

“What’s at Stake in 2010,” Bill Ballenger, Editor, *Inside Michigan Politics*

Bill Ballenger spoke at a meeting hosted by the Progressive Women’s Alliance on Wednesday, October 21, 2009. The following account of his remarks was prepared by PWA.

What’s at stake in 2010? We will not see another Michigan election like this in our lifetimes, and the stakes are huge. Why is this year unique?

The political configuration outlined below has never before occurred during a federal census year, and elective outcomes in 2010 will determine reapportionment for the next decade.

- For only the second time since just after WWII all four constitutional officers (Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, and Secretary of State) will be on the ballot as open seats; no incumbents are running.
- All 15 U.S. House seats are up for election.
- The 38 seats in the Michigan State Senate and 110 State House seats are all up, and many are open because of term limits.
- Two seats out of 7 on the Michigan Supreme Court will be up for election.
- Over 200 judgeships and almost 700 county commission seats are also up for grabs statewide.

State Supreme Court

Reapportionment [the *re-allocation of representation in Congress and redistricting to achieve equal population within legislative districts, based on decennial census results*] is begun by passing a bill in the state legislature. The Governor can sign or veto the bill, after which a legal challenge by the ‘aggrieved’ party is likely to be sent to the state Supreme Court. Control of the Supreme Court becomes critically important after 2010.

Supreme Court races are ostensibly non-partisan, although the candidates are nominated at party conventions. Currently, the Court is 4-3 Republican. The **two seats up next year** are those of two incumbent Republicans, Elizabeth Weaver and Robert Young, both of whom are likely to run for re-election. The Republicans have nothing to gain and everything to lose in this race. If the Democratic candidates should win both seats, they would gain a 5-2 majority and we would see a complete undoing of the January 1999 Engler court.

The Supreme Court ballot does not list party affiliation, but it does identify Incumbents, giving Weaver and Young a built-in advantage (unless someone else gets the Republican nominations). But all Democrats have to do is finish second. The top two vote-getters will win seats. If the Democrats win only one, they will still have a 4-3 majority. Democrats might be smart to nominate only one person and consolidate their support.

Governorship

John Cherry will be unbeatable in a Democratic primary – all the special interests are firmly on his side. He has been in state government since 1982, so has more experience than John Engler had when he ran. But Cherry is joined at the hip with Governor Granholm, whose job rating has

deteriorated. He can't speak against her and will look like a continuation of her. Still, at seven months away from the filing deadline and ten months from the primary, we have a long way to go.

State Legislature

Republicans have been in control of the State **Senate** for 26 years. Currently, it has 21 Republican senators and 16 Democrats. The one vacancy in the 19th district (Jackson/Battle Creek) is due to the 2008 election to the US House of Mark Schauer and will be filled by special election on November 3, 2009. The Republican candidate is likely to win, making it even more difficult for Democrats to take control of the Senate next year. They would need a net gain of 4 seats. Democrats control the **House**, 67-43, with their third-largest majority in the history of Michigan. With that kind of margin, Democrats are likely to retain control.

The number of **women in state office** has receded, so it appears that term limits have not provided lasting help for increasing those numbers. After the 2010 election it is likely that the number of women in the Senate will be down slightly, from 9 to 6 or 7. No incumbents are running, and it is too early to tell how many women could be elected to open seats.

Term limits will not be overturned. This could be achieved in one of two ways: by legislative action or by petition. A 2/3 majority of both legislative chambers could vote to put the issue on the ballot, but they won't because 'it looks bad' and because the minority party always hopes that term limits will help it become the majority. And no interest groups are currently mounting a petition drive, the route to term limits in 1992. Petition drives take money, and polls show that a ballot proposal against term limits would not win.

It is unlikely that any **moderate Republicans** will be elected. The Republican Party has moved right on socio-cultural issues, and it is impossible to get a Republican elected who is liberal on social matters. Democrats are handling big tent issues much more cleverly. Recently, the Democratic base has risen 6% in the state, a huge gain. So 2010 is an important year – can they keep it going, or will there be some backlash?

Education

Michigan is the only state in the nation where the governing boards of major educational institutions are elected statewide (three: MSU, U-M, and Wayne State). There are 8 seats on each board with staggered terms; 2 are elected to each board during every election. Races for the Michigan Board of Education and local boards will also be on the ballot.

Constitutional Convention

Whether to have a constitutional convention will be an automatic ballot proposal in 2010. Citizens are polled every 16 years on this question, and in 1978 and 1994 they rejected the opportunity by a margin of 3 to 1. Results this year will probably be closer but, unless something dramatic happens, the proposal will likely lose. There is little predicting what could happen if it wins.