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The Political Divergence of Ohio and Michigan

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Introduction

Once considered politically similar Midwestern states, Ohio and Michigan appear to be on very different paths. In the years leading up to the 2016 election, both states had similar partisan composition in their state governments. Each state supported Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump in 2016, Ohio strongly and Michigan narrowly. In the years since the 2016 election, the states have diverged politically with Ohio remaining in the strong control of the Republican Party, and with Democrats in Michigan gaining control of state government. The directions of these states have led to speculation that Ohio is no longer a swing state (Hampton, 2020) and that Michigan Democrats are on their way to turning the state solidly blue (Glueck, 2023).

Although they appear to be diverging politically, Ohio and Michigan remain demographically similar Midwestern states. According to the American Community Survey, the states remain similar in a number of ways. Ohio and Michigan have similar white populations (80% and 78%), Black populations (12% and 14%), bachelor's degree recipients (both 18%), people over the age of 65 (both 17%), median household incomes (both 59k in 2020 dollars), and workers belonging to unions (12% and 13%) (United States Census Bureau, 2023; Union Membership and Coverage Database, 2023). These are only a few of the demographic similarities between the states which suggest that the change in political direction is not a result of changing demographics in the states.

This research provides an explanation for why Ohio and Michigan have diverged politically in recent years. This comparative case study analyzes a number of institutional factors that explain the divergence, including registration and voting laws, redistricting

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processes, and ballot measures. Further, data on the policy preferences in each state are presented and suggest that the divergence between Ohio and Michigan is not the result of different policy preferences among citizens. The results of this comparative case study show that institutional factors, not state response to citizen preferences, are the reasons for different political outcomes in Ohio and Michigan in recent years.

A Comparative Case Study

Case studies are an appropriate method for answering "how" or "why" research questions (Yin, 2014). This research concerns itself with why two similar Midwest states, Ohio and Michigan, have diverged politically since the 2016 election. Not only are case studies appropriate for "why" questions, case studies are also appropriate when studying contemporary events (Yin, 2014). Since the 2016 election, Michigan adopted electoral reforms such as non-partisan redistricting, and same-day and automatic voter registration. During the same time, Ohio voting laws either remained the same, or actions were taken to decrease the number of registered voters rather than encourage registration and turnout.

Although "how" or "why" questions focusing on contemporary events are important for case studies, there are also several other characteristics that define and help justify the use of the case study method. Case studies explain decisions, why they are made, their implementation, and the results of those decisions (Schramm, 1971). They also investigate a contemporary phenomenon where there are more variables of interest than there are data points (Yin, 2014). In this research, several institutional factors (i.e. variables) are considered as explanations for the political divergence between Ohio and Michigan. These institutional factors, along with other variables associated with alternative explanations, outnumber the number of cases. Further, case studies benefit from previous development of theoretical claims which guide the data collection

and analysis (Yin, 2014). The data collection in this research is guided by previous work on the influence of institutions and the findings of previous research related to variables of interest such as voter registration laws, redistricting processes, and ballot initiatives and referenda.

Comparative case studies attempt to identify the relevant differences between two cases with different outcomes (Smelser, 1973). Comparative case studies have some distinct characteristics from other case studies and can be used to solve the problem of many variables but a small number of observations by focusing analysis on comparable cases. When selecting comparable cases they should be similar in important characteristics, but different when it comes to the variables of interest (Lijphart, 1975). Ohio and Michigan are similar in a number of important ways, historically, demographically, and regionally. However, the institutional factors investigated in this research are the characteristics that are dissimilar between the two cases, and these dissimilar factors are the variables that are used to investigate the hypothesized relationship between the institutional factors and political outcomes. Although comparative case studies cannot account for all differences between the cases, it is also important in comparative case study research to focus on key variables and omit variables of marginal importance (Lijphart, 1975).

This comparative case study uses developments in institutional theory to guide data collection and analysis. Douglass North (1991) defines institutions as "humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction" and "consist of both informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct), and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights)" (p.97). Democracy depends on the design of political institutions (March & Olsen, 1984). Further, the actions of individuals and groups are bound by the rules created by institutions (Frederickson et al., 2012). Michigan adopted electoral reforms

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that changed the rules of the institutions, allowing voters to register during early voting, automatically registering new residents, and creating a non-partisan commission to draw electoral districts. Additionally, this comparative case study investigates other institutional factors regarding ballot initiatives and referenda. Case studies not only engage theory to guide the data collection and analysis, but also address rival explanations. The evidence presented suggests the political divergence between Ohio and Michigan is not the result of different social choices between citizens in the two states.

Registration and Voting Laws

Prior to 2018, Ohio and Michigan had similar registration requirements. Citizens in both states were required to register about a month prior to Election Day. In 2018, voters in Michigan approved a ballot proposal by an overwhelming margin (66.8% to 33.2%) to allow same-day voter registration (including on Election Day), automatic voter registration when updating driver's license or personal ID cards, and other changes reducing the burden for registering to vote (Stafford, 2018). Meanwhile, Ohio continued to require citizens to register 30-days prior to the election (Ohio Secretary of State, 2022). Not only that, but Ohio began purging voters from the rolls in 2016 when then Secretary of State Jon Husted directed county boards of elections to notify voters that they either had to vote or respond to the notice in four years to avoid having their registration cancelled. In 2018, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a 1995 law in Ohio that allowed for the removal of inactive voters. By 2019, Ohio counties had removed approximately 267,000 voters from the rolls, some by mistake (Rouan & Caruso, 2020).

Previous research on voter registration shows that states that allow Election Day registration (same-day registration that includes Election Day) experience increases in voter turnout (Fenster, 1994; Rhine, 1996; Rhine, 1996; Hanmer, 2009; Neilheisel & Burden 2012).

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Other research suggests that automatic registration when renewing a driver's license, also known as a "motor voter" law, increases turnout (Knack, 1995). In addition to increasing turnout, election reforms allowing same-day voter registration can change the electorate by increasing turnout among young voters (Grumbach & Hill, 2022).

Registration rules in Michigan and Ohio were similar prior to 2018, but the adoption of reforms in Michigan influenced registration numbers and, in turn, the makeup of the electorate. Twenty years of registration data in the two states reveals something striking: In 2022, Michigan had more registered voters than Ohio, even though Ohio has 1.7 million more people. At no point in the 20 years prior had there been more registered voters in Michigan than in Ohio. Figure 1 shows voter registration in both states.

Figure 1. Number of Registered Voters in Gubernatorial Election Years
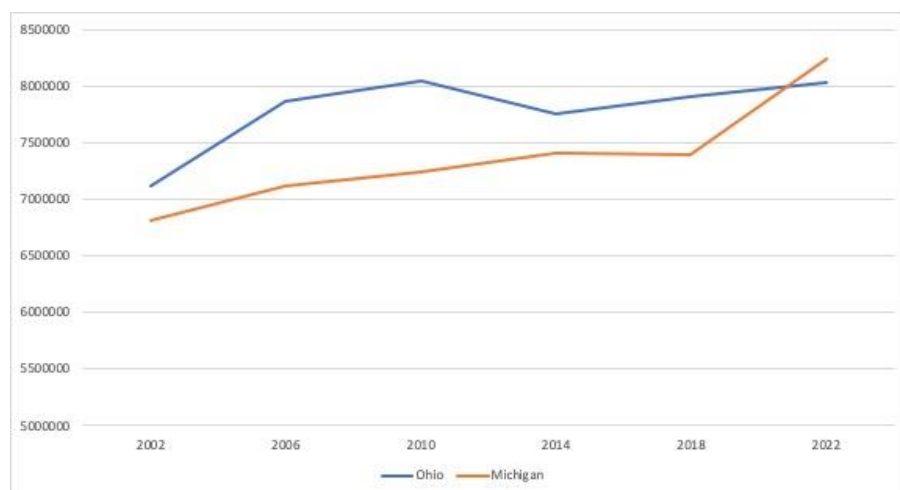
Sources: Michigan Secretary of State and Ohio Secretary of State

The statewide voter registration data show an uptick in voter registration in Michigan following the adoption of registration reforms, and while this is certainly noteworthy, the previously mentioned research suggests the changes should also influence turnout and shape the electorate. In 2022, Michigan saw 4,500,400 voters cast ballots, more than the 4,341,340 voters

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who turned out in the state in 2018, which was a high turnout midterm election (Michigan Secretary of State, 2022; "General Election Voter Registration/Turnout Statistics," 2022). In Ohio, the number of votes cast in 2022 was actually less than in 2018, 4,201,368 and 4,496,834 respectively (Ohio Secretary of State, 2022). Not only was voter registration larger in Michigan than in Ohio, but turnout increased in Michigan following the adoption of voter registration reforms, while turnout actually declined in Ohio during the same period.

The increase in turnout in Michigan cannot be easily attributed to the reforms, though, because other factors, such as candidate quality and ballot initiatives, can drive voters to the polls. Nonetheless, the Michigan Secretary of State website posts a daily total of registered voters by county which can help calculate the registrations that can be attributed to voter registration reforms. By subtracting the number of registered voters 40-days prior to Election Day from the number of registered voters on Election Day, the number of voters registered during the early voting period either through automatic voter registration or through same-day voter registration can be calculated. Although this does not capture specifics about the individual voters themselves, these totals in each county represent the voters who would not have been registered to vote under the previous registration rules where voters had to be registered 40-days prior to Election Day.

The presidential election in 2020 would have been the first year under the new rules where it would be expected that a significant number of people would decide to register to vote during early voting. The influence of these additional registrations can still be seen in 2022 election results because those new registrants in 2020 would not be removed from the rolls before 2022. Statewide, a total of 261,333 voters were registered in the 40-days prior to the election. There is reason to believe that these additional registered voters benefited Democratic

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Governor Gretchen Whitmer in her bid for re-election in 2022. Of the 261,333 voter registrations that can be attributed to the election reforms, 175,635 (67%) came from the 18 counties Whitmer won in 2022. Further, the change in voter registrations are positively correlated (r = .1807) with an increase in vote share for Whitmer from 2018 to 2022. While data on the political party affiliations and the specific motivations of individual voters are unavailable, the county-level data show that the reforms benefited the Democratic Party candidate for governor.

Figure 2 shows a map of the increase in voter registration by county in Michigan during the early-voting period in 2020. Darker counties represent a greater increase in voter registration in comparison to lighter counties. Although the numbers presented correspond with population in the county, raw votes are the appropriate measure because the comparison is made with results from the election for governor, which is a statewide election where turnout in specific regions does not influence the outcome. A greater percent change in voter registration in a less densely populated rural county compared to the percent change in a more heavily populated urban and suburban county has no influence on the outcome of a statewide election. Ultimately, the raw number of votes decide the election and the data presented are by county to show where the change in registrations occurred, and because this is how the states of Ohio and Michigan provide the data.

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Figure 2. Gains in Michigan Voter Registration During Early Voting by County in 2020
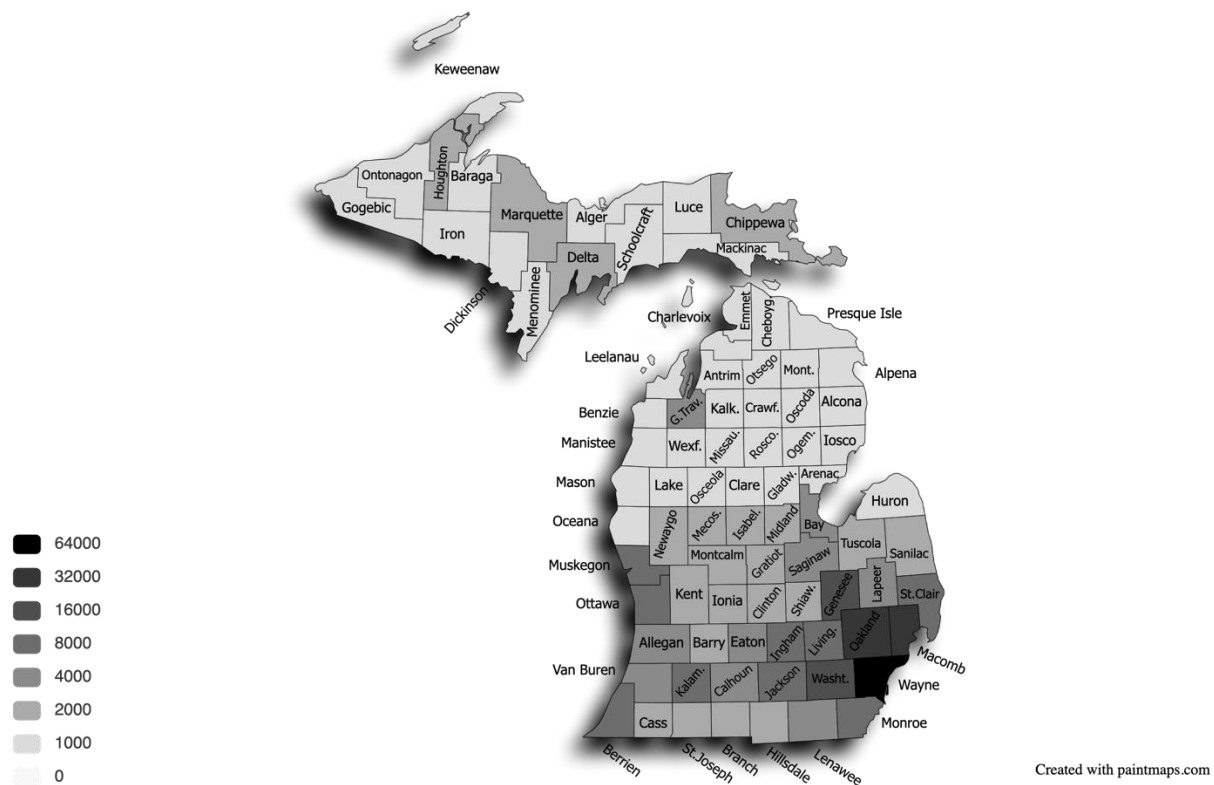
Ohio also had elections for governor in 2018 and 2022, but the voter registration data tell a very different story. Voters in Ohio have to be registered 30-days prior to Election Day, so there are no registrations during the early voting period to parse out from the data. Instead, the declines in voter registration can provide some clarity for who benefits when the state decides to purge voters from the rolls. Data on exactly how many voters in each county in Ohio were removed from the voter rolls is unavailable and some declines in registrations have been offset by new registrants. However, the net losses in counties from 2018 to 2022 suggest that Republican Governor Mike DeWine benefited from voters being removed from the rolls. Of the 57 counties that reported a decline in voter registration, just over half of the decline (50.03%; 56,324 of 112,584) were in 8 counties that the Democratic Party candidate for governor Richard Cordray won in 2018. In that election Cordray won only 9 counties. In addition to this,

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Governor DeWine's increase in vote share from 2018 to 2022 is negatively correlated with the change in county voter registrations (r = -.3502), which suggests that DeWine improved his performance in counties where there was a decline in voter registration. Figure 3 shows the net losses of registered voters in Ohio by county from 2018 to 2022. Darker counties represent greater net losses and lighter counties represent fewer or no loss in the number of registered voters.

Figure 3. Net Losses in Registered Voters in Ohio by County from 2018 to 2022

Created with paintmaps.com

Redistricting Commissions

The rules that govern voting are certainly important, but research also shows that the rules that govern redistricting influence electoral outcomes. Research on redistricting commissions finds that the use of commissions results in more competitive elections than redistricting that is controlled by the state legislature (Carson & Crespin, 2004; Lindgren &

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Southwell, 2013). Recent research parses out the differences between independent commissions and political commissions, finding that independent commissions are more than twice as likely to have competitive elections, and decrease incumbent party wins by 52% (Nelson, 2023).

The influence of redistricting is evident when comparing the cases of Ohio and Michigan. In Michigan, a citizen-initiated constitutional amendment creating an independent redistricting commission was approved by voters in 2018. This amendment created a citizen-led process for drawing electoral districts for Congressional, State Senate, and State House district lines (Michigan Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission 2023). This process takes the power of drawing maps away from the partisan politics of the state legislature. In the same year, Ohio voters approved a constitutional amendment that was not initiated by citizens, but instead was legislatively referred. The Ohio constitutional amendment requires lines to be drawn by a bipartisan commission, not an independent one. The members of the commission are appointed by the Senate President, the Speaker of the House, the Senate Minority Leader, the House Minority Leader, the Governor, the Auditor, and the Secretary of State (Ohio Redistricting Commission, 2023). With Republicans winning all state executive offices in Ohio, the bipartisan commission favors the Republican Party. The bipartisan commission produced district maps that were deemed unconstitutional by the Ohio Supreme Court for violating the amendment aimed at preventing gerrymandering (Associated Press, 2022). Ultimately, a federal court forced the implementation of the unconstitutional maps (Ohio Capitol Journal Staff, 2022).

Table 1 shows the partisan composition of the states and demonstrates how the Michigan process produced a different outcome than the Ohio process. The two states matched in their partisan composition until Michigan adopted the independent commission to draw electoral districts. While the bipartisan, politician-controlled process in Ohio maintained Republican

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control of the legislature, the independent commission in Michigan did what research suggests, and resulted in more party competition for control of the state government.

Table 1. State and Legislative Partisan Composition, 2010-2023						
	Legislative Control		*Governor Party*		*State Control*	
	Ohio	Michigan	Ohio	Michigan	Ohio	Michigan
2010	Split	Split	Dem	Dem	Divided	Divided
2011	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep
2012	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep
2013	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep
2014	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep
2015	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep
2016	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep
2017	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep
2018	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep	Rep
2019	Rep	Rep	Rep	Dem	Rep	Divided
2020	Rep	Rep	Rep	Dem	Rep	Divided
2021	Rep	Rep	Rep	Dem	Rep	Divided
2022	Rep	Rep	Rep	Dem	Rep	Divided
2023	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem
Source: National Conference of State Legislatures						
Note: Shaded areas represent years when party control in Ohio and Michigan matched.						

Ballot Measures

Unlike voter registration laws and redistricting, Ohio and Michigan have very similar processes for ballot initiatives and referenda. Both states allow initiated constitutional amendments with similar requirements for placing the proposed amendment on the ballot and a 50%-plus-one threshold for adopting the amendment (Ohio Constitution, Article 2 Section 1a; Michigan Constitution, Article 12 Section 2). Both states allow an indirect initiated state statute where the legislature has the chance to adopt the proposed statute before it is placed on the ballot (Ohio Constitution, Article 2 Section 1b; Michigan Constitution, Article 2, Section 9). Finally, both states allow a veto referendum, where citizens place an enacted law originating in the state

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legislature on the ballot for citizens to approve or repeal (Ohio Constitution, Article 2 Section 1c; Michigan Constitution, Article 2 Section 9).

Voter registration laws and redistricting in Ohio and Michigan show how differences in institutions can shape the electorate, but even where the processes are similar as with ballot initiatives and referenda, Ohio and Michigan have prioritized different policies which drive turnout. For example, in 2022 Michigan considered a constitutional amendment protecting the right to an abortion and contraception, while Ohio considered initiatives aimed at changing requirements for judges to set bail and prohibiting local governments from allowing non-citizens to vote in local elections. Scholars show that ballot initiatives that are considered salient social issues, like abortion, influence turnout and affect who votes (Biggers; 2011; Biggers, 2014). Table 2 shows the ballot measures in Ohio and Michigan from 2016 through 2022. Note that neither state had initiatives reach the ballot in 2016, when voters in both states supported Donald Trump.

Table 2. Ballot Measures, 2016-2022					
Michigan					
Year	Type	Subject	Approve	Reject	Turnout
2018	Citizen-Initiated State Statute	Marijuana	X		58.10%
	Citizen-Initiated Constitutional Amendment	Redistricting	X		
	Citizen-Initiated Constitutional Amendment	Elections	X		
2020	Legislatively Referred Constitutional Amendment	Parks	X		68.83%
	Legislatively Referred Constitutional Amendment	Law Enforcement	X		
2022	Legislatively Referred Constitutional Amendment	Term Limits	X		
	Citizen-Initiated Constitutional Amendment	Elections	X		54.78%
	Citizen-Initiated Constitutional Amendment	Abortion	X		
Ohio					
2017	Citizen-Initiated Constitutional Amendment	Law Enforcement	X		30.29%
	Citizen-Initiated State Statute	Healthcare		X	
2018	Legislatively Referred Constitutional Amendment	Redistricting	X		21.06%
	Citizen-Initiated Constitutional Amendment	Trials		X	55.72%
2022	Legislatively Referred Constitutional Amendment	Trials	X		52.32%
	Legislatively Referred Constitutional Amendment	Elections	X		
Sources: Ballotpedia; Ohio Secretary of State; Michigan Secretary of State Note: Turnout calculated as number of votes cast divided by the number of registered voters					

There are some important differences between the ballot measures considered in Ohio

and Michigan over the time that the two states diverged in their political support. Related to the

previous discussion on redistricting, Michigan voters approved a citizen-initiated constitutional

amendment that created a non-partisan citizen-driven process for redistricting in the state, and it

was approved in a November election in 2018. Ohio legislators, on the other hand, decided to

place a legislatively referred constitutional amendment that created a bipartisan commission for

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redistricting. They also chose to put this proposed amendment on the ballot in May instead of November, resulting in much lower turnout for the Ohio amendment than the Michigan amendment (21.06% to 58.10%). Ballot measures in 2022 also provide some insights on differences between the states. Michigan approved a citizen-initiated constitutional amendment to protect abortion and contraception rights at the same time that Governor Whitmer won re-election in the state championing abortion rights as a major focus of her campaign (Smith & Sasani, 2022). Ohio voters in that year had two legislatively referred amendments, one regarding how judges set bail amounts and the other restricting non-citizens from voting in local elections (Bruck, 2022). Michigan saw higher turnout with the citizen-initiated abortion amendment on the ballot (54.78%) compared to Ohio with the two legislatively referred amendments not focused on any salient social issues (52.32%).

Ballot measures are not just important for overall turnout though, they also influence who turns out. According to the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) (2023), Michigan had the highest voter turnout among the youth vote (ages 18 to 29) in 2022. Michigan was one of only four states to see an increase in youth turnout from 2018 to 2022 and CIRCLE pointed to changes in voter registration as a key factor in the increased turnout (CIRCLE, 2023). Research from CIRCLE also shows that abortion was a major motivating factor for young voters in Michigan (Booth, 2022). Without registration changes and ballot measures that motivate young voters, youth turnout in Ohio was far behind Michigan, 21.6% to 36.5% respectively (CIRCLE, 2023). This disparity provides further evidence that factors shaping the electorate are creating the different electoral choices in Ohio and Michigan.

Although it appears that Ohioans have not used the initiative process as frequently as citizens in Michigan, citizen-initiated ballot measures in 2023 suggest that Ohioans are starting to use the initiative for similar amendments and statutes as Michigan has in recent years. In November of 2023, Ohioans are voting on a citizen-initiated constitutional amendment to provide the individual right to abortion and other reproductive decisions, as well as a citizen-initiated statute to legalize the use of recreational marijuana (Ballotpedia, 2023).

State Responsiveness to Public Opinion and Policy Preferences

An alternative explanation for the political divergence of Ohio and Michigan is that policy differences are simply a reflection of differences in policy preferences in the states. At the core of democratic theory rests the assumption that policies reflect the will of the people. Scholars use measures of citizen ideology and policy liberalism to investigate the connection between the policy preferences of citizens and state policy (Berry et al., 1998; Berry et al., 2010; Caughey & Warshaw 2018; Grossman, Jordan, & McCrain, 2021). Citizen ideology influences state policy on issues such as climate change (Matisoff, 2008), firearms (Kenter, Mayer, and Morris, 2022), and marijuana (Hannah & Mallinson, 2018).

Citizen-driven initiatives in Michigan regarding redistricting and abortion suggest that these issues are salient for citizens in the state. Though Ohioans did not use the citizen-initiated ballot measure process during the same period as Michiganders for these issues, polling shows that they are salient nonetheless. Ohioans selected threats to democracy (an issue related to election reforms) and abortion as key issues they considered when they cast their votes in 2022. Other issues included in the poll of most important issues for Ohioans included guns and climate change (Conn, 2022).

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Public opinion on salient issues is particularly influential to policy adoption (Page & Shapiro, 1983; Burstein, 2003). On specific salient issues, there is evidence that public opinion influences state policy adoption on climate change (Bromely-Trujillo & Poe, 2020), gay rights (Lax & Phillips, 2009), and abortion (Arceneaux, 2002). In this body of literature there is variation on the influence of political institutions on state responsiveness to public opinion. Some conclude that mechanisms like initiatives and referenda make states more responsive, and institutions are a major influence on state responsiveness (Arceneaux, 2002; LaCombe 2023). Other scholars find little support for the influence of political institutions (Lax & Phillips, 2009).

If institutional factors are not a major influence on the political divergence of Ohio and Michigan, then it is expected that the citizen preferences on issues would reflect the divergence. However, citizens in Ohio and Michigan largely agree on salient issues. For example, the results from a 2022 poll conducted by Baldwin-Wallace University of 856 Ohio registered voters shows that 59.1% support an amendment to the Ohio constitution making abortion a fundamental right (Salamone, 2022). Also in 2022, Michigan voters passed the Right to Reproductive Freedom initiative, an initiative protecting abortion rights, with support earning 55.7% of the vote (Ollstein, 2022). The Ohio legislature proposed raising the threshold for amending the Ohio constitution to 60% in a special August election in 2023, a move in advance of abortion rights groups getting an abortion rights amendment on the ballot for the November 2023 election (Gersony, 2023). The referendum making it more difficult to amend the Ohio constitution failed.

Ohio and Michigan have similar support for the legalization of marijuana. The Baldwin-Wallace University survey in 2022 also shows that Ohioans support the legalization of recreational marijuana with 58.1% of respondents in favor (Salamone, 2022). In 2018 Michigan

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voters legalized recreational marijuana use through a citizen initiated ballot measure with 55.9% of the vote (Michigan Secretary of State, 2018).

The Baldwin-Wallace University survey also shows that 59.6% of Ohioans somewhat or strongly oppose allowing legal gun owners 21 or older to carry a concealed handgun without a permit (Salamone, 2022). A 2023 poll of voters in Michigan shows that 71.9% oppose making Michigan a state where anyone can legally carry a gun with them without a concealed weapons permit (Glengariff Group, Inc., 2023). Although citizens in both states are opposed, opposition in Michigan appears to be stronger than in Ohio. On June 13, 2022, Ohio's law allowing citizens to carry a concealed handgun without a permit went into effect (Ohio Attorney General, 2022). The Baldwin-Wallace survey was conducted several months after the law went into effect, which could explain the lower percentage (but still a substantial majority) of Ohioans opposing permit-less concealed carry, because opposing it would entail opposing current state law.

Citizens in Ohio and Michigan are also concerned with climate change. According to the 2019 Ohio Health Issues Poll (OHIP), conducted by Interact for Health, which describes itself as a "Catalyst for Health and Wellness," Ohioans are concerned about global warming. OHIP asked "How much do you think global warming is currently affecting the United States?" The results show that 72% of Ohioans believe global warming is affecting the United States at least some (Interact for Health, 2019). In 2023 Data for Progress conducted a survey of 597 likely voters in Michigan using web panel respondents, and asked the following question, "In recent weeks, Michigan has experienced extreme weather, including ice storms that have downed trees, closed schools and businesses, and delayed air travel. Scientific experts have suggested these extreme weather events are due to the impact of climate change. Knowing what you know now, how urgent or not urgent would you say that it is for Michigan's state legislature to address

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climate change?" Not surprisingly, 61% described addressing climate change as an urgent need (Jacobs, 2023). While Michigan lawmakers are working to deal with the impact of climate change on the state (Davenport, 2023), legislators in Ohio have proposed a requirement for teaching both sides on climate change (Kowalski, 2023).

The data on salient issues in Ohio and Michigan indicate that the differences in policy in the states are not the result of political responsiveness to public opinion. Voters in Ohio and Michigan appear to align well on the salient issues of abortion, marijuana, guns, and climate change, even as the states' policies do not align. While some of the policy change in Michigan is the result of citizen-driven initiatives taking place during gubernatorial election years, as in the cases of abortion rights and marijuana, efforts from citizens in Ohio to adopt similar laws have seen resistance from the state legislature as evidenced by the proposal to raise the threshold needed to amend the Ohio constitution, and the threat from Republican legislators that if citizens pass a statutory amendment to legalize recreational marijuana use, the legislature may exercise its right to overturn such a change immediately (Trau, 2023). The failed actions from the Ohio legislature to raise the threshold demonstrates the importance of institutions in policy outcomes.

Discussion

There are of course factors that are difficult to trace that may also be contributing to the political divergence of Ohio and Michigan. Research shows that state parties matter for recruiting quality candidates for office (Sanbonmatsu, 2006). With only one Democrat among the statewide elected legislative and executive officials, five Democratic U.S. House members out of 15, and tiny caucuses in both houses of the state legislature, the Ohio Democratic Party does not have many quality candidates to call on to compete for state-wide office.

Additionally, some Ohio Democrats, including Tim Ryan, believed national Democrats abandoned the former Democratic Congressman during his 2022 bid for U.S. Senate (Gomez, 2022). Meanwhile, Ohio Republicans had a deep bench of quality candidates from within the state, and were able to recruit a quality celebrity candidate with Ohio roots, author and venture capitalist J.D. Vance, who defeated Ryan. In Michigan the Democratic Party is strong and has a deep bench of quality candidates, as evidenced by the long list of viable potential nominees to replace retiring U.S. Senator Debbie Stabenow (Roskopp, 2023).

The preponderance of the evidence suggests that Ohio and Michigan's political divergence has happened because of institutional factors such as changes to Michigan's voter registration laws, redistricting, and the kinds of issues that are put to the voters on the ballot. These factors alter not just the number of registered voters in Michigan, but the number of actual voters. They also affect the demographic composition of the electorate, defined as the people who actually show up to vote in the various elections discussed here. Differences in the demographics of the states as well as potential disagreements between the states' voters on salient policy matters do not appear to be driving their political divergence. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the reasons why Ohio has a stronger Republican Party than Michigan does, and Michigan has a stronger Democratic Party than Ohio does. Likely it is a combination of factors including talent, structural differences such as those discussed above, and the decay that normally occurs when a party loses many elections in a row.

Finally, there is reason to be skeptical of the prevailing belief that Ohio is now a noncompetitive red state and that it does not make sense for Democrats to compete there. Democrats like to argue that if everyone votes, then their candidates will win. This belief is simultaneously self-serving and self-critical. It is self-serving because it assumes that the

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majority of potential voters agree with the Democratic Party's positions on the major issues. It

is at least implicitly self-critical because it is the responsibility of the Democratic Party to turn

out Democratic voters. If that is not happening in Ohio, then the party should be doing

something about it. But there may a kernel of truth in the cliché. Senator Sherrod Brown's

reelection campaign in 2024 may be the real test of this possibility. If he is able to register large

numbers of new voters and turn them out, he may stand a better chance at reelection than many

pundits give him. Moreover, if efforts to produce a citizen led redistricting process through

ballot initiative succeed, Ohio could see similar changes to what has happened in Michigan.

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