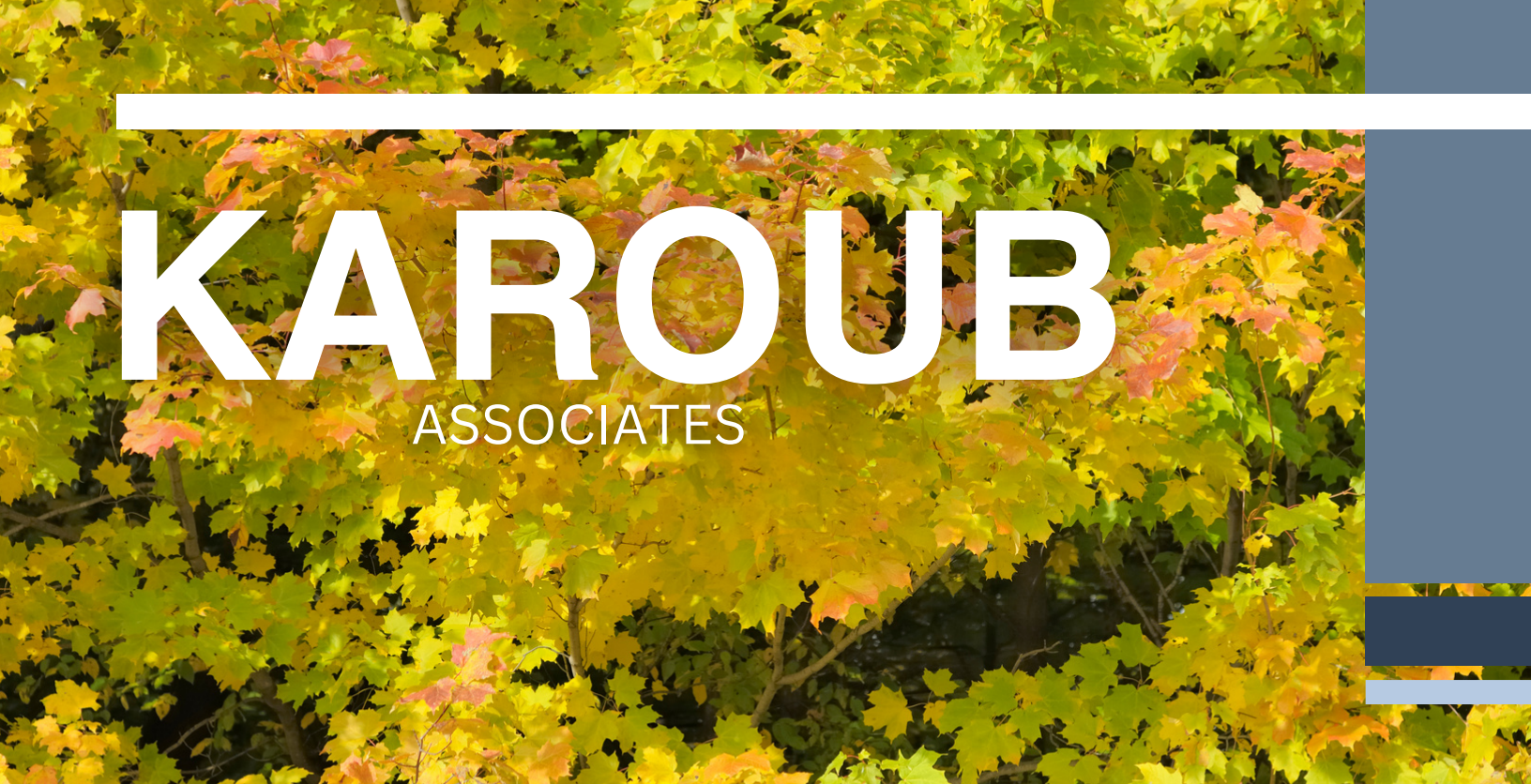




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Why “Safe Seat” Doesn’t Mean What It Used To

About a third of Michigan’s legislative districts are worth watching this November. If you are judging your own by its reputation, you may be judging it on a map that no longer exists.

Most of us carry a rough idea of how our own part of Michigan votes. It is the sort of thing people say without thinking twice — that a county has always gone one way, that a city is a lock, that the state House seat has not been in doubt in years. Those assumptions are usually built on decades of results, and until recently they were reasonably reliable.

This year they are less stable than they look. Working from certified state and federal election records, we have flagged 65 interesting contests on the November ballot: four statewide offices, seven of Michigan’s thirteen congressional districts, 13 of 38 state Senate districts, and 41 of the 110 state House districts. That is slightly more than a third of each chamber of the Legislature, and better than half the Congressional delegation.

A number that large deserves an explanation, and the explanation is not that Michigan has suddenly become more

divided. It is that the ground under those old assumptions moved five years ago, and a lot of people have not caught up.

The map moved. The numbers stayed.

In 2021, after the last census, Michigan redrew its political boundaries. That job had previously belonged to the Legislature; voters handed it to an independent commission in 2018, and the maps we vote on now are the first ones that commission produced.

The lines changed considerably. The district numbers did not change in the same way. So a place that has been called “the 70th” for years may today cover a noticeably different set of neighborhoods, towns and voters than the 70th of a decade ago.

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This creates a problem for anyone trying to judge a district by its track record. When you say a district has voted a certain way for 20 years, part of that history belongs to the place as it is drawn today and part of it belongs to a place that no longer exists in that shape.

None of this is a flaw in how the maps were drawn. It is simply what happens whenever boundaries are redrawn, and it will fade as results accumulate under the current lines. But we are only two general elections into those lines, and for now the old reputations and the recent results can tell very different stories about the same district.

What that looks like in practice

Set a district's long-run record beside its most recent result and the gaps can be startling.

The 70th state House district, for example, ran double-digit Republican in every election from 2012 through 2020, then went better than fifty points the other way in each of the last two. Average the seven together and you get a district sitting almost exactly on the midpoint — a number that describes no election that has ever actually happened there.

Another state House district, the 27th, went Democratic by around 50 points in five straight cycles. In 2022 it came down to a point and a half. In 2024 the other party won it.

It happens further up the ballot too. The 10th Congressional district carries a long-run average of roughly 25 points — comfortable by any measure — but was decided by around six points in 2024.

In each case, both figures are accurate. They are simply measuring different things: one is the memory of a district, the other is the behavior of the voters who actually live there now. Where those two disagree sharply, the recent result is usually the better guide — and it is the one most of us never look at.

What is actually on your ballot

Michigan ballots are longer than people expect, and the races that get the least attention are often the ones that touch daily life most directly. All of the following appears somewhere on the November 3 ballot.

What	Worth knowing
Governor, and three other statewide offices	Governor and lieutenant governor run together on one line. Secretary of State and Attorney General nominees are chosen at party conventions rather than in the August primary, so those two races had no primary vote at all.
One U.S. Senate seat	Statewide. Michigan's Senate seats come up on a staggered schedule, so only one is on the ballot.
All 13 U.S. House districts	Everyone in Michigan votes in one of them.
All 38 state Senate districts	This is the unusual one. State senators serve four-year terms, so the whole chamber is on the ballot only every fourth year — and 2026 is that year.
All 110 state House districts	Two-year terms, so the entire chamber is up every general election.
Education and university boards	The State Board of Education, and the governing boards of the University of Michigan, Michigan State and Wayne State. Statewide races that reliably draw far fewer votes than the offices above them.
Michigan Supreme Court	Non-partisan section of the ballot, which means these appear without party labels and are frequently left blank.
Local races and any ballot questions	Varies by community: county and township offices, judges, school boards, and local millages or proposals.

Fewer voters, tighter margins

Turnout in a year without a presidential race is always lower than in one with it. That has a straightforward arithmetic consequence that is easy to overlook: when fewer people vote, each vote carries more weight, and it carries the most weight in exactly the races people are most likely to skip.

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Legislative districts are small. Some Michigan House seats have been decided by a few hundred votes. In a district of that size, the margin can turn on whether a few dozen households on one street bothered to fill in the bottom half of the ballot.

How to read your own district

Three things worth doing as both an interested analyst and a voter, none of which take long:

- Find out which districts you are actually in. A surprising number of people are wrong about this, and redistricting is the reason. Your state House, state Senate and congressional districts may not be the ones you assume, and they may not be the ones your neighbors two streets over are in.
- Look at the last result, not the reputation. The 2024 margin in your district tells you more about how it behaves today than any amount of received wisdom about how the area has always voted.
- Read the whole ballot before you get there. The offices at the bottom — boards, courts, local questions — are the ones most often left blank, and in a lower-turnout year they are decided by the smallest number of people.

The Secretary of State runs a public site, the Michigan Voter Information Center, where anyone can confirm their

registration, see exactly which districts they live in, and view their own sample ballot before election day. It is the fastest way to replace an assumption with a fact.

This information is the best way to begin, and it's most reliable in that its data drawn from certified election records held by the state and by federal election authorities — no polling, no projections, no private estimates. The August primary results are still formally unofficial until the canvass and certification process is completed, which is routine at this stage and rarely changes an outcome.

And a caution we would apply to ourselves as much as anyone. Flagging a district as competitive is a statement about its measured history, not a prediction about November. A district someone hasn't flagged is not a district where the result is decided; it simply has not met a defined test applied to past results. Candidates, spending, local issues and turnout all sit outside historical data and between now and November they will matter more than any of it.

If there is one thing to carry out of this: the phrase "safe seat" is doing less work in Michigan than it did a decade ago, and in a third of the state it may not be doing any work at all. That is worth knowing as you do your own analysis, and—most of all—before you decide your vote has already been counted for you.

A Short Fall and a Hard Deadline

Michigan lawmakers are heading into the final months of the 103rd Legislature with no shortage of issues to debate, but not much time to debate them.

The House and Senate are returning to Lansing in September, but the November 3 election will quickly consume much of the political calendar. After Election Day comes the traditional lame-duck session, followed by a deadline that matters for every organization with legislation still pending: December 31.

When the clock strikes midnight on December 31, the 103rd Legislature ends. Bills that have not been enacted do not carry over into 2027.

They die and must be introduced again when the new Legislature takes office.

That makes the next few months less about the sheer number of proposals in Lansing and more about which ones have enough support — and enough urgency — to make it through a divided state government before time runs out.

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Divided Government Sets the Terms

If you've been following along, you are keenly aware that Republicans control the Michigan House, while Democrats control the Senate and the governor's office. That means any legislation reaching Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's desk must find a path through chambers controlled by different parties. That has made bipartisan agreement a practical necessity on most significant legislation.

Lawmakers have demonstrated that agreements can be reached when the parties have sufficient incentive to negotiate. But heading into an election, there are fewer legislative days available and less political appetite for votes that could become campaign material.

That changes after November 3.

The period between Election Day and the end of the legislative term is commonly known as "lame duck." Some lawmakers will be returning in January; others will be leaving office. Campaign pressures disappear, the deadline becomes real and issues that have been stalled for months can suddenly begin moving.

For organizations with business before the Legislature, that makes November and December both an opportunity and a risk. Things can move very quickly — or not at all.

What Could Move?

Several significant issues remain worth watching this fall.

Property taxes. House Republicans have introduced a number of proposals aimed at changing Michigan's property tax system. The subject has the ingredients necessary to remain part of the fall conversation: it directly affects homeowners and businesses, has significant implications for local governments and is easily understood by voters.

The details, however, matter. Changes to assessments, exemptions or state and local tax collections can create substantial consequences for municipalities, schools and other public entities. Whether the competing interests

can reach agreement in the limited time remaining will determine whether property tax legislation becomes a negotiating vehicle or remains largely a campaign-year discussion.

Medical debt. Bipartisan legislation addressing medical debt has made meaningful progress during the current term. Proposals include new protections governing medical debt collection, hospital financial-assistance practices and the treatment of medical debt on consumer credit reports.

That makes medical debt different from many issues still circulating in Lansing: lawmakers in both parties and both chambers have already demonstrated interest in acting. The question this fall is whether they can reconcile the various proposals and complete the work before adjournment.

Government transparency. Efforts to expand Michigan's Freedom of Information Act to the Legislature and governor's office remain unresolved. Michigan continues to be one of only two states where both the governor's office and Legislature are broadly exempt from the state's public-records law.

Transparency legislation has repeatedly generated bipartisan interest — and repeatedly run into disagreements over what records should be public and what exemptions should apply. With the clock running down, the issue remains one to watch, although its path through the House remains difficult.

Economic development. Economic development policy is another natural candidate for late-session negotiations. Michigan's approach to business attraction, incentives and economic development has been the subject of debate throughout the term, and broader packages often emerge when legislative leaders begin assembling year-end agreements.

Whether that happens again this year may depend less on any single proposal than on whether House, Senate and administration leaders decide there is enough common ground for a broader lame-duck package.

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The Election Changes the Equation

By the time lawmakers return after Election Day, everyone in Lansing will know who controls state government beginning in January. That can dramatically alter the incentive to negotiate.

If one party expects to have greater leverage in the new Legislature, it may prefer to wait. If lawmakers believe their leverage is about to diminish, they may have greater incentive to reach an agreement before December 31. Departing legislators may also be willing to cast votes that would have been politically difficult before the election.

In other words, the results on November 3 will help determine not only what Michigan government looks like in 2027, but what the current Legislature does during its final weeks.

Watch Movement, Not Headlines

For businesses and organizations trying to determine whether an issue is truly gaining traction, public statements are not necessarily the best indicator. Committee activity is.

A bill introduction or press conference establishes a position. A committee hearing means lawmakers are investing scarce legislative time in an issue. A committee vote is an even stronger signal. Negotiations involving

House leadership, Senate leadership and the governor's office are stronger still. Those signals will become increasingly important as the calendar gets shorter.

The same is true for legislation that has already passed one chamber. A bill sitting in the other chamber should not be viewed as "almost finished." Until both chambers approve identical language and the governor signs it, the legislation remains vulnerable to the December 31 deadline.

December 31 Is the Date That Matters

The final months of an election-year Legislature are inherently unpredictable. There may be a burst of activity after Election Day, a handful of carefully negotiated agreements or relatively little action at all. What is predictable is the deadline.

Anything that has not been enacted by the end of December will have to begin again in the 104th Legislature — with new bills, new committee referrals and, in many cases, new sponsors and new political dynamics.

For anyone with an issue before state government, that means the most useful question this fall isn't simply whether a proposal has support. It's whether it has a realistic path to the governor's desk before the clock runs out.