

## Based Look at Straight Ticket Voting in Michigan



(Kurt Metzger and Phil Lombard, Dec. 17, 2015)

The Michigan State Senate recently passed Senate Bill 13, which does away with straight party ticket voting. All Republicans but two voted for it and all Democrats voted against it. It is unclear why the legislation is needed and legislators haven't defined an existing problem that needs a solution.

Sen. Tonya Schuitmaker, a Republican from Lawton, said the legislation would result in a more informed electorate and not just vote with the party. But does she actually think that if you vote via straight ticket you aren't informed? Isn't it possible that the voters study the issues and candidates and then decide to vote either the party or split their ballot? To



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borrow a Republican talking point, is this not just another instance of big government deciding what's best for the voters?

Republicans assume that the elimination of straight party voting would have the largest negative impact on the Democrats – especially in areas with high proportions of “voters of color.”

Perhaps, if these legislators, who were so quick to vote Yes, took the time to study the issue in depth, they would realize that straight-ticket voting is prevalent among Democrats *and* Republicans.

In fact, in the last legislative election of 2014, many Republican senators benefited from the straight ticket ballot. Sen. Marty Knollenberg, a Republican from Troy who sponsored the bill, received 46.7% of his vote from the straight ticket, while his Democrat opponent received 45.5%. Sen. Arlan Meekhof, the Senate Majority Leader, won his election with a 68.2% straight ticket vote, while his opponent

received 43.9%. Republicans risk alienating many of their own constituents, so you have to wonder why they would do so.

We were able to obtain data on straight party voting for seven of Michigan's largest counties – accounting for 56% of both registered voters and ballots cast in the state. Aggregating data over the last four even-year elections – two presidential (2008 and 2012) and two gubernatorial (2010 and 2014) – we found that counties that tend to vote Democratic have a higher share of Democratic straight ticket use, while Republican leaning counties see Republican straight ticket use on the high end. The extremes in our sample show Wayne County with 66% of Democratic votes arriving straight party and Ottawa County bringing in 64% of their Republican votes in this manner.

In the 2014 State Senate race, 49.3% of voters elected a Democrat and 50.7% elected a Republican. However, when the dust settled, Republicans were sitting in 71.1% of the seats. Now they come to help us become more informed voters by eliminating our ability to vote straight party and, if that's not enough, they add an appropriation to the legislation so

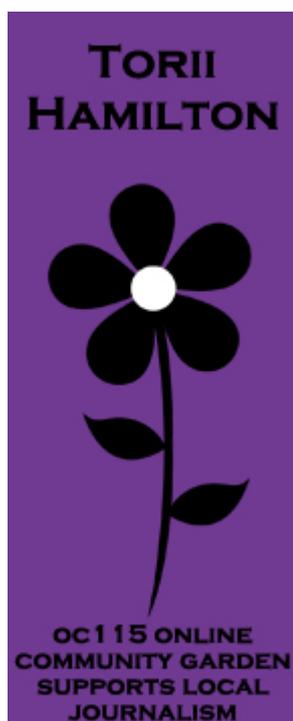
voters can't repeal the law via referendum – which is exactly what voters did in 2012 after Republicans pulled this ploy the last time.

In our search for straight-ticket voting data, we learned that many counties do not publish or even keep records of straight-ticket voting. There is no statewide analysis available.

Given our look at the use of straight-ticket voting, it's hard to say this is anything other than a partisan attempt to suppress minority votes and an expression of contempt for the majority of voters in Michigan.

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*Pleasant Ridge and Director Emeritus of Data Driven Detroit.*



☒ UPDATE: This effort has passed the legislature. See <http://oaklandcounty115.com/2015/12/17/michigan-legislature-votes-to-eliminate-straight-ticket-voting/> for more details

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