

Detroit Free Press

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK



Photo: Mike Thompson Detroit Free Press

Want a revolution? It doesn't start with the president

[Nancy Kaffer](#), Detroit Free Press Columnist 11:15 p.m. EST March 12, 2016

Two presidential candidates promise to transform America and American government, making America great, erasing inequality, ushering in a host of reforms that will fundamentally alter the status quo.

A revolution, proclaims Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, the one-time long-shot candidate who won Michigan's Democratic primary last week.

Big changes, says billionaire businessman Donald Trump, the improbable candidate who's swept GOP primaries and caucuses across the nation, an unstoppable juggernaut who terrifies Republicans as much as he does Democrats.

Thousands of new voters flocked to the polls in Michigan last week to cast ballots for each man. But casting a ballot for a presidential candidate, no matter how outrageous or iconoclastic, isn't a vote for revolution. Our system moves slowly, by design. One person can't usher in sweeping change — and that's what the Founding Fathers intended.

"The system was set up to move slowly," says Brandon Dillon, chairman of the Michigan Democratic Party. "It was designed to avoid huge swings, ideologically or practically."

That's the bad news. Here's the good news: Revolution, my friends, is possible. It's just a lot harder than you thought.

It takes more time. And it costs a lot of money. But there are efforts underway that could revolutionize politics, starting right here in this state, where most of the decisions that impact our lives — how our schools are funded, how our roads are maintained, what kinds of protections LGBT Michiganders have, access to reproductive health care — are made.

So if you voted for a presidential candidate because you want a revolution, don't stop there. Understand "how the most local races affect your community," Ronna Romney McDaniel, chairwoman of the Michigan Republican Party, says. "That's the first place."

"A revolution that moves fundamental reforms in our democracy does not happen overnight," said Melanie McElroy, executive director of Common Cause in Michigan, a nonpartisan organization that advocates for government reforms. "That is why we lose instant-gratification voters who turn out for presidential elections To achieve a fundamental shift in power, it's not enough to vote for a candidate with revolutionary ideas."

Real change means working to ensure that the state Legislature represents Michigan, improving voter access, voting in the local primaries where many local legislative races are decided, helping folks get to the polls, and maybe — possibly — running for office yourself.

Change the map

Michigan is a blue state. Our two U.S. senators, elected by a statewide vote, are Democrats. Democratic presidential nominees have won Michigan since the election of George H.W. Bush. Our governor is a Republican, but — back when he was elected — was a moderate whose initial pitch promised a pragmatic middle path.

And yet Michigan's state Legislature is dominated by a conservative GOP majority. Our 14-member delegation in the U.S. House of Representatives includes just five Democrats.

Why? Because following each decennial U.S. Census, the party that's in charge of the state Legislature draws and approves the state's legislative districts. When Republicans are on top, legislative and Congressional districts are drawn to favor — you guessed it — Republicans. When Dems are on top, the reverse is true.

But there's a way to end this cycle: It's called bipartisan redistricting reform. I know, it's a terrible name. But it's really important.

Decisions made by the state Legislature — how to fix our roads, whether and how much to invest in our schools, restrictions on reproductive rights, protections for LGBT Michiganders — this all happens at the state level. And because Michigan's districts are drawn to favor Republicans, in recent years, social conservatives have had an outsized impact on our state's character. Some Republicans have called bipartisan redistricting a Democratic power grab, and it's probably true that the immediate impact would be greater Democratic representation. But ultimately, redistricting reform would create a more fair playing field.

A 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision upheld Arizona's authority to invest the authority to draw districts in an independent, nonpartisan redistricting commission. And there's been quiet interest in putting this question onto a statewide ballot. Other states have adopted bipartisan reforms — there's no shortage of best practices to follow — and there are three election cycles before the next census. But don't expect to see redistricting reform on the ballot this year.

The state League of Women Voters held a series of informational meetings last fall, both public town halls and presentations to civic groups. And what the league — an advocate for good governance, rather than a particular political agenda — learned, said vice president Susan Smith, was that Michigan isn't ready.

"While the people who came to the town halls were interested in hearing more about redistricting, and some already recognized there was a problem, when we spoke to the civic organizations, there was a lot less awareness of how redistricting is done in Michigan, and what some of the problems are that resulted from the way we do it," Smith said. "So we came away from that experience recognizing we needed to do a lot more work."

One political strategist I consulted estimated that it could cost more than \$10 million to mount an effective statewide campaign in support of a bipartisan redistricting ballot proposal — and that's without significant opposition. So far, Smith says, "Nobody wrote us a check."

What can you do? Call the League. Smith says. Offer to host or help organize an information meeting. Talk to your friends and neighbors.

Show up

Consider Right to Life.

The anti-abortion-rights group has developed a masterful strategy to lock down key legislative and judicial races. Here's what my colleague [Brian Dickerson wrote two years ago](#), after yet another electoral sweep by the group's preferred candidates: "The group's primary strategy is to identify candidates for elected office at every level of government who share its agenda and link them to the anti-abortion voters most likely to participate in primary and general elections In most election cycles, including this one, Right to Life effectively locked down pro-life majorities in both legislative houses by the second week in August, months before most voters even begin to think about the November general election."

In essence, Right to Life builds a farm team, and rallies voters to cast ballots in primary elections, when turnout is generally less than 30% — a fraction of the percentage of voters who turn out for general elections.

It's a winning strategy. And it can be copied.

"Every county in Michigan has a county party or congressional district party," Dillon says. "But there are other organizations. Some people are concerned about the environment; there might be an organization they can channel that energy through I would encourage people to vote and get involved in this election The message is important, but being committed to staying involved cycle after cycle is going to pay dividends in the long run."

GOP chairwoman McDaniel can testify to the value of getting involved: When she returned to Michigan in 2007, she joined the local Republican Party, running for precinct delegate, "which you can do in either party," she notes.

"I showed up to county conventions, started figuring out how my county worked, how my district worked, knocked (on) doors for candidates — you meet a lot of people," McDaniel said. "Go to township board meetings, school board meetings, find out what's happening in your local community. Go to your local representative's coffee hours, ask what's happening in Lansing. Then gauge how much more involved you want to be based on your time and interest. But I think that's the best place to start."

If you're passionate about a candidate or issue, she said, "the best way is to have neighbor-to-neighbor conversations about issues you care about. And as a party, we facilitate that — we have neighborhood captains, and we really try to have a field captain that focuses on quality relationship building."

Those actions, she said, can improve voter turnout. And if you don't like the way your local party runs, Dillon says, "There are mechanisms to change that. But it involves showing up."

Pester your elected representatives. They listen.

There are a number of legislative reforms that could change the state of Michigan politics: No-reason absentee voting would mean that anyone could obtain an absentee ballot, even if they're not going to be out of town on Election Day. Early voting would improve ballot access for folks whose schedules complicate participation on Election Day. Ultimately, universal voter registration who authorize any qualified adult who hasn't opted out of the electoral process to participate..

Call Secretary of State Ruth Johnson, and tell her these things are important to you. Gauging the mood of the public lets elected officials know what's important — and provides reassurance that such reforms aren't won at the price of political failure.

Both Trump and Sanders have discussed America's farked campaign finance system. The U.S. Supreme Court's 2010 decision in *Citizens United vs the Federal Election Commission* (the lobbying group Citizens United wanted to air an anti-Hillary Clinton movie but was barred from doing so by the McCain-Feingold Act) found a constitutional right to corporate speech, and allowed corporations much greater latitude in election spending.

Barring a significant shift on the high court, that's not likely to change. But Michigan could do a few things, says Rich Robinson, former executive director of the Michigan Campaign Finance Network, a watchdog group: "We should require 24-hour reporting of independent expenditures," Robinson said. "Some \$3 million of independent expenditures related to the 2014 state elections weren't reported until Feb. 2015, over three months after the election."

Another way to transform the system is expanding contributions from small donors, he says.

"Empowering small donors is happening in presidential campaigns. Obama raised hundreds of millions in unitemized (aggregate less than \$200) contributions and Sanders is doing it too (so did former GOP candidate Ben Carson). Somehow, anything less than a presidential campaign doesn't seem to spark that kind of enthusiasm," he said. "Public vouchers, rebates or tax credits for small contributions could ignite something and make small donors much more interesting to candidates," he added. "But if that's going to happen in Michigan, it will be at the local level."

So call your lawmakers, and tell them this is important to you.

Contact Nancy Kaffer: nkaffer@freepress.com