Governor Engler's policy agenda. They could select a gubernatorial nominee other than the Leader, but with two years of shadow-government visibility and policy leadership invested in the Leader, the party would pay a price for naming someone else.

CONCLUSION

America's political parties have been displaced in the policymaking process, largely by thousands of special-interest groups. The parties have ceded their historical roles as the nominators of candidates for primary elections, taking the "public" out of public policymaking (at least a political party in a two-party system, unlike a special interest, purports to represent close to half the people in society). The latter structural change, vesting nominations in the hands of voters, has sapped the political parties of their influence and importance, prolonged election campaigns that seem endless to most voters, and deprived citizens of the right to hear from an organized and coherent opposition throughout a president's or governor's term of office.

In time, minority parties may find organizing in opposition so beneficial that they will recruit shadow spokespersons and candidates-presumptive for legislative as well as executive offices. Parties would not have to wait until within a few months of an election to challenge an incumbent legislator's record or policy views; these things would be challenged on a daily basis by the shadow government, which would (1) make the incumbent legislator explain positions on issues as they arise, (2) command the same levels of media attention as the incumbent, and (3) build recognition within the district to make a serious electoral challenge possible.

The opposition parties of America and Michigan must reinvigorate themselves. They should make some decisions about their leadership years, not months, before the next election. They should reward policy experience, the ability to communicate, and stature, and they should defend themselves against the tide of narrow, self-serving special interests.

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