

DAS ONLINE-SUPPLEMENT DES FORSCHUNGSJOURNALS

FORSCHUNGSJOURNAL SOZIALE BEWEGUNGEN 34. Jg. Heft 1 | 2021

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Macomb County, Michigan

The lasting influence of Trump and the future of swing districts: an interview with campaign manager Emily McHarg

During the 2020 elections, not only the president was on the ballot: the entire House of Representatives, one third of the Senate, and State Legislatures across the country were up for election. With a contentious and divisive presidential incumbent on top of the Republican ticket, it was unclear if voters in swing states would split their votes, meaning: would independents and moderates vote Democrat for President, but Republican down ballot?

As political actors mobilized for or against former President Trump, local political landscapes began to shift. In particular, as the Republican party has struggled over its identity (is it the party of Trump? What does it mean to be conservative? How do we resonate with young voters and changing demographics?), it has been uncertain how party bases and voter blocks will ultimately vote.

To understand the long term effects that Donald Trump will have on the Republican Party, it is worth taking a closer look at the state of Michigan. The rust belt state provides interesting insights on the shifting US electorate for several notable reasons. The state voted twice for Barack Obama, but for Donald Trump in 2016, and for Joe Biden in 2020. It also has a long history of unions and labor movements, which is now experiencing a declining union membership and in some sectors a shift away from the Democratic Party.

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Most acutely, the state is witnessing an uptick in extreme, far-right political ideologies: in October 2020, 13 men were charged with planning to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer and instigate a civil war. We can now see this as a predecessor to the January 6th, 2020 mob that attacked the US Capitol, an extremely worrisome trend for all democratic actors across the United States. Both of these events followed a summer of armed and organized militias protesting at the capital against the stay-at-home measures implemented by Governor Whitmer.

What can Michigan teach us about the current state of social movements, political narratives, and the future of party politics in the United States? In the following interview, Emily McHarg addresses these points in detail based on her experience running a Michigan State Legislature's campaign. McHarg discusses the challenges and realities of running a campaign during the Trump era, an ongoing pandemic, and against an extremist candidate who embodied the far-right political tendencies taking hold of US society. She reflects on the legacy that Trumpian politics will leave on local and state politics in Michigan and based on her experience analyzes how 2020 will influence social movements, unions, party politics, and political trends in the years to come.

Emily, can you give us an overview of your campaign: who was the candidate, for which position was he running for and what were the main messages of your campaign?

I ran a State Representative's (Nate Shannon) re-election campaign in Macomb County, Michigan during the 2020 cycle. My candidate was a former city council member and teacher before running to be a State Representative, so he had strong ties to the community. While the district has always had a Democratic State Representative, the district is becoming increasingly competitive with smaller winning margins for Democrats. This seat was viewed as a "flippable" seat for Republicans, especially with Trump on the ballot. One of the campaign's biggest challenges in 2020 was the down-ballot Trump effect, despite the district's history of ticket-splitting. Ticket-splitting is for example when voters vote Republican for President, and then Democrat for the Congressperson. This often happens when there is a polarizing figure on the ballot, such as Trump.

Because the district is in a pivot county in Michigan, meaning Macomb voted for Obama twice and then Trump in 2016, our campaign needed carefully strategized messaging that would resonate with working class Democrats, independents and moderate Republicans.

Our campaign focused on education, good jobs, infrastructure, healthcare and Covid-19. As a public-school teacher, my candidate is a strong advocate for providing increased funding to elementary, middle, and high schools. In addition, if you've heard Governor Whitmer's catchy "fix the damn roads" slogan, then you know how important

infrastructure is in Michigan and to voters. My candidate supports rebuilding Michigan's infrastructure which would create thousands of good paying jobs in the state. Lastly, more accessible and equitable healthcare was an issue elevated by the Covid-19 pandemic. A lot of messaging focused on protecting the community and frontlineworkers while helping small businesses recover from the economic impact of Covid-19.

These were successful messages. On November 6th, 2020, my candidate won in a competitive district, and outperformed Democrats on the top of the ticket. Our positions resonated with both independent and moderate Republican voters.

**How did an increase in right-wing aggression in Michigan influence the campaign?
How present were these right-wing influences in your district?**

The August Republican primary was a three-way contest, and the winner was the most extreme, right-wing of the candidates. This candidate is openly racist, xenophobic, homophobic and sexist. Also a former city council member, he had been asked to step down from city council after being investigated by the FBI due to death threats made against Democratic elected officials, including then-President Obama. His own Republican colleagues called him unfit to hold public office. However, the Republican candidate has a recognized name in the community and was on the Republican ballot, so our campaign was concerned that enough voters would vote straight ticket Republican with Trump on the ballot, allowing this extreme candidate to win.

In October, the kidnapping plot against Michigan's Governor Gretchen Whitmer was revealed by the FBI. The Republican candidate replied to a Facebook post about the kidnapping plot with a photo of my candidate and the Governor together. His comment called the plot a bogus sham and he defended the actions of these men by saying that they never did anything illegal. Only after the Republican candidate made these comments did the chair of the Michigan GOP and the House Republicans disavow his candidacy. I think that happened too late into the campaign. This candidate has a public track record of encouraging violence and promoting right-wing extremism and conspiracy theories. Multiple news stories had been written about him prior to the 2020 cycle. Michigan Republicans should have disavowed his candidacy sooner. Over 20,000 voters still cast their ballots for this candidate, which wasn't enough for him to win but 20,000 voters either didn't know about this candidate or knew and still voted for him.

Were there any unexpected benefits to running a campaign primarily virtually?

Running a campaign primarily virtually was hard. Yet our campaign was able to engage with a larger network across the state and country that I don't believe we would have been able to engage with otherwise. For example, after our campaign was featured on a nationwide email to promote one of our 'Weekends of Action', we were able to

mobilize phonebank volunteers from across the country. There is so much potential for policy progress, activism and engagement at the state level, so I was excited to have volunteers from across America invested in our campaign. We all know how important federal offices are, but state offices can be just as important if not more. A lot of policy that directly affects people's lives is actually decided on the state level, especially in regard to hot button issues like reproductive health. Plus, when you invest in candidates on the county and state level, candidates at the top of the ticket benefit too. The bottom-up effect in politics is real, and I think more Democrats can win up and down the ballot if long-term investments at the community level are made.

State campaigns and local parties desperately need resources and volunteers, and the internet is a great platform to connect those resources and volunteers with state and local campaigns.

How did your campaign use social media and digital tools?

Our campaign heavily relied on digital tools to connect with voters over the phone. I ran a robust texting and calling program, with 40,000 texts sent out and 80,000 calls made. I always thought this campaign would be won or lost by a field margin, so it was important to me to try to find creative ways to do that old-school relational organizing during Covid-19.

We were able to try out a lot of new technology, including relational organizing apps that allow you to connect with people in your own network to ask questions about what issues matter to them and who they're voting for. Having someone in your own network ask you those questions is a lot more powerful and memorable.

I saw a lot of potential use for new technology like that, but the challenge was virtually training a group of mainly older volunteers on unfamiliar technology. Unfortunately, that digital tool did not gain a lot of traction among our volunteers and network, but I'm excited to see how those new digital tools will be used on future campaigns.

In terms of social media, our campaign mainly used Facebook instead of Instagram or Twitter. The advantage of Facebook was being able to target audiences based on a variety of factors. We also used Facebook as a platform for virtual events and to connect with local activist groups and voters. All of these social media and digital tools were very easily adaptable during Covid, but we knew we weren't going to connect with all of our targeted voters online. In addition, we sent out several mail pieces and dropped campaign literature on doors in a socially distanced fashion.

As a campaign, what was your level of interaction with social movements? If any, was that a shift from previous campaigns?

Running a Democratic State Representative's re-election campaign in Macomb County during a presidential campaign resulted in social movements largely focusing on the top of the ticket. The coordinated Biden and Peters (US Senator) campaign was so focused on flipping Macomb County blue that energy and resources from social movements were funneled into those candidates. Plus, social justice issues often fail to resonate with Macomb County voters, so social movements have found a more successful home in the neighboring Oakland County, which has been trending Democratic recently.

Do you see Trumpian politics continue to resonate in your district and state in 2021 and beyond?

The short answer is yes. Macomb County has a long political history, including being the birthplace of "Reagan Democrats" and it is often considered the bellwether of the state. The county was one of 12 pivot counties in Michigan that voted for Obama twice and then Trump in 2016, so Trump's populist message targeting working class voters plays well here. In 2016, Trump won Michigan by 10,704 votes, so all eyes were on Macomb County in 2020. 40,000 more Macomb voters cast a ballot for Trump in 2020, so the Trump base in Macomb County stayed strong, but it still wasn't enough to turn Michigan red.

Macomb is a blue collar, working class region that cares about economic issues like jobs, trade and infrastructure more than social justice issues. It historically has been a hub for automotive manufacturing, but those jobs have begun disappearing. The Trump campaign identified that concern. For example, in 2016, Trump promised Macomb that if he was elected, no more plants would leave the area. 'America First' messaging carried Trump – at least in Macomb – to victory twice, and it will continue to resonate in the district.

Comparatively, the surrounding counties of Wayne and Oakland decisively voted for Biden in 2020. Oakland County is a former GOP stronghold in Michigan but has recently shifted Democratic, as Trumpian politics fail to resonate in that county. Macomb County has experienced the opposite shift. The county also has a long history of ticket-splitting and voting for Republicans on the top of the ticket, but for Democrats in state and county offices. That might be beginning to change. In 2020, Republicans picked up four of the five key countywide offices in Macomb, despite Democratic investment in the area. It will be interesting to see how the newly drawn districts in Michigan impact upcoming elections, but I think Michigan will remain competitive.

Did you experience new trends in political discourse and/or new political coalitions/alliances? If yes, do you see them as temporary for the Trump era or a more permanent shift?

Like the rest of the country, we saw a continuation of seemingly unlikely political coalitions including typical union members voting Republican. Not only is union membership at a historic low in Michigan, but social justice messaging is not resonating with union members in Michigan, especially in Macomb County. This seems like a more permanent shift that Trump was able to take advantage of. To win back these voters, Democrats need to message effectively to these voters about social justice issues and climate change along with prioritizing economic issues. These voters care about their jobs, their children's education and the infrastructure in their state. Therefore, even though unions are one of the largest spenders in politics, that Democratic union base is decreasing.

We also saw more women voting Democratic and a greater gender divide forming. Most of our targeted voters that we were reaching out to were women, and I think our most productive persuasion conversations happened with women voters. Moderate Republican women were much more likely to continue a conversation with the candidate or volunteers compared to moderate Republican men. However, it will be interesting to see what happens after Trump is out of office. If these moderate Republican women were only turned off by Trump's abrasiveness and language, then they might end up going back to the Republican party.

How will the next two years look like in Michigan politics?

The next two years in Michigan politics will be combative, competitive and uncertain. Every 10 years, states across the country redraw their district lines for political offices, so we do not know what Michigan's new districts will look like yet. What we do know is that members of the Michigan House of Representatives were at the January 6th United States Capitol riots in Washington D.C. That fact has yet to be acknowledged by Michigan Republican leadership, which currently controls both the House and the Senate. We also know several men have been charged with conspiring to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer, and links between the protests at the Michigan Capitol which occurred last spring and the January 6th riots are still being investigated.

These events occurred in part due to false information spreading about Covid and the 2020 election. If Michigan Republicans continue to utilize that misinformation network that Trump's presidency enabled, it's very possible we will see more extreme, right-wing candidates running, like our Republican challenger. That also means there's less of a chance of bipartisanship approaches to urgent problems like the Covid pandemic. More than 14,000 lives have been lost to the pandemic in Michigan, but some Republican elected officials still refuse to wear masks on the House Floor. Michigan

Republicans are focused on denying Democrats legislative victories that they can run on in 2022 which is when the Governorship will be back on the ballot, and in the end, Michigan residents will be hurt.

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Emily McHarg ran Nate Shannon's state legislature campaign during the 2020 US Election.