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Introduction

The past decade of American politics has been riddled with election outcomes even the best pollsters could not predict, such as growing populism and political parties struggling to hold candidates to the party line. Political actors seek to exert influence on the local, state, and national levels, and, as they do, they continue to form groups or coalitions as a method to gain and wield this influence. One such group that has emerged is Ottawa Impact, a local-level political organization, which overcame years of traditional, party-line conservative politics in order to win a majority of seats on the county's Board of Commissioners in 2022 in Ottawa County, Michigan. Since then, the group has been a source of controversy in west Michigan due to its strong stance in opposition of many of the COVID-19 pandemic policies, the teaching of Critical Race Theory in schools, and its methods of replacing local officials in Ottawa County, for example. This paper attempts to discover if factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, partisan polarization and the culture war between the left and right, and the growth of a national parental rights movement are sufficient to explain Ottawa Impact's ability to gain and maintain political control of Ottawa County.

In order to understand the causes of Ottawa Impact's political influence, it is important to first understand who or what Ottawa Impact is. Though the literature on interest groups offers some explanation as to how a group like Ottawa Impact enters the political arena, I find that Ottawa Impact does not fall neatly into the category of "interest group," and in some ways acts

more like a political party or a small part of a larger social movement. Additionally, although I refer to Ottawa Impact as a far-right group, this is not to depict Ottawa Impact as a Republican or conservative group. Rather, I argue that Ottawa Impact has emerged out of the trend on both the left and the right towards populism and a general disillusionment with the state of politics in the United States. Above all, this essay is concerned with how groups, especially those which are neither strictly interest groups nor political parties, penetrate the political arena. Further, the idea is to understand Ottawa Impact as a part of the changing political landscape— one that offers evidence as to how politics are changing and why.

Interest Groups, Political Parties, and Social Movements

Bentley (1908) was the first to introduce interest groups as not just occasional political actors, but as essential parts of the policy-making process (as cited in Mahood 2000). Further, it is not individual preference, but group affiliation, that drives political opinion (Bentley 1908). Since Bentley's initial study, interest groups have been understood as the foundation of the American political system, as responsible for delivering the needs of society through action and competition, and as actors who change and alter the political arena (Mahood 2000). Specifically, while Bentley understands interest groups as having equal opportunity to influence the political arena, anti-pluralism challenges this view. While antipluralist Lowi (2nd ed., 1979) is primarily concerned that self-interested groups do not act in the best interests of the public, E.E. Schattschneider (1942, 1960) argues that interest groups are not as well equipped as political parties in representing most Americans (as cited in Mahood 2000).

Schattschneider's (1942, 1960) work is also noteworthy due to the distinction he makes between interest groups and political parties. While the latter seeks to mobilize a majority of voters over a large set of issues and exert power through government, the former generally is

focused on a single issue area, appeals to a smaller group of people, and only tries to influence government. According to this distinction, Ottawa Impact, although mobilized by health policies during the COVID-19 pandemic, is not a true interest group, for the group is also now concerned with issues surrounding education and individual rights, for example (Ottawa Impact 2022). Moreover, Ottawa Impact is not just influencing local politics, which would be how interest groups act within the political arena, but rather directly creating policy. While the group is not a political party, the fact that some of its members are on the board of county commissioners and therefore make up government, makes it clear that the group is not standing on the outside of the political arena looking in, but has become integrated in government and therefore directly involved in the policy-making process.

Much of the contemporary research on interest groups is focused on how groups interact internally, leaving a gap in the research in terms of how interest groups and parties interact other than through lobbying (Mahood 2000). However, social movements are an example of how a group becomes integrated within a political party, whereby the movement becomes incorporated and consolidated so that it develops into an important coalition of that party (Schlozman 2015). While I identify Ottawa Impact as a far-right group in this paper, that does not mean that it is akin to the Republican Party. In fact, as I will explain later in this paper, Ottawa Impact is different enough from both the Republican and Democratic parties to reveal that it does not seek integration within existing parties. Furthermore, it is not just political parties that can build coalitions, but rather ideas can serve as “coalition-magnets” as well (Béland and Cox 2016). Therefore, whether Ottawa Impact is an interest group, political party, or another type of group entirely, it is possible that Ottawa Impact rose to power by coalition-building. Specifically, I argue that in order to serve its own interests, Ottawa Impact built a coalition with movements

such as the parental-rights movement, those disillusioned with the traditional parties, and individuals opposed to state-level COVID-19 policies.

Regardless of how Ottawa Impact should be classified, understanding the function of groups within the creation of policy is of use in this essay. As Truman (1951, 14) highlights, “the group experiences and affiliations of the individual are the primary...means by which the individual knows, interprets, and reacts to the society in which he exists” (as cited by Mahood 2000, 14). While one interpretation of this view on group politics might be that membership with Ottawa Impact influences an individual’s perception of the political environment, it is also possible that Ottawa Impact gained support in the first place because individuals felt that the group already represented their political interests and opinions.