Michigan enjoys a diverse political environment, which includes a great diversity of opinions and ideas. With this, however, comes contentious politics: the expression of opposing policy preferences by organized groups within political or governmental settings. This chapter examines how associations of individuals seek political influence in Michigan by attempting to affect state policy as well as how they might represent Michigan citizens’ interests on a national level. Such associations consist of both state and substate party organizations that nominate candidates for office, and interest groups that lobby elected officials. Both political parties and interest groups play an important role in politics as linkage institutions; each, in their own way, provides a connection between citizens and their government. The chapter is centered on the history of these associations as well as the effects of these associations on Michigan’s government today; parties are considered first with interest groups following. In each section, some key concepts are introduced before turning to a discussion of their relevance to Michigan’s political system. This encompasses state government responses to challenges as well as state-local government relations—parties nominate candidates for office that eventually become state and local policymakers and interest groups lobby for their own ideas for policy solutions.

**Historical Party Control in Michigan**

The first major political party to form in Michigan was the Democratic Party. By 1832, five years before Michigan was granted statehood, the party had a presence. Early parties in Michigan were composed of many
factions—for example, the Democratic Party consisted of the office-holding, the conservative, the radical, and the western factions. At the time, members of the Democratic Party were largely immigrants from western New York who were “poor and inclined to be radical.” What was referred to at the time as the radical faction of the Democratic Party consisted of farmers and laborers, who were characterized by their opposition to banks and slavery. The Democratic Party platform included opposition to monopolies, equal rule of law for all, equal rights, and other positions that were steadfastly antiaristocratic in nature. For much of Michigan’s history before 1854, the Democratic Party dominated statewide elections. These included elections for governor and state Legislature, although the party was sometimes split into conservative and radical factions, and by geographic loyalties.

The second major political party to form in Michigan was the Whig Party, organized in 1834. While the constituents of the Democratic Party were largely poor, supporters of the Whig Party were mostly well-to-do. Despite success in the elections of the early 1840s, the Whigs were mostly a minority throughout Michigan’s early history and were split between radical and conservative wings. The radical wing of the Whig Party consisted of Whigs opposed to slavery, and the radical Whig politicians tended to be younger than the conservative Whig politicians. By the mid-1840s, as intraparty fractures became deeper, many Whigs began to support candidates nominated by third parties—particularly the Free Soil Party and the Know-Nothing Party, a nativist third party intended to limit the political influence of immigrants and Roman Catholics. The fractures of the Whig Party were largely responsible for its failure to gain control of Michigan’s government from Democrats after 1841.

The modern Republican Party formed in 1854, uniting several antislavery parties and the antislavery wings of other parties. The first meetings of the Republican Party took place in Jackson, Michigan, and in Ripon, Wisconsin. In Michigan, the Republican Party formed from remnants of the Free Democrat Party and more radical wings of the Democratic and Whig Parties. While these prior partisan identities led to infighting within the new party, the preference for preventing additional slave states from being admitted into the Union was enough of a unifying factor to give the party strength. In 1854, the year of its founding, the Republican Party gained control of Michigan’s state government. Subsequently, Democrats did not win an election for statewide office for another three decades.

Michigan has had several distinct periods of one-party control. With few exceptions, the Democratic Party controlled state government from
1837 to 1854. For the next 80 years, however, Republicans consistently won statewide elections and presidential contests in Michigan. Since the 1932 elections, control of state government has vacillated between the two parties, but Republicans have reemerged at the state level since the mid-1990s. While the state’s congressional delegation consisted mostly of Republicans until the late 1960s, Democrats had a stronger presence through the 1980s and 1990s, but after the 2002 elections, Republicans have had a majority of congressional seats. At the presidential level, a plurality of Michiganders voted for the Democratic candidate between 1992 and 2012. This, in turn, has awarded all of Michigan’s electoral votes to those Democratic candidates. However, due in part to Republicans’ successes in other statewide elections and sizable number of electors, Michigan has continued to attract considerable attention from candidates, parties, and outside groups during recent presidential elections. In the 2016 elections, the Republican Party maintained control of the state government and the Republican nominee for President, Donald Trump, won a majority of the popular vote to gain the state’s 16 Electoral College votes by a razor thin margin of less than 11,000 votes out of nearly five million cast.

Minor Political Parties in Michigan

Minor political parties (sometimes referred to as “third parties,” although the two may not be equivalent under Michigan law) have a long history in Michigan and at times have had a prominent presence in municipalities across the state, despite being largely absent at the state level. Early minor parties in Michigan included the Free Soil and Liberty Parties, of which the latter was the first antislavery party active in the state. From 1900 to 1920, the Socialist and Prohibition Parties’ top-of-the-ballot candidates consistently drew approximately 2 percent each of the total ballots cast. In 1912, Theodore Roosevelt’s National Progressive Party received strong support in Michigan, winning more than 38 percent of the popular vote in the presidential election. Support for the party, however, was largely centered on Roosevelt’s candidacy and it ceased to exist by 1916 when Roosevelt retired from national politics. In the 20th century, prominent minor parties in Michigan included the Human Rights, Libertarian, and Green Parties. While the Human Rights Party was active mostly in Washtenaw County in the 1970s and eventually merged with the Michigan Socialist Party, the Libertarian and Green Parties continue to regularly nominate candidates for statewide office. Candidates from these parties rarely receive more than 2 percent of the vote, although in
2016 the Libertarian Party candidate for president, Gary Johnson, received approximately 3.5 percent of the popular vote. The Tisch Independent Citizens Party, founded by antitax activist Robert Tisch in the 1970s, managed to gain some attention in statewide elections in the late 20th century but never gained more than 7 percent of the vote. In 1992, the party became affiliated with the U.S. Taxpayers Party, which later became the Constitution Party. The Tisch Independent Citizens Party is the most recent party (other than the Republican and Democratic Parties) to have qualified as a major party in Michigan, in 1992. 12

Three Components of Political Parties

One way of examining political parties is through the lens of V. O. Key’s “tripartite” model, which argues that parties consist of three elements: party in the electorate; party in government; and party as organization. 13 Party in the electorate focuses on individual members of the public and their attachment to a political party. Party in government refers to candidates running for office and elected officials who have a party affiliation. Finally, party as organization centers on the officials, staff, operatives and others who work to get the party’s candidates elected to office. It is valuable to consider each of the three legs of Key’s tripartite model in the context of Michigan politics. Doing so allows for a nuanced examination of the parties by giving proper attention to each of the different elements.

Party Identification in Michigan

A key component of party in the electorate is “party identification”; this is the level of attachment that an individual has toward a political party, or the level of importance the person attaches to being associated with that party. 14 While we cannot directly observe party identification because most parties do not require formal membership, the partisan leanings of individuals in the electorate are often used to measure the levels of party support. In some states, voters are required to declare a party affiliation when they register to vote, which makes it easier to measure or estimate party identification. Michigan, however, does not ask voters to declare their party loyalties when registering, and major parties do not maintain public records of how many residents identify as partisans. 15 Therefore, proxy measures are the only indicators of party identification and strength, with surveys asking respondents which party they identify with being the most common method of measuring party identification.
NOTES


2. Floyd Benjamin Streeter, Political Parties in Michigan 1837–1860: An Historical Study of Political Issues and Parties in Michigan from the Admission of the State to the Civil War (Lansing: Michigan Historical Commission, 1918).

3. Ibid., 31.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 38.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.


10. Major and minor parties differ in multiple ways under Michigan law. Major parties hold primary elections to nominate their candidates while minor parties must hold caucuses (Michigan Compiled Laws 168.532). The campaign finance laws that govern major and minor party candidates also differ, particularly with respect to the eligibility of candidates to receive money from the Michigan state campaign fund (Michigan Compiled Laws 169.265). County chairpersons of major political parties are also permitted to challenge the appointment of an election inspector based upon the inspector’s party affiliation while Michigan law does not provide the same power to the county chairperson of a minor party (Michigan Compiled Laws 168.674).

11. Streeter, Political Parties in Michigan.

12. State governments are responsible for determining thresholds for parties to appear on official ballots. Such thresholds are frequently referred to as “ballot access laws” and are responsible for keeping election ballots within manageable lengths. In the state of Michigan, different rules apply to major political parties and to minor political parties. Major parties are defined legally as those whose principal candidates received more than 5 percent of the vote within the last general election for the office of secretary of state. Minor parties are defined as those that failed to reach this threshold. Since 1854, candidates from the Republican and Democratic Parties have consistently received enough votes for their parties to be classified as major parties in Michigan.


22. The bylaws for both the Michigan Democratic Party and the Michigan Republican Party include rules and provisions for county executive committees and county party committees. Members of the county executive committees are elected during the relevant county party convention, and typically hold terms of two years. Elected officials from that county who are party members are also frequently named to the executive committee of that county.


24. Twelfth Congressional District Republican Committee Bylaws, last modified 2016, http://12cdrc.org/docs/12thDistrictCommitteeByLawsFinal

25. These data can be found at the National Institute on Money in State Politics (http://www.followthemoney.org).


31. There is wide variation between U.S. states in the numbers and types of laws that affect the political activities of these actors. Other targets of ethics and disclosure laws often include elected and appointed state officials, political parties, and political action committees (PACs).
