



Michigan COMMENTARY

Postelection Outlook

by Craig Ruff and Gerald A. Faverman

American politics is racially polarized and became visibly more so in the fall presidential election. The effect of this polarization on the nation demands our attention, as does its implications for future Michigan politics and public policies.

When 65 percent of white men vote Republican and 90 percent of black women vote Democratic—as happened last November 8—the nation faces a political schism of disquieting proportions. Not since 1960 has a Republican presidential nominee won more than 15 percent of the black vote; President Johnson was the last Democratic presidential candidate to win 50 percent of the white vote.

"The election figures suggest that in most of America race is an important factor—a divisive factor—and that, for many whites, familiarity does not breed contempt, but fear," writes *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen. Cohen found that George Bush fared best in states with the highest concentrations of black voters (New York, the exception), and Dukakis in states with the fewest blacks. In Oregon, for example, which Dukakis carried 53-47 percent, only 2.4 percent of voters are black. Similarly, the other Dukakis states (Iowa, Minnesota, West Virginia, Hawaii, Washington, Rhode Island, Wisconsin, and Massachusetts) have percentages of black voters far below the national average.

American politics has come to bear an unwholesome resemblance to the fragmented politics of Yugoslavia, Belgium, and India, nations in which religion and/or ethnicity direct voting behavior and governmental policies. It is not surprising that blacks and whites should hold differing views, molded by historic forces and current socioeconomic pressures. The concern we have is that racial politics can translate into governmental policies based not on the good of society but on the good of a race. For Republicans, Democrats, and the unaligned—and for the good of governance and of electioneering—parties, candidates, and political activists must seek a more even division of partisan loyalties among blacks, whites, and Hispanics. How likely this is to happen remains to be seen.

In Michigan, the effects of polarization are in some ways exacerbated by population and economic shifts resulting in the decline in voting power of Detroit. In 1950, the city accounted for 30 percent of all votes cast in the state. In 1988, it accounted for 8 percent.

Detroit's Contribution to State Vote

Election Year	Percent of Total Vote
1950 (gov.)	30.4
1958 (gov.)	23.6
1970 (gov.)	16.3
1974 (gov.)	14.0
1978 (gov.)	10.9
1980 (pres.)	11.0
1982 (gov.)	11.0
1986 (gov.)	10.0
1988 (pres.)	8.3

In 1988, Oakland County cast 50 percent more votes than did the city of Detroit. Macomb County cast nearly as many as Detroit; combined, the GOP strongholds of Kent and Ottawa counties cast nearly as many as Detroit. Oakland and Macomb counties combined cast more votes than Wayne County.

Percent of Total Vote Cast

	1970	1988
Detroit	16.3	8.3
Out Wayne County	13.1	12.3
Oakland County	10.8	12.8
Macomb County	6.7	7.9
Kent-Ottawa counties	6.6	6.8
I-75 (Flint, Saginaw, Bay City)	8.6	8.5
Rest of state	37.8	42.4

The Democratic Party itself has found its political base more evenly distributed throughout the state. In 1950, Detroit voters cast 38 percent of all the votes won by Governor Williams. In 1986, less than 12 percent of Governor Blanchard's total vote came from Detroit. In 1988, Detroit voters cast only 15.5 percent of all the votes won by Michael Dukakis, notwithstanding the fact that he carried the city 86-14 percent.

Detroit is not alone among the state's industrial cities that are contracting in population and political influence in direct proportion to their economic decline. Flint, Jackson, Saginaw, Pontiac, and others are ceding political power, inch by inch, to their suburban environs and to the growth areas of western and northern lower Michigan. Reapportionment in 1991 or 1992 will take a toll on these cities' representation in the state legislature. Diminished power in the state capitol and diminished influence in statewide elections augur poorly for the cities' future political clout—at the very time the distressed populations of these cities, with their concentrations of blacks, Hispanics, and native Americans will need clout more than ever before.

Nearly every state political office worth contesting will be contested in 1990: the governorship, the state Senate and House, U.S. Senator Carl Levin's seat, all members of the U.S. House, two seats on the state supreme court (held by justices Patricia Boyle and Michael Cavanagh). By extension, control of reapportionment of congressional and state legislative districts will fall to the victors.

Reapportionment of legislative districts is to politicians what a candy store is to children. Mathematically, the odds of the Democrats controlling the 1991 redistricting are considerably better than for the Republicans. To control the process, the Democrats need to retain the governorship, lose no more than five seats in the House, and gain two Senate seats. The Republicans, to gain control, would have to retake the governorship, gain six seats in the House, and hold every Senate seat. Nonpresidential election years like 1990 generally find the party in control of the White House losing seats at all levels; to that problem is added the continuing likelihood of an economic downturn by 1990 that could spell problems for Republicans tying their fortunes to President Bush. Bad economic performance, however, could weaken incumbents of both parties; "time for a change" takes on greater importance in bad economic times.

Typically, the gubernatorial campaign does not heat up until the election year. But Michigan's resurgent Republicans—having amassed the momentum, money, and organization to deliver an electoral plum to President-elect Bush—do not intend to cede to Governor Blanchard two more years of unchallenged command of the political agenda.

In political campaigns, incumbency is worth its weight in gold. The sheer news and publicity value of serving in the office, coupled with the patronage, relationships, fund-raising constituencies, and friendships inevitably attached to the role, make it very difficult for someone less visible to garner enough name recognition and publicity to be able seriously to challenge an incumbent. Michigan's campaign finance laws, which limit campaign contributions and spending, effectively enhance incumbency's advantage. (A bill increasing campaign spending limits to more realistic levels currently languishes in the legislature as likelihood dwindles that it can attract the bipartisan support it deserves.)

The Republicans and their prospective, but as yet unannounced, gubernatorial standard-bearer, Senate Majority Leader John Engler, now command a statewide organization that delivered Michigan for George Bush. The human energy and money invested in that political network is a ready-made resource for a gubernatorial run. The organization is assured of nourishment in the form of Washington-based Republican patronage. Finally, Engler owns the political microphone (his majority leader position) to gain exposure for his views.

Meanwhile, Governor Blanchard, an experienced street-fighter, campaigner, and fund-raiser, continues to do an extraordinarily shrewd job of chilling competition, raising money, and nurturing loyalty—not only reinforcing his core of support but also restricting access to money and endorsements by his opposition. Blanchard's strategists have begun sending a blunt message to special interest groups: "Those who support our rivals cannot be our friends."

The erstwhile gentility of Michigan politics, exemplified by leaders such as Soapy Williams, Phil Hart, Arthur Vandenberg, and Bill Milliken, has given way to what shapes up as a slugfest between two partisan infighters in Governor Blanchard and Senator Engler. They are two of the most intense, political gameplayers the state has seen, people who enjoy the thrill of the game and the adrenalin of political strategies perhaps more than the policy-making fruits of victory. All early indications mark this race as surely the longest—and probably the most contentious—Michigan gubernatorial race in a generation.

Exaggerated partisan politics hold hostage several critical issues. Property tax reform and school financing proposals died as the 1988 session closed, caught in a volley of buck-passing between the houses of the legislature and the legislature and the governor. The deterioration of the state highway system begs for attention. The social welfare system is being tinkered with incrementally in spite of support for comprehensive and substantive overhauls by one after another blue ribbon commission and by our own intuitive sense that the system has become archaic.

Physicians and hospitals are tormented by inexcusably high costs of malpractice insurance; nursing homes are teetering on the brink of bankruptcy; the urban poor are having the doors to decent medical care shut in their faces; rates of infant mortality in underprivileged families are indecently high; the costs of caring appropriately for AIDS patients are being ignored; and the burgeoning group of older Michiganians faces economic ruin because of long-term care costs. The state's colleges and universities and its public and quasi-public research centers need new infusions of funds to keep Michigan competitive in the drive for 21st century jobs.

The state's political hierarchy has a precious few months to make a dent in these and other problems before every vote and every press release becomes totally embroiled in election-year posturing. We see much wisdom in the convening of heavyweight summittees on several key issues in the state, similar to the convening of the federal, bipartisan commissions on social security and the one now at work on the budget deficit. The Republicans and Democrats need to be insulated from attacks by one another for challenging conventional wisdom and boldly offering leadership on each issue; summits of bipartisan and non-partisan experts on one or more difficult problem offer an avenue toward reaching consensus and taking unpopular but necessary actions that neither political party will use for political gain.

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