

Study says middle-of-road voters are gone

By Tim Richeard
staff writer

Michigan voters used to be viewed as lumped in the "middle of the road." Not any more.

They appear to have split in two polarized camps, liberal and conservative, according to a pair of scholar-politicians.

The 1986 Republican gubernatorial race will probably appeal to the far right, and Democratic Gov. James Blanchard will be well advised to "move to the right as quickly as possible."

THE FINDINGS, laced with political advice, were unveiled last week in a paper by state Sen. William Sederburg, R-East Lansing, and Gary Wolfram, assistant professor of political science at the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

Sederburg has a doctorate in political science from Michigan State University. Wolfram is on leave from UM-D to serve as staff economist for the state Senate Republican caucus.

Wolfram presented the paper and fielded questions in a UM-D conference on public affairs.

"The year 1980 started to mark a watershed," Wolfram said. Until then,

Republican Govs. George Romney and William G. Milliken had won three elections apiece by staying in the middle of the political road, appealing to moderates of both parties.

BUT IN 1980 Ronald Reagan, a Republican conservative, easily tramped President Jimmy Carter, a Democratic moderate.

"The Headlee people (supporters of 1982 GOP gubernatorial nominee Richard Headlee) read it that either the median had shifted (first chart), or we have a bi-modal system (second chart)," Wolfram said.

In the 1982 GOP gubernatorial primary, Lt. Gov. James Brickley, a virtual clone of Milliken, should have been an easy winner against three conservatives. But Brickley captured a scant 30 percent of the vote while the conservatives took 70 percent. Headlee, insurance executive from Farmington Hills, topped the field with 34 percent.

So certain were Headlee's pollsters that Michigan was now bi-modal that they didn't even ask voters if they were "moderates." They tried to categorize them as "very conservative," "somewhat conservative," "somewhat liberal" and "very liberal." Only if a respondent insisted would he or she be classified as

"moderate," Wolfram said. Significantly, the Headlee pollster was E. Spencer Abraham, now GOP state chairman.

HEADLEE'S STRATEGY was good, but he lost anyway. Why? Wolfram and Sederburg offered several reasons:

- James Blanchard of Pleasant Ridge won the Democratic primary in a field of eight with overwhelming union support, by "obscuring" the issues and by running in the middle of the road. The authors said that "would have been a losing strategy in almost any other year."

- Headlee, despite a good strategy on economics and tax issues, alienated blocs of support with off-the-cuff remarks. "On women's rights, he implied that feminists, including Gov. Milliken's wife, were closet lesbians. He took a strong anti-gay position. He called the city of Detroit a cesspool and implied that its black mayor, Coleman Young, was an inefficient if not crooked administrator."

- Blacks turned out in record numbers in cities, supporting Blanchard.
- Unemployment was high, not only in Detroit (17 percent) but also in such outstate cities as Flint (20) and Pontiac (32), and that hurt Republicans.

"CONSIDERING these factors, it is impressive that Headlee came within 200,000 votes of Blanchard," the authors said.

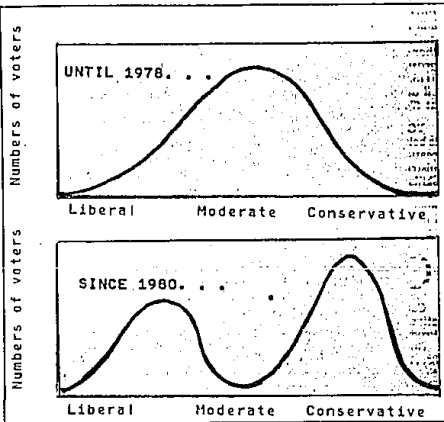
They noted Headlee's 6 percent margin of defeat was considerably better than the 15-21 percent margins suffered by Republican losers in Ohio, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Blanchard himself polarized the electorate with his successful 38 percent state income tax increase early in 1983, the authors said. It was passed with only one Republican vote in the Senate and none in the House.

While dozens of recalls were talked about, only two Democratic senators got the voters' axe: Philip Mastin of Pontiac and David Serotkin of Mt. Clemens. Republicans had expected to carry both Senate districts in 1982.

"Interestingly, the two recall districts were the only districts carried by Headlee but not also carried by the Republican Senate candidate," Wolfram and Sederburg said. Republicans carried them in special elections by 67-69 percent, emphasizing anti-tax feelings.

THE AUTHORS agree that Michigan no longer has a lump of middle-of-the-road voters: "The distribution became slightly bipolar, with an increase in the conservative end at the expense of the center. The recall elections . . . were a reaffirmation of the 1982 Republican strategy of picking a position to the right and sticking with it."



Michigan voters are becoming polarized, say Wolfram and Sederburg. Until 1978, a winning candidate had to capture the middle of the road (upper chart). Since 1980, voters have split into two camps (lower chart), with moderates apparently shifting to the conservative side.

GOP moderates alive, convening

Unaware that some pollsters think they no longer exist, the Michigan Moderate Republican Movement will explore the future of the "mainstream" in a state conference next weekend at Bay City.

Ellen M. Tempin, Bloomfield Township and former state GOP vice chairwoman, will preside at the second conference of "Modcon," whose theme will be "Bridging the Gap." Sessions will be held Friday evening, all day Saturday and Sunday morning in the Bay Valley Inn.

James E. Defebaugh, former state representative from the Birmingham area, will be master of ceremonies at a banquet honoring moderate legislative candidates. Defebaugh was unseated from the Republican State Committee in the 18th Congressional District caucus in January.

Other area persons taking part will be state Rep. Shirley Johnson of Royal Oak, on the women's

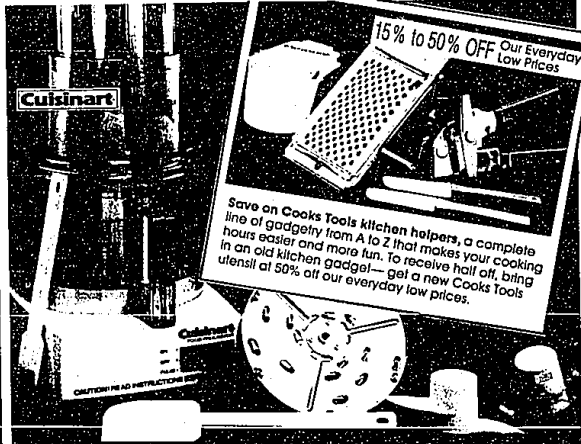
caucus agenda; former Rep. Ruth McNamee of Birmingham on the proposed constitutional amendment requiring a balanced federal budget; Dorothy Beardmore of Rochester, newly elected member of the State Board of Education; Mel Larsen, former state representative from Oakland County and past GOP state chairman, on urban ethnics in the Republican Party.

Memberships are available in four categories, named for various Republican moderates: former Gov. William G. Milliken (\$75), President Dwight D. Eisenhower (\$100), suffragette Susan B. Anthony (\$150) and Abraham Lincoln (\$300). The moderate group began to organize after Milliken retired as governor, and conservative supporters of Richard Headlee gained a tight grip on party machinery.

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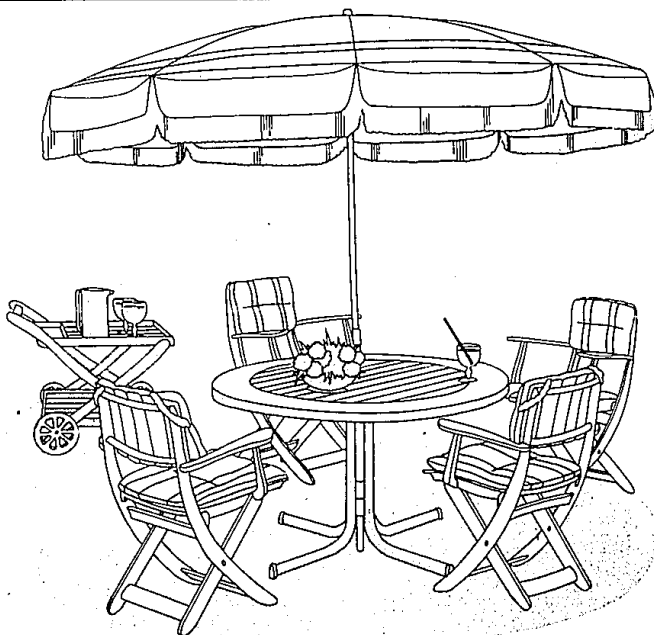
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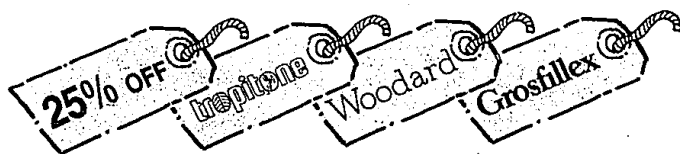
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