

Superintendents and Interest Groups

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U.S. citizens traditionally have abhorred politics at the schoolhouse door. At the turn of the 19th century, the office of superintendent was designed as a professional buffer to politics in education. Mid-20th century scholars of school politics recorded the persistence of politics in education and, more important, the diversity of political roles necessary for superintendents to appease local interests. This article reviews results from one mid-century investigation of superintendents' relationships with their school boards and communities. Survey results from 2,262 superintendents in office during the 1998-1999 school year revealed that superintendents persist in practicing professional decision making while at the same time recognizing the politically charged, interest-driven environment of their school districts and communities. The article concludes with recommendations for superintendents and educational administration programs to end their naïve, apolitical professional approach to community interest groups.

THE COINCIDENTAL development of the U.S. school superintendent and interest group politics begs deeper investigation. This article links a dormant study of the politics of the superintendency with institutional interpretation of interest group politics.

INTEREST GROUP POLITICS AND MICROPOLITICS OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS

The democratic foundation of U.S. public education ensures a political underpinning for nearly every activity in and around schools. Despite the essential polity of U.S. schools, both professional educators and citizens



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assign negative connotations to political behavior associated with education (Blase, 1986; 1989; Gutmann, 1989; Malen, 1995; Slater & Boyd, 1999). Nevertheless, the high demand, scarce resources, and rudimentary social service sustained in institutions of public education provide a contested arena for local politics and competing interests (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). As the axiom goes: All politics is local.

Definition of Interest Group Politics in Education

Education is hardly unique among service professions that offer a private good wrapped up in a public benefit. All the same, teachers yearn for a freedom of the profession, which allows academic judgement sans public interference (Ginsberg, 1997; Gutmann, 1989). The unique challenge for professional educators is the provision of a democratic service that also models democracy (Gutmann, 1989; Sykes, 1999). Such a challenge poses the dilemma of achieving an elite status of professional expertise among teachers and other educators while at the same time accommodating the competing interests of school constituencies without being elitist (Gutmann, 1989; Malen, 1995; Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

Competition among interests is the hallmark of U.S. education. Schooling's purposes are contested among subpopulations of the schools' communities (Goodlad, 1984; Gutmann, 1989; Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Stout, Tallerico, & Scribner, 1995). Individual rights are contested between and among students and staff members (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991; Lindle, 1994; Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 1988). Not surprisingly, school board politics provides a forum for airing these contests (Wirt & Kirst, 1992).

District Level Politics: Macro or Micro

The analysis of school district conflict has drawn the intermittent attention of political scholars (e.g., Burlingame, 1988; Iannacone, 1991; Scribner & Layton, 1994). The development of the superintendency inserted role conflict between newly minted educational administrators and school committee members in the late 19th century (Cistone, 1975; Konnert & Augenstein, 1990; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). During the early 20th century, conflict between school boards and superintendents was viewed as a by-product of civic corruption. The remedy was to eliminate politics by moving board member selection processes along a supposedly politically insulated spectrum of appointed boards through nonpartisan elections (Cronin, 1973; Iannacone & Lutz, 1995; Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

In the mid-20th century, scholars began to view the deliberations and electoral events surrounding school boards as a legitimate political arena (Burlingame, 1988). Nevertheless, serious scholars in political science preferred the

study of macroarenas at the state and national level (Iannacone, 1991). Few studies attempted explanation of the local preferences exhibited in school boards' electoral politics (Burlingame, 1988; Iannacone, 1991; Iannacone & Lutz, 1995). Hindsight suggests that prevailing paradigms of these times might have prevented political scientists from examining the ubiquitous tensions in local school boards because these were commonplace conditions. Other arenas, under this paradigm, established more high profile and exotic fodder for so-called serious researchers.

Although some scholars (e.g., Iannacone, 1991; Zeigler, Jennings, & Peak, 1974) have consistently argued for rigorous investigation of the political developments in the local politics of schooling, the shifting paradigm of new institutionalism permits analysis of local school politics through another perspective. With a shift in the scholarship among political scientists from gamesmanship and the notion of particularly individualized self-interest, new institutional theory also supports a practical model of collective action and collective interests (Clemens, 1997; Knight, 1992; Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Scott, 1992). These juxtapositions can be shown to be useful in the micropolitics of superintendent and school board relations.

New Institutionalism and Interest Group Micropolitics

A micropolitically favorable interpretation of new institutionalism suggests that an understanding of conflict between actors is fundamentally more than inept gamesmanship or dysfunctional organizational role conflict (Cibulka, 1996; Clemens, 1997; Rowan & Miskel, 1999). Instead, institutional theory suggests that the presence of conflict represents more than psychosocial incongruencies but also the by-products of consistent sociological conditions requiring collective adaptation by social institutions and interest groups (Cibulka, 1996; Clemens, 1997; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991).

Emerging concepts of interest group politics found in this volume and elsewhere press ideas about political agency beyond narrow expectations for individual attainment of limited goals (Clemens, 1997; Knight, 1992; Mitchell, 1996; Rowan & Miskel, 1999). The notion that interest groups represent collective advantages rather than serendipitous "free rides" is more extensively explained elsewhere in this volume.

SUPERINTENDENTS AND POLITICS

As the nature of educational reform shifted in form and texture, interest in complex issues associated with restructuring education increased (Murphy, 1990). Conventional management practices gave way to a better understanding of the political dynamics of the superintendency (Boyan, 1988). With

greater social diversity in ethnicity and race, the expectations for schooling have become increasingly complex; thus, today's school superintendents work in environments of participatory decision making, shared governance, and highly dynamic political interests (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). The traditions of the superintendency often mythologized the job as politics-free (Kowalski, 1995, 1999; Ortiz & Marshall, 1988).

History of the Superintendency

The superintendency owes much to the industrial revolution. Concomitant with the creation of mass education and secondary schools, the late 19th century and early 20th century produced the position of school superintendent as a civic homage to the corporate values of efficiency, scientific management, and hierarchical, apolitical professionalism (Callahan, 1967; Iannacone, 1982; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Yet, self-reports and scholarship exposed the environmental press that demanded the political attention of superintendents (Boyan, 1988; Boyd, 1974, 1976; Cuban, 1976; Iannacone & Lutz, 1970; McCarty & Ramsey, 1971; Zeigler et al., 1974).

Scholarship on Superintendents and Politics

Recent scholarship on politics in schools acknowledges nested arenas of political interests, alliances, and conflicts internal to schools and school districts (Malen, 1995). Yet, the political action focused on superintendents as a nexus of political interaction remains underreported and underpublished (Boyd, 1976; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Cuban, 1976; Iannacone & Lutz, 1995; Johnson, 1996). The tensions concerning power distribution pit the professionals over community wishes against the preservation of public good through the maintenance of community order (Burlingame, 1988; Tucker & Zeigler, 1980). More recent events in educational policy raise the specter of professionals as defenders of the status quo while communities push for educational innovations and accountability policies (Cibulka, 1999; Ogawa, Crowson, & Goldring, 1999).

BOARD AND ELECTION POLITICS

Certainly, the hand-to-hand combative democracy of school board deliberations embodies the cardinal virtue of local control in civic involvement (Iannacone & Lutz, 1995). Despite its raw example of open democracy, political analyses of electoral politics at the school district level are rare.

Two theories focused on board electoral politics depend on voter turnout data from mid-century. Zeigler and associates' (1974) decision-output theory described board electoral participation as an apolitical event given low com-

<i>Community Power Structure</i>	<i>School Board Characteristics</i>	<i>Role of Superintendent</i>
Dominated	Dominated	Functionary
Factional	Factional	Political strategist
Pluralistic	Status congruent	Professional adviser
Inert	Sanctioning	Decision maker

Figure 1. Community School Board Typology

petition for school board seats and low voter participation. Another interpretation of these phenomena suggests that one-time snapshots of voter turnout poorly explain decision-output theory (Iannacone & Lutz, 1995). On the other hand, dissatisfaction theory tied electoral processes to long-term analyses of community economic and value structures (Iannacone & Lutz, 1970). By focusing on the defeat of incumbent board members and the subsequent involuntary turnover of superintendents, Iannacone and Lutz (1970) identified salient features of communities that influenced school district leadership (Boyd, 1976; Burlingame, 1988). Questions of means of sustaining office as a superintendent are tied to understanding the nature of the community (Boyd, 1976; Iannacone & Lutz, 1995; McCarty & Ramsey, 1971).

COMMUNITY POLITICS AND SUPERINTENDENTS

Several decades ago, McCarty and Ramsey (1971) raised questions about superintendent and board of education relationships. They approached understanding superintendent-board relations through an analysis of community political structures. They assumed that board character aligns with community political structure, an assumption that Iannacone and Lutz (1970) had independently shown to be dynamic. McCarty and Ramsey presumed that the board and community alignment would shape the superintendent's role. They hypothesized that superintendents would adapt their leadership to fit the community and board types. Figure 1 depicts a community school board typology that shows the alignment of community, board, and superintendent characteristics as hypothesized by McCarty and Ramsey (1971).

As shown in Figure 1, a dominated community power structure produces a dominated school board and requires the superintendent to assume a functionary role. McCarty and Ramsey (1971) defined dominated communities by an elite power model in which a few individuals exert political influence top-down. Elite status could be achieved by economic dominance or by the historical dominance of a particular ethnic, religious, or racial group. Elite structures do not tolerate opposition.

Factional communities, in contrast, show relatively equal power distribution among several groups. Again, economic, religious, racial, or ethnic interests may coalesce these factions. According to McCarty and Ramsey (1971), in such communities, the boards are factional and the superintendent must work as a political strategist among the competing interests. A number of current scholars in the field of the politics of education postulate that more of today's communities evidence a factionalized context due to increasing community diversity among economic, religious, racial, or ethnic interests (e.g., Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Johnson, 1996; Malen, 1995; Murphy, 1990).

The most recent study of the superintendency from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) revealed that more than 90% of superintendents in the large urban districts (enrollments more than 25,000) identify interest groups exerting political pressure on board policy and operations. Better than 57% of all superintendents confirmed the presence of active community pressure groups. Superintendents report that these groups wield tactics that can split boards. Confirming McCarty and Ramsey's model, superintendents reported a balance among these groups, including community interests (31%), political affiliations (16%), religious ties (15%), and business sector (8%) (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000).

Figure 1 shows pluralistic communities that, according to McCarty and Ramsey (1971), also represent multiple interests. The distinction between pluralistic communities and factional ones are primarily those of process. In pluralistic communities, emergent issues galvanize the divisions in the community. This type of community requires a status congruent board, that is, one that is issue-oriented and responsive to the community without polarizing on issues. In such a community, the superintendent can act as a professional adviser, offering expert advice on the immediate issues.

The inert community is inherently conservative but also relatively inactive. The board accedes to the superintendent's proposals as long as such proposals do not disturb the status quo. According to McCarty and Ramsey's (1971) model, the superintendent may act as a decision maker as long as he or she respects the boundaries of latent community values.

McCarty and Ramsey (1971) emphasized the cross-sectional nature of their hypotheses and recognized the limitations of cross-sectional research. They used 51 communities to validate the four power structures in the model. The more common type seemed to be pluralistic (23) and the next common was the inert (13). No community remained as a particular type in perpetuity, although some tend to cycle through only a couple of the types represented in the model (Iannacone & Lutz, 1995; McCarty & Ramsey, 1971).

McCarty and Ramsey (1971) offered cautions about replicating their study, given the dynamics of community power structures. Boyd (1976) also critiqued the model, suggesting that McCarty and Ramsey's own data showed the so-named pluralistic communities to actually be homogeneous suburbs that practiced rational decision making probably due to the level of affluence and education associated with the general population.

Nevertheless, attention to community power structures offers a strong variable for aspiring and practicing superintendents to discern the nature of their work and role expectations (Burlingame, 1988). Because increasing demands for accountability and school excellence abound, superintendents require political acuity (Blumberg, 1985; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Johnson, 1996). McCarty and Ramsey's (1971) model offered a useful way to ascertain practicing superintendents' political savvy.

METHODS

Beginning in 1923, the Department of Superintendence of the National Education Association conducted the first in a series of nationwide studies of the superintendency that have been conducted each decade throughout the 20th century. *The 2000 Study of the American School Superintendency: A Look at the Superintendent of Education in the New Millennium* (Glass et al., 2000) continues a tradition of longitudinal research on the superintendency. The study provided current information on the superintendency to national, state, and local education policy makers, researchers, and the superintendents. The primary objectives of the study included (a) maintaining and updating trend data from earlier studies (1960, 1971, 1982, and 1992) and (b) providing an overview of the perspectives of district leaders. The 2000 study collected data on demographic characteristics of superintendents, including age, family status, education, and area of residence; relationships with board members; characteristics of school districts; selected community characteristics; superintendents' opinions on key problems and issues; participation of women and minorities in the superintendency; professional preparation; and career patterns of superintendents. Of the 2000 study's 86 questions, 10 focused on superintendents' perceptions with regard to their work with boards, interest groups, parent/citizen participation in decision and policy making, and school board characteristics.

SAMPLE SELECTION

The U.S. Department of Education provided a stratified random sample from a universe of 12,604 practicing superintendents in regular public school

Table 1
Distribution of District Enrollment Size

<i>District Groups</i>	<i>Group A</i>	<i>Group B</i>	<i>Group C</i>	<i>Group D</i>
Enrollment size (pupils)	≥ 25,000	≥ 3,000 and < 25,000	≥ 300 and < 3,000	< 300
<i>N</i>	222	1,175	3,065	874

districts in the Common Core of Data Public Education Agency Universe. This database generates summary information for school superintendents by type of district and total enrollment. Table 1 displays the distribution of selected districts within enrollment categories.

The 5,336 sample of participants drawn from a population of 12,604 was an adequate size and proportion to reflect the diversity of public school districts in the nation as well as gender and race of superintendents. Special attention was paid to ensure that district size, as well as superintendents' gender and racial diversity from previous studies were replicated to meet the objectives of maintaining trend data.

SURVEY IMPLEMENTATION AND RETURN RATE

The 2000 Study (Glass et al., 2000) was a mailed survey. In April 1999, survey instruments were mailed to an oversampled group of 5,336 U.S. superintendents. By June 1999, AASA forwarded all completed surveys for tabulation and analysis. The number of usable surveys was 2,262, for a return rate of 42.4%, that is, 89% of the projected sample or 18% of all U.S. superintendents. The greatest number of surveys was returned from the Great Lakes and Plains state regions, which also have the greatest number of school districts.

FINDINGS

Table 2 shows the responding superintendents' perceptions of their communities' types under the McCarty and Ramsey (1971) model and disaggregated by the enrollment size of the district. The predominant responses suggest that power structures are relatively aligned with community expectations. As was the case in 1971 for McCarty and Ramsey, the most common power structure would seem to be pluralistic. But, unlike the distribution for McCarty and Ramsey, the next most common perceived power structure was factional rather than inert.

Table 2
Superintendent Perceptions of School Board Members

<i>Perceptions</i>	<i>Group A</i>		<i>Group B</i>		<i>Group C</i>		<i>Group D</i>		<i>National Unweighted Profile</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Dominated	1	1.1	17	3.1	36	2.7	5	2.0	59	2.6
Factional	30	32.3	107	19.6	251	18.7	35	13.9	423	19.0
Pluralistic	59	63.4	374	68.6	868	64.6	170	67.7	1,471	65.9
Inert	3	3.2	47	8.6	188	14.0	41	16.3	279	12.5
Total	93	100	545	100	1,343	100	251	100	2,232	100

Note. The pupil enrollment size of each group is as follows: Group A = more than 25,000; Group B = 3,000-24,999; Group C = 300-2,999; and Group D = less than 300.

As shown in Table 2, very few of the superintendents perceived their community or boards as dominated or inert. These responses suggest that prevailing conditions of complex communities with diverse and divergent subpopulations affect most of the superintendents responding to *The 2000 Study* (Glass et al., 2000). The dynamics between factional and pluralistic communities are relatively subtle and perhaps dependent on superintendents' sensitivity to influential political activities. The 2000 study data also showed that female superintendents and superintendents of color were more likely to characterize their boards as dominated by elites than White or male superintendents. For example, 6% of minority superintendents viewed boards as elite-dominated as compared with 2.5% of their White colleagues. To a lesser degree, 3.4% of the female superintendents viewed boards dominated by elites as compared with 2.6% of their male counterparts. In addition, 27% of superintendents of color characterized boards as factional as compared with 19% of White superintendents. Female superintendents also reported more factional boards (24%) than did male (18.3%). Female superintendents and superintendents of color also predicted that their boards would be less likely to accept superintendents' recommendations and decisions than Whites and male superintendents predicted.

Table 3 shows superintendents' perceptions of their roles with their boards. Supporting earlier findings by McCarty and Ramsey (1971), most of the superintendents reported asserting proactive decision making and professional activities rather than political strategies. Comparisons between Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the potential for superintendent-board conflict.

Very few superintendents (2.6%) see their school boards as dominated by an elite group; however, fewer still (1.2%) enact their roles as a functionary, a

Table 3
How Superintendents Work With School Boards

<i>Perceptions</i>	<i>Group A</i>		<i>Group B</i>		<i>Group C</i>		<i>Group D</i>		<i>National Unweighted Profile</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Functionary	2	2.1	8	1.5	11	0.8	5	2.0	26	1.2
Political strategist	1	1.1	9	1.7	23	1.7	4	1.6	37	1.7
Professional adviser	31	33.0	245	45.0	644	48.0	143	57.4	1,063	47.7
Decision maker	60	63.8	282	51.8	665	49.5	97	39.0	1,104	49.5
Total	94	100	544	100	1,343	100	249	100	2,230	100

Note. The pupil enrollment size of each group is as follows: Group A = more than 25,000; Group B = 3,000-24,999; Group C = 300-2,999; and Group D = less than 300.

role that would be congruent with a dominated board. A superintendent serving in the capacity of a functionary would tend to identify with and take cues from the elites and would create a role of implementing rather than establishing board policy.

Nineteen percent of superintendents indicated that their boards were factional (see Table 2), but only 1.6% indicated that they adopted the role of political strategist (see Table 3). Superintendents who perform as political strategists are cognizant of board member linkages with segments of the community, ideological positions, contested issues, and the balance necessary to achieve a board majority in any policy direction.

Superintendents' perceptions indicated that nearly 66% serve in districts with status congruent boards that would require the superintendent's role to align with the board in the capacity of a professional adviser (see Table 2). Yet, as shown in Table 3, only 48% of superintendents described their role as a professional adviser. As a professional adviser, superintendents act as technical advisers, offering research-based and expert judgments.

The propensity of nearly 48% of these superintendents to designate their roles as decision makers in Table 3 while indicating that only 12.5% saw their boards in an inert, sanctioning power structure (see Table 2) also depicts an incongruity in role-enactment and community context. Administrative decision makers design and implement policy in direct conflict with most participative models of governance. The propensity of superintendents to act as decision makers was probed further. For example, although one third of superintendents described district level policy-making processes as shared

with the board of education, more than 89% indicated that boards of education accepted their policy recommendations 90% to 100% of the time.

Almost 50% of superintendents characterized their work with boards as being a decision maker and initiating action to maintain district effectiveness. Nearly 48% of superintendents characterized the way they work with boards of education as being a professional adviser. In other words, they saw themselves as presenting alternatives and consequences in an objective fashion. Superintendents' domination of the nature and direction of policy formation in school districts is contrary to the notion of a shared process. That more than 97% of superintendents reported roles incongruent with their perceptions of their communities' power structures supported earlier work by McCarty and Ramsey (1971). The tendency of superintendents to assume roles not aligned with community power distribution offers insight into the persistence of superintendent and board conflict and suggests some disturbing prognoses with the increasing insertion of interest group politics at the local level.

CONCLUSIONS

The documentation of superintendent and board conflict is enormous (Blumberg, 1985; Boyd, 1974, 1976; Burlingame, 1988; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Cistone, 1975; Cuban, 1976; Iannacone & Lutz, 1970; Johnson, 1996; Kowalski, 1995, 1999; Malen, 1995; McCarty & Ramsey, 1971; Murphy, 1990; Pitner & Ogawa, 1981; Tucker & Zeigler, 1980). Formal theories and street-level explanations for the tensions and pressures on superintendents and boards abound. A substantial body of these explanations points to the political influences embedded in communities that influence the dynamics between boards and superintendents. Nevertheless, data presented herein suggest that superintendents persist in adopting apolitical strategies that may, in fact, exacerbate tensions. This dogged adherence to politically naïve strategies seems especially shortsighted given the documentation of increasing interest group insertion in local school board activities (Cibulka, 1999).

One question unanswered in these data is why superintendents, in the face of abundant folklore and scholarship on the politics of the superintendency, repeatedly report adopting strategies ill suited to addressing political pressures. Speculation concerning these seemingly politically suicidal leadership strategies focuses on three possible explanations: (a) professional culture, (b) inadequate preparation, and (c) limitations on methods used to ascertain superintendents' roles in their work with boards.

Professional culture presents a number of constraints on superintendents' willingness to adopt or report political acuity. Despite the essentially public

nature of the superintendency, politics in education is viewed as inherently unprofessional (Cibulka, 1999; Kowalski, 1995, 1999; Sykes, 1999). Furthermore, models of strong leadership tend to be essentially male and may obviate any superintendent's reports of politically accommodating behavior (e.g., Bell, 1995; Brunner, 1999; Chase, 1988). For example, although serving as a subordinate functionary might be a politically astute role in a dominated community, many chief executive officers accustomed to proactive leadership models could have an aversion to reporting or working in such a fashion.

Practicing administrators attribute their sources of leadership models to preparation programs for school leaders. Most practitioner assessments of their preparation programs are decidedly negative (Haller, Brent, McNamara, & Rufus, 1994; Hannaway & Crowson, 1989; McCarthy, 1999; Murphy, 1992). Perhaps a problem with such preparation is a rather insubstantial approach to the political environment of school leadership as coursework anchored at universities tends toward more professionally acceptable titles such as school-community relations rather than meatier attention to the politics of education (Layton & Scribner, 1989). Practitioner-designed programs offer no more significant approaches to the complex dimensions of political influence and school leadership. Such programs prefer standards and topics that barely address politics as part of a miscellaneous collection of environmental influences (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996; Hoyle, English, & Steffy, 1985, 1990; Thomson, 1993). The argument for such approaches states that the core of schooling is instruction (Murphy & Louis, 1999; Murphy, Shipman, & Pearlman, 1997). Yet, in education, calls for professional accountability derive from strong democratic ideology concerning political accountability (Cibulka, 1999; Dahl, 1982; Scribner, Reyes, & Fusarelli, 1995; Stout et al., 1995; Sykes, 1999). Political accountability is to instructional accountability as local control is to the design of curriculum (Stout et al., 1995; Sykes, 1999). Practical realities suggest that school superintendents cannot deny the role that politics and interest groups play in the core of their professional work.

However, nearly three decades after McCarty and Ramsey's (1971) investigation of the patterns of political influence communities exert on the work of superintendents, the fact that the responses from today's superintendents follow nearly the same patterns raises some interesting questions. Clearly, the survey method may not reveal the full scope of superintendents' roles in addressing board and community politics. Today's data confirm the rising influence of interest group politics on the work of superintendents. But the methods reported here were too limited to ascertain the acuity with which superintendents may attend to political demands. Noticeably, the

professional culture of the superintendency sways the responses superintendents give on how they handle factional communities and boards. Perhaps other methods may yield more definitive insights into the political work of superintendents.

Although the considerable influence of community interests on superintendent-board relations is well established by several decades of research, persisting evidence suggests that school leaders may not be well equipped for their inherently political roles. Given current evidence of the volatile politics of diversity and interest groups, an open line of research may be the pattern of superintendent political strategies in addressing collective ideologies and tactics employed by burgeoning local interest groups.

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