After GOP success this election, is Michigan now officially a red state?



A more-fortified Republican party in Lansing could lead the state in new directions in 2015.

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In the end, the horse race was not a photo finish, but more like Gov. Rick Snyder (and his fellow Republicans) by three lengths. The collapse of Mark Schauer's campaign, said to be in a virtual dead heat with the incumbent in its final days, left not only a chastened Democratic Party but the continued drift rightward for Michigan that might not have been imaginable a generation ago.

Both U.S. Senators will be Democrats, due to the easy victory of Gary Peters over Republican Terri Lynn Land. But after Tuesday's election, Lansing will be redder than ever, "the most conservative legislature we've seen since the 1950s," in the observation of Mark Brewer, the former chairman of the state's Democratic Party.

In Wednesday's aftermath, political observers were left to debate whether increased GOP majorities in the House and Senate will push the state further right, potentially disrupting the agenda of a governor who ran first as a moderate and then as a moderate with a solid record of accomplishments to please both parties – Medicaid expansion and a rejuvenated Detroit for Democrats, a substantial business tax cut and right-to-work legislation for Republicans.

But with Snyder now term-limited, and an even larger Republican majority set to arrive in 2015, including more tea party adherents, the question of whose agenda takes priority may not be entirely settled. Some Republicans, like veteran GOP insider and former Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema, say this new era could be one of mainstream Republican achievement rather than extremism.

"Now with 63 Republican seats (in the House), the handful of tea party types are marginalized," said Sikkema, a senior policy fellow at Public Sector Consultants in Lansing, who has done work for The Center for Michigan, Bridge's publisher.

"Republican control is so big, you can give seven votes away and still pass a bill. You don't have to kowtow to an extreme conservative agenda if you don't want to if you are in House leadership."

Sikkema hesitated to predict what major legislation might get done in the next two or four years. But he said he believes the gubernatorial results suggest that voters respect a party and governor that get things done, noting Snyder's $1.6 billion business tax cut and controversial tax on pensions.

“You can pursue a very robust, controversial agenda and actually be rewarded for doing it. I think voters thought, 'I don't agree with everything they did but at least they did something.’”

Others were not so sanguine. Kelly Rossman-McKinney, CEO and principal of Truscott-Rossman, a Lansing-based public relations firm, said she anticipated the legislature clashing with Snyder.

“The Senate will be more conservative, but I don’t know how knee-jerk they’ll be with a more comfortable majority,” she said. “I doubt the relationship with the governor will be as compatible as it has been, and it wasn’t very compatible before.”

Rossman-McKinney’s partner, John Truscott, a former press secretary to GOP Gov. John Engler, disagreed, saying he doesn't expect a hard turn to the right by the Legislature.

“I think Republicans have to be careful not to anger the electorate,” Truscott said. “These things can bounce back quickly. You have to be responsible.

“If you are a tea party legislator, do you want to have an impact or not? If you want to have an impact, you have to play ball. You have to be cooperative to get things done.”

Counters Rossman-McKinney, who said she worries in particular about issues like same-sex marriage, “It’s a real possibility for Michigan to go backwards on those basic human rights issues. I would not put anything past freshman legislators. They’re full of testosterone, and full of the, ‘All right, here I come, I have my agenda and I’m going to push it.’ Whether reality sets in will be really interesting.”

First, fix the roads

Political observers roundly expect that funds for road repair, if it gets done, will only happen in the upcoming lame-duck session, due to the unwillingness of some in the 2015 Legislature to vote for new taxes, for anything. Beyond that, speculation is wide open on how aggressive House and Senate

Republican leaders will be on taxes, education and social issues important to their conservative base in the months and years ahead.

Brewer, the former Democratic chair, said he expects “attacks on public education” via more charter schools and “a refusal to adequately invest in education and infrastructure. Minnesota is doing much better than we are on these issues, but the ideologues in the GOP have no interest in that.”

Ken Cole, a lobbyist for the city of Detroit, said he hopes the legislature will continue to support Michigan’s largest city as it recovers from bankruptcy. However, he said, Detroit residents still harbor mixed feelings over what many see as Lansing’s role in the city’s financial troubles.

The legislature’s help for the city, Cole added, seems predicated on the narrative – erroneous, in his view – that Detroit’s troubles are “all come from greedy public sector unions and inept, corrupt politicians, especially black ones,” rather than from a slackening in state revenue sharing over the years.

But in the end, those Detroiters, and other residents of Michigan’s beleaguered cities, were lackluster in their support for alternative state leadership.

Schauer needed better turnout than in 2010 in Democratic strongholds to have a chance. He didn't get it, as Snyder won 51 percent to 47 percent. Statewide turnout was just over 42 percent, down from 45 percent in 2010.

For those expecting a Detroit backlash against Snyder because of that city's bankruptcy, it didn't happen. About 10,000 fewer Detroit voters showed up than in 2010. Schauer won the city 92 percent to 7 percent, a similar margin to Bernero's 94 percent to 5 percent tally four years ago.

As for Democrats who ran and lost, Sikkema said he believes they need to retool if they are to reverse several election cycles of GOP dominance in state races.

“They spent a lot of effort attacking Republicans, as to what they see as their political vulnerabilities rather than telling people what they want to

accomplish," Sikkema said. "They have to take stock of who they are, rethink their messaging.

"What they are doing now isn't working. In the state Senate, there is no way Republicans ought to have 27 seats in a 38-member body in a state like Michigan."

Michigan Education Association spokesman Doug Pratt said he was unsure where the Democratic Party goes from here.

"We have to look at the numbers and see what happened. To have an election where 100,000 fewer people turned out is not something that anybody was expecting. To have 100,000-plus fewer people vote yesterday is incredibly stunning."

As to what the results mean for the state's political agenda, he said: "Honestly, I don't know. It's too early to give you something on that."

Dems need a reboot

Cole, the Detroit lobbyist, echoed Sikkema's critique of the Dems. Aside from Jennifer Granholm, no Democrat has won state-level political office – governor, attorney general or secretary of state – in two decades.

"The Democrats deserve some of this. What do they stand for? They need to decide," Cole said.

In 2012, Democrats whiffed on two ballot measures to prop up union clout, traditionally their biggest source of support. The big one – Proposal 2 – would have enshrined collective bargaining in the state Constitution. It lost 58 percent to 42 percent. A second proposal to classify home health care workers as public employees lost badly as well. (Democrats lost pro-labor ballot issues in 2002 and 2006 as well.)

A few weeks after state voters rejected Prop 2, Snyder signed right to work legislation, which prohibits compulsory collection of union dues.

By 2013, all this caught up with Brewer, the former party chairman. After 18 years at the helm, Brewer was ousted at the party convention by Lon Johnson.

Johnson is credited for modernizing the party's organizing structure and seeking to push up absentee votes through a mobile phone app.

But the party still faces the same upstream swim as Brewer – an ongoing drop in labor clout, long the heartbeat of Democratic organizing and fundraising. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, union membership fell from 26 percent of Michigan workers in 1989 to just over 16 percent in 2013.

Some voters seemed to be stepping out of party boundaries, even as the state becomes redder.

Kentwood resident Laurie Fernandez voted for Snyder four years ago, hoping he could help get Michigan back on its feet. This time she voted for Schauer – for one dominant reason.

“I didn't like what Snyder did for the schools and for teachers. He did cut money from schools – I know, it happened to me,” Fernandez said.

Fernandez said she was pink-slipped as a teacher in the East Grand Rapids Public Schools, for which she blames Snyder.

Bryon Quertermous, a 38-year-old web administrator from Canton who was once a solid Republican, said he now considers himself independent.

Quertermous said he split his ticket on Tuesday for the top four state positions evenly, voting for Snyder and Republican Secretary of State Ruth Johnson, but also for Democrats Gary Peters and Mark Totten for U.S. Senate and attorney general, respectively.

“Snyder seems to have a pragmatic view, which I like,” he said. “He seems to want to stay out of the social-issue quagmire. Considering how antagonistic his party has been, I didn’t think he’d get as much accomplished as he has.”

Fewer voted, Snyder wins – here’s how he did it

Despite claims that voter turnout would be above 2010 levels, perhaps turning the Michigan governor's race into a toss-up, turnout was actually down across Michigan Tuesday and Republican Gov. Rick Snyder won handily.

Former Democratic Rep. Mark Schauer did far better than Lansing Mayor Virg Bernero did in 2010, winning 14 counties to Bernero's four, but turnout in the state's Democratic strongholds didn't materialize. In fact, 10,000 fewer Detroit voters, who gave Schauer 92 percent of the vote, cast ballots Tuesday compared to 2010.

And in Oakland County, the state's second most populous county, Snyder saw his huge 2010 margin shrink -- but he still won by over 56,000 votes.

Statewide, turnout was about 42 percent, down from the nearly 45 percent who voted in 2010. Midterm elections across the country typically generate far less interest; on average, there are 1.4 million more Michigan voters during Presidential elections since 1996.

You can see how each county differed in the two Snyder elections below.

The dark red counties are those where Snyder captured more than 60 percent of the vote; light red are where Snyder won by a lesser margin.

The dark blue counties are those where Schauer captured more than 60 percent of the vote; light blue are where Schauer won by a lesser margin.

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