

# NORMALIZING THE DISENFRANCHISEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

I've been one of the first people to note that the Emergency Financial Manager laws have disproportionately affected MI's African Americans. Note what I wasn't arguing: that Governors Snyder and Granholm imposed EFMs because the cities in question were predominantly black. But it is, in fact, the case that the EFM law is affecting African Americans disproportionately, and with Detroit as Rick Snyder's bullseye, affecting far too many of MI's African Americans.

Nevertheless, the Free Press decided to turn that observation into a straw man.

Brian Dickerson: What's really driving state takeovers: It ain't race

[snip]

Benton Harbor, Ecorse, Flint and Pontiac have something much more important in common: They're all *shrinking*—hemorrhaging taxpayers, homeowners, employers at an alarming rate.

And in each case, African Americans are rushing for the exits just as fast, and in some cases faster, than their white, Latino and Asian neighbors.

The numbers in the accompanying chart tell the story succinctly: In the decade between the U.S. census counts in 2000 and 2010, Benton Harbor and Pontiac both lost more 10% of their residents. Ecorse and Flint lost more than 15%, and Detroit, the city currently atop the state treasurer's critical list, lost 25%.

Now, the argument is a bit odd, not least

because it looks at the last 10 years of population trends to explain an EFM law that goes back over twenty years (though the cities that have been in and out of EFM status, including Flint and Ecorse, have been losing population throughout that period).

More telling, though, is that Dickerson didn't consider why Wayne County, which also has a deficit and also shrank over 10% in the last decade, hasn't been seized (though people have started gunning for Wayne County, too). While the answer is obvious—not least, that the law pertains to municipalities—it reveals a lot of the underlying logic that got MI to embrace EFM laws.

It's not just that both Democrats and Republicans chose to make cities sink or swim on their own decades ago; given the segregation and history of white flight, that decision did have racial implications. It's also that the state relies relatively more on property taxes than other states, and relatively less on income taxes (particularly for a state that doesn't have another big source of funding, like oil revenues). Those decisions have made the exodus of MI's residents—both black and white—particularly devastating for cities. And all that's before you factor in things like predatory lending which further exacerbated the problems of communities with large African American populations.

The underlying issue here is MI's shrinking population, which itself is largely a response to globalization, to the gutting of the manufacturing that once thrived in these cities. But we as a state can choose to deal with it as a state, or we can choose to let the cities rot while putting stimulus money into newer areas. And while the decision to do the latter may not be motivated primarily out of racism, it is having the undeniable affect of taking away a disproportionate amount of African Americans' self-governance.