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The Failed Coup D'état in Michigan

Last week FBI and Michigan State authorities arrested thirteen men in a plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer. According to the various reports, a confederation of discontented extremists had plotted in detail to “arrest”, kidnap, and then possibly “try” the Governor for a set of grievances largely related to her leadership during the current COVID-19 crisis. Fortunately, they failed, and if there is justice, they will spend serious time behind bars.

This is an economics blog, so where is the economics here? We elect officials to provide a wide range of governmental services, and there are decisions to be made. How many police, how many firefighters, how many teachers? How many parks, and how many highways, Fourth of July fireworks and parades, public health clinics. Leaders are elected to make these decisions. How do they decide how much?

There is a model called the “median voter model” that says that under a plausible set of conditions, the elected officials act as if they were making decisions of the “median” (or middle) voter. In 2018 Gretchen Whitmer was elected on a platform of “fix the damn roads.” She won election by almost 10 percentage points, or over 400,000 votes. Apparently, she did a better job of satisfying the median voter than her opponent.

Neither she nor anyone else could have foreseen the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many other Governors (and unlike some others), she took an activist viewpoint, and invoked emergency powers early and hard. After an initial blitz of COVID-19 in March and April, Michigan’s rates fell, and the number of new cases was also checked. In other blogs, YB has noted that Michigan has fallen to the middle of the pack in terms of illnesses and deaths. Governor Whitmer’s policies have been successful.

The public has largely been supportive. In a poll of 600 likely voters by the Glengariff Group, in September, 59% said they approved of Whitmer’s job performance. Another 38% of voters disapproved of the governor’s performance. The report noted that in January 2020, only 43% approved of the job Whitmer was doing and 36% disapproved (source: [Detroit News](#), September 9, 2020). This looks like she was satisfying the median voter.

Some people went to court to strike down the emergency powers that were used, and the Michigan Supreme Court (on a party-line vote) agreed. President Trump tweeted to “Liberate Michigan”. Others collected petitions to “Unlock Michigan.” Senate leader Mike Shirkey, and House Speaker Lee Chatfield fanned the flames of the opposition with repeated rallies, and inflammatory rhetoric. Both Shirkey and Chatfield then professed shock that some “patriots” took them at their word to liberate Michigan by planning to kidnap and possibly kill the Governor. Chatfield then had the unbridled gall to chastise

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Whitmer for not warning legislators (in the middle of an ongoing investigation) that they might be in danger. This is an odd reaction from a Speaker who did not seem to be bothered by armed individuals who “occupied” the State Capitol in Lansing in April. His response then was to recess the Legislature.

Again, this is an economics blog. When the elected officials do not satisfy the median voter, then they will be voted out and the policies will be changed. That is what civilized societies do. When voted out, they leave. That, again, is what civilized societies do. Civilized societies do not deputize militias to kidnap and try elected officials who are doing their jobs. Banana republics do that.

Michigan avoided a coup d'état last week, but we are the laughing stock of the nation.

Allen C. Goodman
Professor of Economics