Contentious Politics in Michigan: Political Parties and Interest Groups

James M. Strickland and Logan T. Woods
University of Michigan

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Introduction: Contentious Politics in Michigan

Michigan enjoys a diverse political environment. Unlike in many other states, Michigan has numerous electoral districts that are competitive and hundreds of unique interest groups vying for the attention of incumbent legislators. With this diversity of opinions and ideas, however, comes contentious politics: the expression of opposing policy preferences by organized groups within political or governmental settings (Tilly and Tarrow 2006). This chapter examines how associations of individuals attempt to change policy in the state of Michigan by becoming active within its state government as well as how they might represent Michigan citizens’ interests on a national level. Such associations consist of both parties that nominate candidates for office and interest groups that lobby incumbent officials. We confine our chapter to the history of these associations as well as the effects of these associations on Michigan’s government, turning first to parties and then to interest groups. In each section, we introduce some key concepts before turning to their relevance to Michigan’s political system.

Political parties and interest groups should be of concern to anyone who is interested in American politics. Parties and groups are among the primary means by which individuals with similar opinions and ideas connect to each other and express their views in government. Hence, parties and groups are important mechanisms for facilitating the participation of citizens in government (Thomas and Hrebenar 1998). Both have essential functions for representation. Parties are typically organized around sets of ideas (known as “ideologies”) about the functions of government and tend to reflect the desires of more voters than groups, which are usually motivated by more insular, specific causes. Unlike interest groups, all of the functions of a party are directly or indirectly related to politics and campaigning. Interest groups instead often serve many purposes outside of government. They become politicized (or mobilize) only when there
are few other options for protecting or promoting their interests (Walker 1991, 41-55). For example, many sports leagues and other hobby associations exist in society without ever becoming politically active. Such associations might lobby state officials only when their activities or interests are affected by pending legislation or regulations. Parties, by contrast, are constantly looking for ways to elect their candidates to office.

**Political Parties and Ideology: A Brief Introduction**

Broadly defined, political parties consist not only of the candidates and officials who are organized under a common label for the purpose of gaining and retaining office, but also of the individual voters who vote reliably for party candidates, share the goals and preferences of the party platform, and who self-identify as members of the party (Kollman 2015, 422). Relatedly, “party identification” is the feeling of attachment or kinship that a person has with a party and the importance that she places on being a party member. Such partisan identification is separate from “ideology,” which is a coherent set of ideas that people draw upon whenever forming opinions about political issues. Parties are usually formed around different ideologies that define the role of government in the personal and economic lives of citizens. For example, most self-professing Democrats (a partisan identification) may prefer policies of a “liberal” (an ideological label) nature, but not everyone who supports such policies may always vote for candidates associated with the Democratic Party. Similar differences can be found among Republicans who prefer “conservative” policies, but who may not always vote for Republican candidates. Some voters have strong loyalty to their parties but others choose to vote more often in accordance with their personal preferences or ideologies, which may not be reflected by party nominees.

Different parties tend to have different relationships with their governments, with some falling in and out of control while others never gain a foothold. For example, while many parties
exist in the United States, not all of them are able to nominate candidates whose names appear on election ballots. 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 five 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.

**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 admitted as a U.S. state, the party had a presence. At the time, members of the Democratic Party were largely immigrants from western New York who were “poor and inclined to be radical” (Streeter 1918, 5). The Democratic Party platform included opposition to monopolies, equal rule of law for all, equal rights, and other positions that were steadfastly anti-aristocratic in nature. For much of Michigan’s history before 1854, the Democratic Party dominated statewide elections. These included elections for the governorship 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 (Streeter 1918; Bentley Historical Library 2016). While the constituents of the Democratic Party were largely poor, supporters of the Whig Party consisted mostly of the well-to-do. Despite
having great success in the elections of 1840 and 1841, the Whigs were mostly a minority throughout Michigan’s early history and were split between radical and conservative wings. By the mid-1840s, as inter-party fractures became deeper, many Whigs began to support candidates nominated by third parties. The Free Soil Party in particular drew much support from former Whigs. The conservative wing of the Whig Party drifted towards the new Know-Nothing Party, a nativist third party intended to limit the political influence of immigrants and Roman Catholics (Streeter 1918). 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 anti-slavery parties and the anti-slavery wings of other parties. Michigan and Wisconsin played prominent roles in the formation of the party and its emergence as a national force. The first meetings of the Republican Party took place in Jackson, Michigan and in Wisconsin. In Michigan, the Republican Party formed from remnants of the Free Democrat Party and radical wings of the Democratic and Whig parties (Bentley Historical Library 2016; Streeter 1918). While these prior partisan identities led to infighting within the new party, the preference of preventing additional slave states from being admitting 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 party control. With few exceptions, the Democratic Party controlled state government from 1837 to 1854 (Streeter 1918). For the next eighty years, however, control shifted to the Republican Party. 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 re-emerged at the state level since the mid-1990s. While the state’s congressional delegation consisted mostly of Republicans until the late 1970s, Democratic candidates have since gained a stronger presence. As of 2016, both U.S. Senators from Michigan were members of the Democratic Party, but nine of its fourteen U.S. Representatives were Republicans. Due in part to its unpredictable voting outcomes and sizable number of electors, and despite the fact that a majority of Michiganders have voted for the Democratic candidate in the past six presidential elections, Michigan has continued to attract considerable attention from candidates during recent presidential elections (Shaw 2006).

**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 include the Free Soil and Liberty Parties, which was the first anti-slavery party active in the state (Streeter 1918). From 1900 to 1920, the Socialist and Prohibition Parties consistently drew approximately two percent each of the total ballots cast for their top-of-ballot candidates. In 1912, Theodore Roosevelt’s National Progressive Party received strong support in Michigan: more than 38 percent of the popular vote. Support for the party, however, was largely centered around Roosevelt’s candidacy; and it ceased to exist by 1916 when Roosevelt retired from national politics. In the twentieth 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
nominate candidates for statewide office. Candidates from these parties rarely receive more than two percent of the popular vote. The Tisch Independent Citizens Party, founded by anti-tax activist Robert Tisch in the 1970s, had some brief success in general elections in the late twentieth century but never gained more than seven percent of the popular 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.

In Focus: The Human Rights Party

Formed as a statewide minor party, the Human Rights Party played a prominent role in Ann Arbor city government in the 1970s. The party was formed by Zolton Ferency, a former chairman of the Michigan Democratic Party. The Human Rights Party found success in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti due in part to those towns’ liberal tendencies. Indeed, such trends had earlier given rise to local chapters of Students for a Democratic Society and Weather Underground (Smith 1980). In the 1972 Ann Arbor city council elections, the Human Rights Party received 24 percent of the popular vote and won two seats. Within the next two years, the Human Rights Party won 25 and 18 percent of the citywide vote during elections for city offices, and successfully elected three party members to city offices. By the end of 1974, however, party membership began to dwindle, and the Human Rights Party chose to merge with the Michigan Socialist Party. The party has not played a significant role in city or state-level politics since.

Party Identification and Strength in Michigan

Partisan identification is the level of attachment that an individual has towards a political party, or the level of importance the person attaches to being a member of a party (Kollman 2015). While we cannot directly observe party identification, the partisan leanings of registered
voters is often used to measure the levels of party identification in particular areas. In Michigan, however, voters are not required to declare party loyalties when registering, and major parties do not maintain public records of how many residents identify as partisans (Michigan Compiled Code 618.615c). Therefore, we must rely on proxies for party identification and strength, such as survey results and party fundraising figures.

Table 9.1 displays data collected from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, an online survey implemented by researchers who study various topics including ideology and party identification (Ansolabehere 2010; 2012; Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2013; Schaffner and Ansolabehere 2015). Among the data collected is the partisan identification or leanings of respondents. Such identification is captured by a seven-point scale in which respondents may choose the strength of their partisan identities (from “strong Democrat” to “strong Republican,” with independents being in the middle). Also included in Table 9.1 are the percentages of respondents who responded “not sure” when asked their party identification, and the total number of respondents for each year. Examining the percentages of respondents that identify with these categories can give us insight into recent trends in party identification among Michigan voters. The data presented in Table 9.1 are only from respondents who lived in Michigan at the time of each survey. Several trends are apparent from the data. First, the percentage of weak party identifiers and independents has risen since 2008. Second, the percentage of strong partisan identifiers has declined since then. In particular, this trend was most pronounced among self-identified “strong” Republicans. Such trends may help to explain partly Michigan’s increasing lean towards Democratic presidential candidates since 2008.

[Insert Table 9.1 about here]
Complementing self-reported party identification, the relative fundraising power of political parties can also be used to measure party strength. Table 9.2 illustrates fundraising data for the Republican and Democratic State Committees from 1997 to 2014, provided by the National Institute on Money in State Politics. These data include contributions from individuals and non-individuals, which include corporations, labor unions, and political action committees. From 1997 to 2005, the Republican Committee largely held a fundraising advantage over the Democratic Party. After 2006, however, the Michigan Democratic Party has held a fundraising advantage. The data also include donations from donors outside of the state of Michigan, so they might not reflect perfectly the strength of Michigan parties. Also, the totals presented in Table 9.2 do not include donations to individual candidates, district party committees, county party committees, affiliated and unaffiliated political action committees, and donations in support or opposition to ballot initiatives. Such totals can exceed millions of dollars. For example, in the 2014 gubernatorial election, incumbent Republican Rick Snyder and his campaign raised $12,625,208 while Democratic challenger Mark Schauer raised $7,202,753. Third-party candidates raised a total of $6,013.

Table 9.2 about here

[Insert Table 9.2 about here]

Political Parties in Michigan Government

Figure 9.1 shows the ideological distance between the median Democratic and Republican members of the Michigan Senate and Michigan House of Representatives from between 1999 and 2014, excluding 2009 to 2011 (from Shor and McCarty 2015). This is one way of capturing party polarization in Michigan state government. Party polarization, or the distance between the two major parties, has typically been greater in the Michigan Senate than in the Michigan House. Throughout the period covered by the figure, Republicans have controlled
the Senate while control of the House has shifted between both parties. A time of relatively equal polarization within the two chambers, 2003 to approximately 2008, coincided with a time of divided government under Governor Jennifer Granholm (when the Senate was Republican and the House divided).

[Insert Figure 9.1 about here]

Figure 9.2 illustrates changes in the ideological heterogeneity of parties in the Michigan legislature (as provided by Shor and McCarty 2015). High values indicate that the chamber party is ideologically diverse, or that there are both relatively liberal and conservative members within that caucus. Low values indicate that the caucus is ideologically homogenous or more uniformly liberal or conservative. As Figure 9.2 shows, the Democratic Party caucuses in the Michigan House and Senate are more ideologically diverse than their Republican counterparts. In general, ideological heterogeneity among all chamber caucuses decreased during the time period studied.

[Insert Figure 9.2 about here]

DW-Nominate scores are measurements of ideology frequently used by political scientists to predict voting patterns in legislative assemblies (Carroll et al. 2015). The scores are based on the prior voting decisions of incumbent legislators. A low value indicates that a legislator has a more liberal voting history than those with high values, who voted more conservatively. Figure 9.3 displays the DW-Nominate scores for all Senators and Representatives elected to Congress from Michigan for which Carroll et al. (2015) have data (from the first Congress to the 113th). Each Republican legislator is denoted by a red dot, and each Democratic legislator by a blue dot. Black dots are used to mark the ideological positions of minor-party legislators, including members of the Whig party.

[Insert Figure 9.3 about here]
As Figure 9.3 shows, the ideological position of Democrats has been relatively unchanged in Michigan’s history. Up until the approximately the 100th Congress, Republican members from Michigan did not change dramatically. After this, however, Republican legislators became much more conservative on average and ideologically homogenous. This pattern is similar to the nationwide ideological distribution among all members of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate (see Figure 9.4). In concert with the data presented in Figure 9.2, it appears that the Republican candidates elected to both the Michigan legislature and Congress have become more uniformly conservative on average. Counterintuitively, such trends have coincided with the weakening of party identification among Michigan’s Republican voters (see Figure 9.1).

[Insert Figure 9.4 about here]

Party Organizations and Nomination Processes in Michigan

Michigan election law mandates that “groups participating in elections form and register committees,” the duties of which include fundraising and managing expenditures. In practice, when a political party forms a state central committee, that committee governs the statewide party and sets bylaws that all member party organizations abide by. Once a group receives $500 in donations, that group must form a committee and name a treasurer. Membership in the committee (which is different than membership in the state party) includes both citizens and elected officials who are members of that party. Specifically, the Republican State Central Committee consists of regular members who are elected by the district parties or nominated by the Committee Chairman, ex-officio members (statewide elected officials), non-voting members (leaders of independent Republican organizations) and paid members (members who have made a contribution within the previous eight years). Similarly, the Democratic State Central
Committee includes members elected by district-level committees, members of the Democratic National Committee from Michigan, and district and county chairpersons. State election law provides that committees be formed for county, district, and state-level parties (Michigan Campaign Finance Act of 1974). The state central committees are the decision-making authorities for the state parties when there is not a state party convention occurring (Democratic State Central Committee of Michigan 2016).

As indicated above, the Democratic and Republican Parties in Michigan have multiple levels, and all levels play distinct roles in the nomination and election processes in the state. According to the bylaws of the Michigan Republican Party, the Michigan Republican Party consists of three party committees: the state party committee, the party committee for each congressional district, and the county executive committees (Michigan State Republican Committee 2012). Similarly, the bylaws for the Michigan Democratic Party describe the party as being comprised of precinct, county, congressional district, and state-level organizations (Democratic State Central Committee of Michigan). Michigan election law lays out the guidelines and procedures that state, district, and county parties must follow, including for nominating processes and the scheduling of conventions. There are also numerous party clubs and organizations that exist on local levels, at times supported by party committees and at times independent of them.

**County Parties**

County parties in Michigan are in some cases constrained by the state party in their duties and governing rules and in other cases given a wide berth to determine their policies. For example, membership in the Leelanau County Democratic Party requires payment of an annual fee while membership in the Washtenaw County Democratic Party does not. Similarly, the
Otsego County Republican Party requires an annual fee to be a member, but the bylaws of the Oakland County Republican Party state that any person who has paid at least $35 to the county party in the past ten years is a member (Leelanau County Democratic Party 2015; Otsego County Republican Committee 2015; Oakland County Republican Party 2013; Washtenaw County Democratic Party 2009).

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 for two years. Elected officials from that county who are party members are also frequently named to the Executive Committee of that county. Duties of the Executive Committees in each county vary, but frequently include allocation of precinct delegates and filling positions as necessary on the county party committees. Duties of the county party committees include supporting local grassroots organizations and approving the bylaws set forth by the Executive Committee among other duties that might be set forth by the Executive Committee or by state law. County parties are also obligated to hold a county party convention at which delegates to the state party conventions are chosen and, frequently, county party bylaws are adopted (Michigan Compiled Code 168.592). In short, county parties and party committees are integral to the operation of the Michigan Democratic and Republican parties. Such county parties, however, are not the only sub-state organizations that are vital to state parties.

District Parties

District parties and party committees are also set forth in the bylaws of the Michigan Republican and Democratic parties. There is one district committee in each congressional district in the state. Much like county parties and their committees, congressional district parties and
committees are permitted leeway in structuring their bylaws and rules of procedure (Michigan State Republican Committee 2012). For example, the stated purpose of the Twelfth Congressional District Republican Committee includes duties such as “promoting active citizenship through the Republican Party” and “supporting Republican Party candidates seeking elective office at the local, county, state, and federal levels as determined by the District Committee” (Twelfth Congressional District Republican Committee Bylaws). There are no executive committees in the Republican District Committee organizations, whereas the Democratic Party Bylaws entail the creation of both a District Committee and an Executive Committee for that district. The Democratic Executive Committees for the district require a committee consisting of at least 19 members while the Republican District Committee consists of 25 members. In both the Republican and Democratic District Committees, members serve two-year terms.

While many of the congressional district parties and county parties operate relatively independent of one another, in a limited number of cases the two have a different relationship. In the counties around Detroit, particularly Wayne County, the rules governing district and county parties are different than the rules that govern district and county parties in the rest of the state. While each county party is entitled and obligated to have a county party convention, in cases where there are at least parts of multiple congressional districts in the county, each district within the county functions as its own county with regards to holding conventions (Michigan Compiled Code 168.592).

State Parties

State-level party organizations have several duties as prescribed by both their own bylaws and the laws that govern the state of Michigan. Similar to district and county parties, state parties
are governed by committees and executive committees each with discrete duties. State law mandates that state central party committees circulate notifications of the state convention to the county party chairs, declare all donations and expenditures to and by that committee, and name treasurers and other officers as the party deems appropriate (Michigan Compiled Codes Chapter 169). Michigan state central committees are also tasked with crafting the bylaws that govern party organizations in Michigan when a state convention is not occurring, creating the procedure that sends party delegates to the national party convention, and coordinating with the relevant national party (Bylaws of the Michigan Republican State Committee 2012; Democratic State Central Committee of Michigan).

Membership in Political Parties and Political Party Committees

There are various levels of membership in the state Republican and Democratic parties, some of which require financial contribution (or donation) to the state party committee. According to the bylaws of the Democratic State Central Committee, members of the Michigan Democratic Party shall be any legal resident of Michigan who is at least 16 years old and has filed a membership form with the state party office. A financial contribution is not required to join the Michigan Democratic Party (Democratic State Central Committee of Michigan 2016). The Michigan Republican Party provides avenues for individuals to volunteer or make donations to support the party (termed “joining the coalition”), which is practically the same as joining the Michigan Republican Party (Michigan Republican Party 2016). However, formal membership requires financial contribution--the Macomb County Republican Party states as one of its purposes “...to grow the paid membership in the party to include all those who believe with the mission statement and objectives of the Party: payment of dues is required for the executive committee to consider an individual a member in good standing” (Macomb County Republican
Executive Committee 2013). Similarly, while the Michigan Democratic Party does not require
dues, county parties are free to implement local dues as mentioned above. Save for the financial
contribution requirement, membership policies and privileges of county parties affiliated with
both the Republican and Democratic State Parties are similar between parties. In general, then,
we can think of county, district, and state party committees as governing the political parties in
Michigan with the state party committee acting as the primary governing authority, although
much discretion is given to county and district parties.

**Candidate Nomination Processes**

While party registration and membership are not required to vote in primary elections in
Michigan, voters are required to declare in writing for which party ballot they wish to vote
(Michigan Compiled Code 168.615c [1]). Major parties can choose not to use primary elections
in their nominating process and instead use caucuses, but minor parties must use caucuses to
nominate their candidates. Parties are deemed minor parties if their “principal candidate” (the
candidate whose name appears nearest the top of the party column) received less than five
percent of the popular vote for Secretary of State in the most recent election. The nomination
process differs between presidential candidates and other candidates for office.

Michigan election law stipulates that the presidential primaries for both parties be held on
the second Tuesday in March (Michigan Compiled Code 168.613a). In a presidential primary,
voters must declare which party ballot they wish to receive (that is, a voter must declare that she
wishes to participate in the Democratic primary, for example). The date of the Michigan
presidential primary has changed many times. For example, the 1980 presidential primaries were
held on May 20 while the 2008 presidential primary elections were held on January 15, and the
2012 presidential primaries were held on February 28 (State of Michigan Bureau of Elections
In general, the trend of presidential primary contests in Michigan (and to a certain extent the rest of the United States) has been to hold the primary elections earlier in the year than in the past, a phenomenon known as frontloading. States will move their primary election dates earlier in the year to attempt to gain more influence in the election, as primary elections determine who can run in the general election. However, evidence of Michigan’s declining national influence stage is found in its allocation of delegations at the Republican and Democratic National Conventions. In 2000, the Democratic and Republican delegations from Michigan composed 3.6 and 2.7 percent of the total votes of their respective conventions. By 2016, these figures will have declined to 3.1 and 2.4 percent, respectively (Berg-Andersson and Roza 2016).

Michigan election law requires a different nominating process for non-presidential candidates. While the presidential primary election is held in the spring, the primary election for other offices is held on the Tuesday after the first Monday in August. Offices for which this primary election applies include United States Senator, U.S. Representative, statewide offices such as governor, and county-level offices. Unlike the presidential primary election held in the winter or spring, the August primary election is open: voters do not have to declare the party for which they wish to vote. Political parties are able (to some extent) to determine the rules by which they will conduct their primary elections and candidate nomination processes. We now turn to an examination of other associations of people vying for power in Michigan—interest groups.

**Interest Groups and Lobbying: A Brief Introduction**

Americans have traditionally been suspicious of “lobbyists” and their “special interests” (Milbrath 1963, 298). Indeed, with close relationships between and occasional scandals involving state officials and well-heeled powerbrokers, there may be reason to be suspicious at
times. Despite such scandals and mistrust, however, most Americans have favorites among organized interest groups that advocate for causes they care about. Today, tens of thousands of interest groups are active at the federal and state levels trying to influence policy, and adult Americans have a higher probability of being associated with an interest group than of voting (Ainsworth 2002). The positions that organized interests advocate for are as diverse as the many bills considered by the Congress and state legislatures. In fact, there are numerous kinds of interest groups, and their lobbyists fulfill multiple roles within policy-making processes.

Even though the U.S. Constitution protects rights to assemble peaceably and petition government for policy change, not all interest groups take advantage of these rights to the same extent or in the same manner. Interests can be classified according to their organization types and issue areas, and different lobbying techniques tend to be favored by different types of interests. Institutional interests (like corporations or universities) have a history of dominating the lobbying environment of most states (Salisbury 1984; Gray and Lowery 1996a). Traditional membership associations (like the Sierra Club or American Civil Liberties Union), associations of organizations (like chambers of commerce), and government agencies compose the remaining percentage of registered interests. The dominance of institutions in Michigan and elsewhere can partly be explained by their pursuit of concentrated benefits, as opposed to the broader causes of many associations (Olson 1965). These interest groups behave differently. For example, corporations tend to sponsor many fewer protests than single-issue groups (Kollman 1998).

Despite particular suspicion of “lobbyists” among voters, individuals who volunteer or are paid to communicate with lawmakers and other state officials serve a variety of purposes. One of many roles that lobbyists fulfill in Michigan politics is providing information to lawmakers and other officials. Imparting reliable and timely information is among the top
priorities of successful lobbyists. Such agents help to inform lawmakers of the details and effects of proposed laws, thereby providing an informational subsidy (Hall and Deardorff 2006). Lobbyists also help to express the preferences of their particular groups (or clients) and of the public. Along with parties, interest groups are among the only means that bring together people with similar opinions and ideas. Lobbyists help to express those ideas before government officials.

Lobbying in Michigan has changed over the past sixty-five years. In particular, more groups and individuals than ever before spend more money than ever before trying to influence policy made in Lansing. Importantly, numerous multi-client firms that consist of teams of lobbyists working in tandem have emerged in recent decades. Throughout the period studies in this chapter, lobbying in Lansing has become more crowded, competitive, and professional. The amount of information we have about such influence is contingent on the types of disclosure laws enforced.

**Tracing the Development of Michigan Interests**

The twentieth century saw the development of new ethics and disclosure laws within the American states. Such laws serve the purposes of regulating and making known the actions of hired lobbyists, interest groups, and other political entities. In other words, they provide interesting glimpses into the world of lobbying that only insiders often get to see. Since the laws provide for regular registration and reporting by lobbyists, we can turn to lobbyist records to see how lobbying has changed in Michigan over time. Fortunately, records of lobby disclosure in

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1 There is wide variation between U.S. states in the numbers and types of laws that affect the political activities of these actors (Newmark 2005). Other targets of ethics and disclosure laws often include elected and appointed state officials, political parties, and political action committees (PACs).
Michigan dates back to the late 1940s, thereby providing rich information on the development of organized interests. Lobby laws in Michigan are currently administered by the Bureau of Elections in the Department of State, and historical records are maintained by the Library of Michigan in Lansing.

Michigan’s first lobby transparency was signed by Governor Kim Sigler on June 17, 1947. The law, labeled Public Act 214 and known as the “legislative agent act,” initially required paid lobbyists to register with the Secretary of State’s office. The law did not require any reporting of information beyond the names of those who chose to register (Kelley 1962). As a consequence, we know only the names and addresses of compliant lobbyists and interest groups from that period, and have little information about their activities other than that provided by journalists. Despite these limitations, the records provide insight into how lobbying in Lansing has grown and diversified over time.

Table 9.4 shows the totals of unique lobbyists and interest groups registered to lobby in Lansing from between 1952 and 2014. These figures were compiled by transcribing lists originally maintained by the Secretary of State and then eliminating duplicate entries. As evidenced by the totals, which are also plotted in Figure 9.5, Lansing’s community of lobbyists and interest groups remained fairly stable in size from the 1950s until the early 1970s. At that point, and especially in the 1980s, many more individuals began to register to lobby in Lansing. In fact, totals of lobbyists and their clients had more than septupled from their 1970s lows by 2014. This growth is somewhat anomalous given that Michigan's population (also plotted) did not experience a similar seven-fold increase in those years, but mirrors growth seen in some other states (especially Ohio) around this time (Gray and Lowery 1996a).

[Insert Table 9.4 about here]
Existing accounts of lobbying growth may suggest a few potential causes of the rapid growth of lobbying in Lansing. Political scientists David Lowery and Virginia Gray (1995) proposed a theory of why some states have larger communities of interest groups than others. To them, totals of registered interests reflected the size of a state (in terms of constituents) and its politics (which energizes interest groups into mobilizing). Since Michigan’s totals of registered interests are only moderately correlated with its population, political factors may help to explain the growth of lobbying. Gray and Lowery (1996a, 71) suggested that government growth and the potential for policy change may each contribute to increased lobbying. A noteworthy example of this occurred in Florida in 1990 when a divisive budget battle and proposed tax reforms spurred numerous groups to lobby for the first time (Brasher, Lowery, and Gray 1999). Other political factors that may have contributed to increased lobbying in Michigan include the presence of ballot initiatives (Boehmke 2008), more instability of partisan control (Gray and Lowery 1996a; 1998), or increased legislative professionalism (Kattelman 2015).

To help identify the cause of the increase in lobbying, we can turn to changes in the diversity of registered interests in Lansing. In examining the diversity of interests, we explore the types of groups that are registered to lobby. Gray and Lowery (2001) provide a useful method for categorizing interest groups. First, each group is labeled as being of a for-profit or not-for-profit type of issue. For-profit groups were then categorized into fourteen separate issue categories and non-profits divided by twelve categories. Table 9.5 illustrates the percentages of for-profit and nonprofit interest types among Michigan’s registered interest groups. Descriptive figures from before 1980 were coded from original records, while figures for 1980 and afterward were provided by David Lowery. Table 9.5 shows relatively little change in the percentage of interest groups by
profit status over time. For-profit interests have consistently outnumbered nonprofits in Michigan by a ratio of roughly three to one. While these percentages may support the economic interpretation of interest mobilization (e.g. Olson 1965), the percentages may conceal fluctuations in the totals of individual types of groups.

[Insert Table 9.5 about here]

Between 1951 and 2007, Lansing’s community of interest groups changed in composition. Despite little movement in the ratio of for-profits to non-profit interests, some types of interest groups increased their lobbying efforts much more than others. In 2007, the leading types and totals of for-profit interest groups in Lansing were organizations related to healthcare (146), business services (143), manufacturing (126), and banks (84). The lobbying activities of each of these sectors were much smaller in 1951 when only 13 healthcare organizations, 25 service firms, four manufacturers, and six banks registered to lobby, among other for-profits.

Shifts of similar magnitude occurred among non-profit interest groups. In 2007, the leading types and totals of non-profits were groups related to education (130), sports and hobby leagues (48), environmental causes (20) and groups related to police and firemen (41). Fifty-six years earlier, only ten educational organizations, three sports leagues, three environmental groups, and three police or firemen groups were registered. In general, while all types of registered interest groups have increased dramatically in number over the past six decades, for-profits continue to dominate the lobbying community in Lansing. Groups related to healthcare, service firms, and manufacturing enjoy the greatest numerical advantages, but may not always advocate for the same policies.

Political Influence, Transparency and Ethics
Laws that are intended to make lawmakers more accountable to their constituents may play some role in explaining the rapid increase in totals of registered lobbyists and interest groups. Since such laws are intended to provide members of the public and media with information about the activities of lawmakers, lobbyists, and other political actors, the strength (or enforcement) of these laws may determine how much information they actually deliver. In this section, we suggest that modifications of Michigan’s transparency and ethics laws have changed lobbying in the state over time. Tracing the ebb and flow of special-interest influence on Michigan politics is more challenging than determining how many individuals and groups were registered to lobby. There is some evidence, however, that lobbying in Michigan has become more professional over the past sixty-five years. This is due in part to improvements in transparency and ethics laws.

Michigan’s first lobbying transparency law, the “legislative agent act” of 1947, had little enforcement provisions attached to it (Legislative Service Bureau 1965). In an opinion issued in 1949 (No. 866), Michigan’s Attorney General stated that the law “…does not in fact undertake to regulate the activities of lobbyists. Licensing [i.e. registration] and regulation are not synonymous terms.” While the original act required that lobbyists register with the Secretary of State, pay a filing fee, and maintain records of expenses for six years, the law did not require lobbyists to report their activities or even register on a regular basis. While the state’s Attorney General was responsible for enforcing the law, the office was given few resources for prosecuting violations. Moreover, numerous attempts were made throughout the 1950s to repeal the act. It was not until the passage of House Bill 551 in 1958 that lobbyists were required to register on an annual basis, but a study of Michigan lobbyists found that numerous interest groups still did not register and that no lobbyist had ever been prosecuted under the law (De
Vries 1960). The vague nature of the law allowed lobbyists more discretion over whether they qualified as agents who needed to register. Even though the law categorized violations as felonies, the Michigan State Department and Attorney General lacked resources to investigate complaints of unethical conduct.

An investigation conducted by Attorney General Frank Kelley in the early 1960s sheds some light onto what lobbying used to look like in Michigan, before stricter transparency and ethics laws were enacted. Following the failure of an income tax reform proposal in April 1962, Governor John Swainson requested that the Attorney General investigate whether any lobbyists had violated standards of ethical conduct while lobbying against the proposal. The report found that two particular lobbyists, both of whom represented large automotive companies, were likely effective in having persuaded several senators to change their votes from “yea” to “nay.” Other senators reported “vicious” and “unbearable” pressure from other lobbyists as well (Kelley 1962, 8).

Apart from the pressure applied during the tax reform debate, the Attorney General’s investigation recorded numerous informal tactics used by Lansing lobbyists in the early 1960s. Upon being questioned, numerous lobbyists reported regularly buying drinks and meals for lawmakers. They also stated that lawmakers had come to expect such perks even if they were not currently dining with the lobbyists. Some lobbyists reported maintaining hospitality suites in local hotels for lawmakers and others also reported that lawmakers frequently turned to them to secure jobs for relatives from lobbyists' employers. Lawmakers were reported to have asked for and received numerous other gifts from lobbyists, including cruises, golf matches, cigars and beverages. At the conclusion of his report, the Attorney General recommended the enactment of a new lobby law that included enforcement provisions.
Despite numerous other attempts to reform or repeal Michigan’s lobby law throughout the 1960s, it was not until 1978 that a stronger law was enacted.\textsuperscript{2} Act 472, known as the “lobby act,” created more specific registration and reporting criteria for lobbyists and their employers, and included numerous bans on gifts to legislators. It also empowered the Secretary of State’s office to forward cases of suspected noncompliance to the Attorney General for investigation. While the Secretary of State’s office had created rules for enforcing the law by November 1980, a coalition of more than 100 lobbyists, businesses, and professional associations filed a lawsuit that challenged the law’s constitutionality. The lobby law was deemed an infringement on free speech by an Ingham County circuit judge in October 1981. Within a year, however, the Michigan Court of Appeals had reversed this ruling (\textit{Pletz v. Secretary of State}); and in September 1983, the Michigan Supreme Court refused to hear the second appeal. While the reporting requirements of the lobby law had been weakened, most aspects of the law were deemed constitutional. The Michigan legislature has since modified the law several times, including making changes to the reporting requirements and implementing prohibitions on legislators accepting honoraria for speeches or other public appearances.

Michigan’s 1978 lobby act is likely the cause of the rapid increase in lobby registrations in the 1980s. Throughout the litigation process and following the decision of the Supreme Court, the total of both registered lobbyists and interest groups increased by more than 400 percent. The more specific registration criteria of the act encouraged interest groups to register \textit{all} of their lobbyists in hopes of avoiding violations. Browne et al. (1995) argue that the act’s

\textsuperscript{2} Lobbyists were strictly regulated (at least temporarily) during Michigan’s Constitutional Convention of 1962. “Convention agents” (i.e. lobbyists) were required to maintain more detailed records of their attempts to influence the convention proceedings. Similar regulations were enforced during Pennsylvania’s convention five years later.
implementation involved an adjustment period in which interest groups cautiously registered more individuals as lobbyists than required. Moreover, the law appeared by some accounts to have reduced the number of perks received by Lansing legislators (Firestone 1984). As uncertainty about the state’s new law waned, and as lobbyists became more familiar with the law’s requirements, registration figures began to level off. As Table 2 illustrates, the 1978 lobby law appears to have had little effect on the percentage of nonprofits registered to lobby.

In addition to being more regulated, there is evidence that lobbying in Lansing was becoming much more sophisticated by the early 1990s. Throughout a series of interviews conducted with several influential contract lobbyists in the summer of 1994, Gray and Lowery (1996b) found that lobbying in Lansing was becoming more lucrative and competitive than ever before. One lobbyist claimed that it was not unusual for lobbyists to get threatening bills introduced only to be hired to lobby against them. This activity was called the “Step and Fetch It” practice (1996b, 34). Other lobbyists alleged that competition was increasing because more people were entering the lobbying business. Indeed, since so many interest groups had come onto the lobbying scene in Lansing, legislative business was said to be more arduous and sclerotic than ever before (1996b, 35). When asked about the competitive advantages of hiring multi-client lobbyist firms over using in-house lobbyists, some lobbyists emphasized that the political donations of their lobbying firms gave them greater access to and influence over lawmakers. It was claimed that such firms were becoming powerful players in Michigan politics. Indeed, “money and people [was] the name of the game,” according to one lobbyist (1996b, 37).

**Recent Developments in Michigan Lobbying**

Today, hundreds of individual lobbyists, interest groups, and lobby firms consistently spend more than $35 million per year trying to influence policy in Lansing. While reported
spending on lobbying has surpassed new records in recent years, Lansing’s lobbyists are not immune from fluctuations in the state’s economic performance. Reported spending on lobbying declined in response to both the Great Recession and the recession of the early 2000s (Robinson 2010). While reported spending recovered to its pre-recession levels by 2011, spending has leveled off after reaching a new record in 2012. As of this writing, spending during the first seven months of 2015 was on track to surpass a new record.

Since reporting standards remain lax compared to other states, however, total spending in Lansing may be greater. Little is known about the individual expenses of particular interest groups since lobbying firms that represent multiple clients are not required to report which expenses are made on behalf of each of their clients (Oosting 2015). Lobbyists also are not required to report personal expenses for lawmakers that cost below particular thresholds. Michigan’s current lobbyist reporting requirements place it in the bottom fourth of states in terms of how many requirements exist (Strickland 2014), and the state recently received an “F” grade for lobbying disclosure from the Center for Public Integrity (Andrews 2012). Despite lax reporting standards, firm-level spending totals are available. Among the Lansing lobby firms that consistently spend the most money on lobbying efforts are Governmental Consultant Services, Inc., James H. Karoub Associates, Kelley Cawthorne, RWC Advocacy, and the Michigan Health and Hospital Association. It remains to be seen how Michigan’s newest campaign finance law (signed by Governor Snyder in January 2016) may affect lobbying in Lansing, if at all.

Two recent developments may have increased the influence of lobbyists in Michigan state politics: the implementation of legislative term limits and rulings issued by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010) and *McCutcheon v. FEC* (2014). In November 1992, as part of a larger national movement, Michigan’s voters approved a constitutional
amendment imposing term limits on numerous state officials. Members of the Michigan House were first “termed-out” of office in 1998, with some senators first being forced out in 2002. By 2014, 298 representatives and 69 senators in Michigan had been prevented from seeking re-election (NCSL 2014). Legislatures in which term limits are in effect tend to experience greater turnover among lawmakers, thereby lowering average policy knowledge among lawmakers.\(^3\) These greater informational asymmetries between new lawmakers and lobbyists, agency officials, and others may have exacerbated the influence of professional lobbyists, many of whom market policy expertise and familiarity with legislative processes.\(^4\) At the same time, however, term limits may have reduced the value of cultivating personal relationships with lawmakers by limiting the amount of time such individuals may serve in office. In addition, with term limits come more former lawmakers who may market their personal connections to gain lobby contracts.\(^5\) When interviewed in 2014, one lobbyist also attributed increased lobby expenditures to term limits since lobbyists have to spend more to develop relationships with new legislators (Hinkley 2014).

Recent decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court may have also affected the influence of lobbyists in Lansing. In *Citizens United v. FEC*, the Court struck down portions of a federal law that had placed limits on the election tactics of corporations (including nonprofit ones) and labor

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3 See Mooney (2007) for a concise review of research on term limits and lobbying.  
4 It remains to be determined whether the many resources (such as staff assistants) available to Michigan lawmakers help to counter or condition the influence of lobbyists in the state’s term-limited legislature. In the absence of such staffers, lobbyists would likely play a larger role in drafting laws and providing lawmakers with information about policy (Berkman 2001).  
5 As of January 2015, Michigan’s “revolving door” law was among the weakest in the nation. Unlike in most other states, which prevent former lawmakers from registering to lobby for specified periods of time after leaving office, former legislators in Michigan are allowed to receive compensation for lobbying immediately upon leaving office, except in the case of resignations.
unions preceding an election. Such tactics mostly include cable or satellite broadcasts that mention candidates. The decision in part reversed an earlier ruling (Austin v. Michigan Chamber of Commerce [1990]) in which the Court ruled that Michigan’s Campaign Finance Act was not violative of the First or Fourteenth Amendments. With the Citizens United decision, state governments were prohibited from regulating the campaign activities of interest groups based on corporate identities. In McCutcheon v. FEC (2014), the Court sustained limits on how much citizens may donate to individual candidates, parties or PACs, but struck down aggregate limits on the amount of money that citizens may give to multiple campaigns or causes. In other words, McCutcheon removed aggregate limits on how much lobbyists in Lansing may donate to candidates running for multiple offices. The weakening of restrictions both on campaign spending and giving by interest groups and individual lobbyists may have the effect of infusing more money into Michigan politics over time and enhancing the advantages of multi-client firms (with their associated PACs) over in-house lobbyists, but the presence and size of any effects remain unmeasured as state courts consider how to implement the Citizens United and McCutcheon decisions.

Some Closing Thoughts

Michigan political parties have experienced periods of influence, competition, and irrelevance. While the Republican Party has enjoyed more years of influence throughout Michigan’s history, this has not always been the case everywhere. Both the Republican and Democratic Parties have multiple levels and have sometimes experienced more influence at different levels of government or in different geographic areas. The state, district, and county-level branches of the parties have different responsibilities and interact differently with state officials. Importantly, despite a steady decline of strong partisan identifiers among Michigan’s
voters, legislators from Michigan (both in Lansing and Washington) continue to exhibit strong partisan trends in their roll-call voting (Carroll et al. 2015). In fact, such polarization is becoming more pronounced over time as the median lawmakers of the two parties diverge. Such polarization may be a consequence of a lack of electoral competition. Even though Michigan experienced several periods of domination by one party in its early history, electoral competitiveness appears to be on the decline relative to its levels in the twentieth century.

With all the money that is spent on campaigns and lobbying in Michigan, it is easy to assume that interest groups and lobbyists successfully divert public policy away from the preferences of voters. It is important to remember, however, that not all of the thousands of interest groups and lobbyists in Lansing lobby for the same opinions or ideas. In fact, as the political salience of different issues increases and subsides, various interest groups may find themselves forming alliances with new partners or even former opponents (Gray and Lowery 2004). Moreover, campaign donations or lobbying may serve purposes other than buying votes. Since interest groups have tended most often to make donations to and lobby already-friendly lawmakers, such efforts may simply be attempts to keep friendly lawmakers in office, maintain access to them, or educate them on the virtues of the group’s position (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Hall and Deardorff 2006). There are numerous interest groups in Michigan that each serve particular constituents and their lobbyists fulfill a number of important roles in government. Despite Americans’ suspicion of special interests and their lobbyists, such associations fulfill important roles by representing diverse groups and articulating their preferences before lawmakers.

Michigan politics can be characterized in part by the various associations that seek power in the state, whether those groups are political parties organized interests. While these groups and
actors have some agency, it is illustrative to understand the influence that Michigan state law has had on the way they organize and mobilize. In our next chapter we turn to a discussion of one of the direct ways that parties and groups attempt to gain influence: elections.
Works Cited


Tables and Figures

Figure 9.1: Historical Distance between Parties in Lansing

![Graph showing ideological distance between parties in Lansing from 1995 to 2010. The graph includes two lines, one for the House (blue) and one for the Senate (red). The distances are measured on the y-axis, ranging from 1.8 to 2.4. The x-axis represents the years from 1995 to 2010.](image-url)
Figure 9.2: Historical Heterogeneity within Parties in Lansing
Figure 9.3: Ideology of Michigan’s Congressional Delegation by Member
Figure 9.4: Average Ideology of Congress by Party
Table 9.1: Party Identification in Michigan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong Democrat (%)</td>
<td>23.74</td>
<td>26.89</td>
<td>24.09</td>
<td>27.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not Very Strong Democrat (%)</td>
<td>13.73</td>
<td>11.91</td>
<td>10.45</td>
<td>8.91</td>
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<td>Independent (%)</td>
<td>15.88</td>
<td>12.26</td>
<td>11.53</td>
<td>11.72</td>
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<td>Lean Democrat (%)</td>
<td>10.12</td>
<td>11.10</td>
<td>11.42</td>
<td>11.34</td>
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<td>Lean Republican (%)</td>
<td>10.80</td>
<td>11.63</td>
<td>14.73</td>
<td>9.40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not Very Strong Republican (%)</td>
<td>7.86</td>
<td>6.82</td>
<td>8.34</td>
<td>7.75</td>
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<td>Strong Republican (%)</td>
<td>12.11</td>
<td>16.37</td>
<td>16.68</td>
<td>21.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not Sure (%)</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>2.62</td>
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<td>Number of Responses</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td>1729</td>
<td>1847</td>
<td>1032</td>
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Source: Cooperative Congressional Election Study Common Content.

Table 9.2: Overview of Major Parties in Michigan

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democratic Party</th>
<th>Republican Party</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year Founded</td>
<td>1832</td>
<td>1854</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Governors</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Unified Control</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>79</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presidential Nomination Process</td>
<td>Primaries and Caucuses</td>
<td>Primaries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Fundraising in 2014</td>
<td>$43,072,661</td>
<td>$62,666,802</td>
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Table 9.3: Patterns of State Party Committee Fundraising

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Democratic Party</th>
<th>Republican Party</th>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>$9,737,219</td>
<td>$7,891,739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>$4,670,760</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>$13,478,101</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>$4,649,708</td>
<td>$3,038,038</td>
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<td>2010</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>$5,001,220</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>$3,697,716</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>$6,306,226</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>$474,460</td>
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<td>$355,638</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>$5,342,089</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>$222,934</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>$16,446,000</td>
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<td>$4,862,656</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>$2,500</td>
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Table 9.4: The Growth of Lobbying in Lansing

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<th>Year</th>
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<th>Interest Groups</th>
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<td>1952</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>240</td>
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<tr>
<td>1958</td>
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<td>1964</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>218</td>
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<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>1,250</td>
<td>850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>1,231</td>
<td>971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1,281</td>
<td>1,044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>1,258</td>
<td>1,159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>1,364</td>
<td>1,409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>1,444</td>
<td>1,504</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>1,484</td>
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Table 9.5: Profit-Status of Michigan Interests, Percentages

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>Nonprofit</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>75.5</td>
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<td>2007</td>
<td>69.5</td>
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Figure 9.5: The Growth of Lobbying in Lansing