

Elected or Appointed? The Debate Over Selecting Michigan’s University Boards

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What university boards do

Every public university is governed by a board. At the University of Michigan, Michigan State, and Wayne State, that board hires and evaluates the president, sets tuition and approves the budget, oversees strategy, and is accountable for how the institution is governed. Board members serve as fiduciaries, with duties of care and loyalty to the institution and its public mission.

What’s being proposed

State Sen. Sam Singh, D-East Lansing, introduced a resolution in the Michigan Senate this spring to change how those members are chosen, moving from statewide election to gubernatorial appointment. The quick version:

Now Voters elect the boards of U-M (Regents), MSU (Trustees), and Wayne State (Governors). Party nominees are chosen at the state party conventions, and independents can petition onto the ballot; either way, candidates run statewide for eight-year terms. The model is written into the Michigan Constitution.

Proposed The governor appoints members, with Michigan Senate confirmation, phased in as current terms expire.

Where it stands An earlier Michigan House version failed; the Michigan Senate version is pending in committee. Any change would need a two-thirds vote in each chamber and then a statewide vote, since these boards sit in the constitution.

What changes, and what does not

Switching from elected to appointed boards would not change the boards’ legal authority. What changes is the route into office and where political influence enters the selection process. The parties nominate and voters elect; under the proposal the governor appoints and the Michigan Senate confirms.

Neither path removes politics from university governance. Each one channels it differently.

Side by side

	Elected · <i>current</i>	Appointed · <i>proposed</i>
How members reach the board	Party convention or petition, then statewide vote	Governor appoints, Michigan Senate confirms
Term	Eight years	Eight years (unchanged)
Main case for	Voters make the final choice	Deliberate screening for expertise
Main concern	Low-visibility races can turn on name recognition	Selection narrows to the governor and Senate

Why university boards matter

For Michigan families, the board’s decisions show up in tuition and in the direction the universities take. For the state, these are major employers and research institutions. There is a federal tie as well: U-M and MSU are among Michigan’s largest recipients of federal research funding, and federal student aid flows through all three. These boards oversee the leadership, budgets, and strategy that shape how each university manages those responsibilities.

What this means

The research on university boards consistently points to what shapes how well a board governs: its composition, its culture and norms, and the working relationship between the board and the president. Selection method matters in one specific way: it relocates accountability for getting a board seat from statewide voters to the governor and Senate, which could also shape who ends up serving. It does not change the boards’ legal authority, and it does not by itself guarantee better governance.