

# Running for Elective Office in Michigan: Sources to Get You Started

If you have ever entertained the idea of running for elective office, you've probably wondered where to start. For some attorneys, a career in politics runs in the family; for others, it was the motivation for attending law school; and, of course, there are those attorneys who simply want to serve the public. Regardless of your reasons for seeking elective office, you will need some background information to begin your quest. While this article is not an exhaustive guide on how to run for office, it will provide you with enough foundational information to get your campaign started. This article focuses on local and state campaigns in Michigan and does not discuss sources for federal or other state elections.

## Articles, Guides, and Manuals

Deciding to run for office can be one of the most difficult parts of the election process, but there are many resources available to help you with this decision. A good place to start is Judge Richard Bandstra's article, "Looking Toward Lansing: Could You Be a Lawyer-Legislator?"<sup>1</sup> Judge Bandstra's article is short but very thought-provoking. He highlights the unique qualifications that make lawyers superb candidates for elective office. Additionally, he describes the practical considerations of running for office, such as whether you have a legitimate chance of winning your election, and how politics will affect your family.

Another resource for lawyers who might be thinking of running for a judicial office is a short pamphlet published by the State Bar of Michigan entitled *Becoming a Judge: Ethics and Campaign Practices*.<sup>2</sup> This publication focuses more on the ethical and compliance

aspects of running a judicial campaign. It includes a concise explanation of candidate eligibility, campaign financing, and campaign activities. Copies may be ordered through the State Bar of Michigan.

You can find a more detailed discussion of the campaign process in *How To Run for Local Office: A Complete Guide for Winning a Local Election* (1st ed).<sup>3</sup> This book is useful for all stages of a campaign, and like Judge Bandstra's article, it also discusses the preliminary considerations of running for office. Additionally, the author, having run for office in Michigan, offers a more local perspective. The only drawback of this book is that it hasn't been updated since its publication in 1999, so some of the information may be slightly dated. Nevertheless, this book is quite popular and one you will find at the top of most candidates' reading lists.

Two other books worth mentioning are *The Campaign Manager: Running and Winning Local Elections* (3rd ed)<sup>4</sup> and *How to Win a Local Election*.<sup>5</sup> *The Campaign Manager* is designed for candidates as well as campaign managers. It includes practical advice, extensive illustrations and sample forms, and is an excellent reference source for all phases of the campaign process. *How to Win a Local Election* is a "nuts-and-bolts" guide to running for office. An entire chapter of this book is devoted to using computers in the campaign.

## Michigan Department of State Website

The Michigan Department of State has primary responsibility for administering Michigan's election process. As such, the department plays an important role in advising

potential candidates and ensuring that official candidates comply with the state's election laws and regulations.

The Department of State's website is an excellent place to formally begin a campaign. Because the Department of State provides administrative support for all aspects of the election process, the website is designed for many different audiences, but most importantly, it includes information for people seeking elective office. The main home page for the Michigan Department of State "Elections in Michigan" is located at <http://www.michigan.gov/sos/0,1607,7-127-1633---,00.html>. This web page serves as a gateway to information for candidates, including forms, manuals, campaign finance rules, and important dates.

Two important election manuals published by the Michigan Department of State are *Preparing, Circulating and Filing Petitions for Public Office*<sup>6</sup> and the *Candidate Committee Manual*.<sup>7</sup> These manuals are designed to provide guidance on the various legal requirements of running for office in Michigan. Both may be downloaded for free from the Michigan Department of State website.

## Special Programs

The Institute of Public Policy and Social Research at Michigan State University hosts several programs designed to enhance the leadership skills of office holders and candidates.<sup>8</sup> One program in particular is the Michigan Political Leadership Program (MPLP).<sup>9</sup> This program "recruits, trains, and inspires tomorrow's public policy leaders, preparing them with vision, commitment, and the skills for effective governance."<sup>10</sup> This program is designed for local elected officials

and potential candidates, and the curriculum focuses on two specific subjects: public policy and how to run for office. Admission to the program is by application, and enrollment is limited to 24 participants.<sup>11</sup>

The MPLP website also includes an extensive list of articles, books, and online resources related to campaigns, many of which are available in full text; this list is available at <http://www.ippsr.msu.edu/mplp/LinksCampaign.htm>.

### Political Parties and Networking

Most candidates will affiliate with either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party. Party membership and participation are two of the best ways to become familiar with the elective process. As Jason Ellenburg, political organizing director for the Michigan Democratic Party, stated, "Begin your campaign before the campaign. Local party meetings are the best place to start." Working with the local party provides an excellent opportunity to learn about the elective process and to get to know the players involved in the area in which you plan on running. Information about both parties is available on the Internet. The Michigan Democratic Party website is located at <http://www.michigandems.com/> and the Michigan Republican Party's website is <http://www.migop.org/default.asp>. Both websites provide contact information for local party offices and include information on how to participate in local party activities.

Much of the research I conducted in preparing this article involved calling or talking to various people such as city clerks,<sup>12</sup> party officials, and one actual candidate. One piece of advice from all these individuals: people are a candidate's most valuable source of information. Making phone calls, sending out e-mails, and meeting people will provide great returns as you embark on your campaign. City and local clerks can help you with forms; party officials can tell you about local activities; and former and current office holders can provide you with practical advice.

Running for elective office requires time, tenacity, money, and a well-planned strategy. Exploring the resources described in this article should provide you with the foundational knowledge for planning, running, and possibly winning your campaign. ◆

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### FOOTNOTES

1. Richard A. Bandstra, *Looking Toward Lansing: Could You Be a Lawyer-Legislator?*, 84 Mich B J 28 (2005), available online at <http://www.michbar.org/journal/pdf/pdf4article850.pdf>.
2. Published by the State Bar of Michigan through the Standing Committee on Professional and Judicial Ethics (2000).
3. By Robert H. Thomas, published by R&T Enterprise, Inc., Westland, MI (1999).

4. By Catherine Shaw, published by Westview Press, Boulder, CO (2004).
5. By Judge Lawrence Grey, published by M. Evans and Company, Inc., New York (1999).
6. Available at [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/ED-24\\_83709\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/ED-24_83709_7.pdf).
7. Available at [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/Candidate\\_Committee\\_Manual2\\_57936\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/Candidate_Committee_Manual2_57936_7.pdf).
8. Information on these programs may be found online at <http://www.ippsr.msu.edu/leadership/>.
9. The author would like to thank Barbara Knuth, MPLP program administrator, for the information she provided about the Michigan Political Leadership Program.
10. Michigan Political Leadership Program, <http://www.ippsr.msu.edu/MPLP/default.asp>.
11. Applications for 2007 will be accepted through September 8, 2006.
12. The author would like to thank Mary Helmbrecht, Meridian Township clerk, for the insightful advice she provided about running for a local office.