

POINTS OF VIEW

Election aftermath: Democrats need overhaul

It must be something in the water.

How else to explain the disconnect between the state of politics in Michigan and what's going on elsewhere in the country.

For Michigan Republicans, Gov. John Engler, running implausibly but effectively as a moderate conservative pragmatist, rolled up nearly a 2-1 margin over Geoffrey Fieger. The GOP also won wall-to-wall control of the apparatus of government: governor, Senate, House, Supreme Court.

Team Engler is now in a position to determine much of the politics and some of the structure of our state for the next decade. Democrats hope they'll overreach, but I doubt it as long as Engler's in control.

By contrast, the national Republican Party took a terrible beating in last week's election, culminating in

the summary knifing of Newt Gingrich (a strategic and policy visionary but a lousy manager). The factional fighting in the GOP — business-oriented moderates, Christian right wingers, compassionate conservatives, hard-edge ideological conservatives — could tear the party apart.

Buoyed by the referendum on impeachment and Ken Starr and chaos in the opposition, the national Democratic Party has come a long way since the days it was preoccupied with making sure there were no enemies on the left. Bill Clinton may possess questionable moral fiber, but his success in moving the Democrats into the middle of the road and opening the party up to various different groups is a fundamental fact of our times.

By contrast, the Michigan Democratic Party seems frozen in amber. Most people thought big labor



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couldn't ever do worse than picking inept Howard Wolpe to run for governor in 1994. But then, when neither Doug Ross nor Larry Owen seemed to be getting much traction last summer and former Sen. Don Riegler started making showing signs of interest in running, the folks who run the UAW panicked.

Their premature and ham-handed endorsement of Owen didn't set well with most folks and opened the way to

Fieger's unexpected victory in the primary and predictable defeat in the general election. Those Democrats who worry about what Team Engler will do over the next few years won't have difficulty in finding plenty of folks to blame.

Which is why so many Democrats are talking so much about how important (and how overdue) it is to revitalize the party, "revitalize" in this case being a code word which really means easing Big Labor's grip on it.

It's clear a complete overhaul of the party is needed," says former Gov. Jim Blanchard. "There are many in the party who are concerned about the need to broaden and strengthen and deepen the party" which is much too "uninclusive," says former Sen. Riegler.

This won't be easy. Obvious candidates to lead the process — Blanchard and newly elected Attorney General

Jennifer Granholm, for example — have political ambitions of their own and won't want to alienate the labor movement that still provides most of the resources for the party.

The requirements — developing some attractive ideas, including groups previously kept out and persuading organized labor that it's better to win the occasional election than it is to maintain total control over the Democratic Party — are fairly obvious.

Whether Democrats can come up with a process and find the people with the will and imagination to carry it out is entirely another matter.

Phil Power is chairman of Home-Town Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@oconline.com

Dems: Imagine what could be if some visionaries make changes

Look for a sea change in the Michigan Democratic Party early in 1999, the biggest change in 50 years.

In 1948, G. Mennen Williams won the gubernatorial nomination with help from Walter Reuther's UAW. That group rewrote state politics and social policy.

Big Labor will continue to be a major player but without its iron fist in a steel glove. The AFL-CIO — including the United Auto Workers, Michigan Federation of Teachers and AFSCME — fielded a 1994 gubernatorial candidate who lost disastrously. Big Labor's choice for the nomination didn't even win the 1998 primary.

To the labor-dominated party, Nov. 3, 1998 was like Moby Dick's sinking of the whaling ship "Pequod." All perished at the bulk of the Engler white whale save one Ishmael, Jennifer Granholm, the attorney general candidate.

Why? Big Labor itself has changed. No longer do industrial workers dominate. Huge blocs of UAW members actually come from the field of state social workers. And Republican Gov. John Engler has pared social workers from the state payroll with welfare changes.

Geoffrey Fieger declared there is no Democratic Party. He exaggerated only a little. Fortune Magazine in a 1960s article on Michigan ran side-by-side pictures of the UAW's slick Solidarity House at 8000 E. Jefferson in Detroit and the seedy, Victorian house that serves as state Democratic headquarters on Townsend Street in Lansing. Without Big Labor, there's not much you can call a Democratic Party.

Yet Democratic candidates as a group ran only 100,000 votes behind out of three million cast this year. They can't all be union people. Some are managers, accountants, archi-



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itects, nurses, store owners, roofers, payroll clerks, retirees, even a newspaper company owner.

So who will make this sea change that is so obviously building up?

Geoff Fieger is unlikely to be a major player. There are some people around him, however, who may try to do to the Michigan Democratic Party what George Romney did to the GOP in 1962 and Dick Hendle did in 1982.

Former Gov. Jim Blanchard will be around. "We need a strong, grass-

roots organization that needs to move out. That's why I formed the New Century Fund," he said election night. His fund helped many candidates.

Ed McNamara, the Wayne County exec who crowned Granholm, will have a role. Lansing Mayor David Hollister may assert himself.

"Elected leaders need to step up and take control of the Democratic Party," said lame-duck state Rep. Kirk Profit of Ypsilanti on election night. "Elected people control the Republican Party. But you don't have elected people in control of the Democratic Party."

Many others apparently agree. A day later, a Lansing lobbyist passed along a tip: Look for elected officials to back outgoing Democratic floor leader Pat Gagliardi for state chair early in 1999.

In the 1970s, the Michigan Education Association was bidding for a dominant role. But because it backed

an occasional Republican, MEA found itself denounced as "whores" by the AFL-CIO president. It may reassess itself, especially as Engler continues to alienate the 40 percent of MEA members who have voted Republican.

Granholm? She'll have her hands full keeping Engler from chopping her regulatory budget and finding child care. Besides, her Berkeley-Harvard mind is so mired in the sociology of the 1960s and '70s — linking "criminals and big corporations" — that she's out of step with the new direction set by Blanchard, Dennis Archer and Doug Ross.

If a party so narrowly run can come within 100,000 votes, think what would happen if a few visionaries made changes.

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