Moms for Liberty is growing in Wisconsin as critics call them extremists

*The parental rights organization has built membership from groups that formed during the pandemic and is looking to shape policy and elections*

**By Rachel Hale**

*Wisconsin Watch*

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At July’s Wood County chapter meeting of Moms for Liberty — a growing, national conservative organization that has drawn scrutiny for its extreme rhetoric on hot-button issues — the discussion turned to a topic that had been decided 30 years ago: whether the local high school should have a valedictorian.

The Marshfield School District discontinued the practice in 1993 on a 4-3 vote partly due to concerns that it put too much pressure on students. Since 2010 the district has recognized the top 5% of graduating seniors, but has stopped publicly ranking students by GPA.

For some parents, it was a reminder that school policies didn’t reflect their values.

“The pushback on it is that whole ‘Well, we don't want to exclude someone,’ ” said Mary Schueller, the Wood County Moms for Liberty chair who graduated from Marshfield High School in 1995. “Well, not everybody gets a participation ribbon for valedictorian and salutatorian. They worked really hard for that.”

“That's the sort of stuff we're fighting,” she added.

Moms for Liberty has attracted condemnation for their promotion of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, opposition to race-focused history lessons and calls to ban books they deem inappropriate for children.

But in Wisconsin and elsewhere their ranks are growing, bolstered by the concerns of parents like Schueller who got a look under the hood of their local schools during COVID and now want a more direct role in their children’s education. That includes removing books from school libraries members deem offensive or inappropriate for children.

The group in June was [categorized](https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/moms-liberty?gclid=Cj0KCQjw8NilBhDOARIsAHzpbLCDIlsMiG5uLXV7XRFt5RtPB2vQo4VC66DuPUQrnffwFXDzxWpdcIQaAh5fEALw_wcB) as an anti-government extremist group in the Southern Poverty Law Center’s 2022 [Year in Hate & Extremism report](https://www.splcenter.org/year-hate-extremism-2022), which [stated](https://www.splcenter.org/year-hate-extremism-2022/introduction) that the group’s “primary goals are to fuel right-wing hysteria and to make the world a less comfortable or safe place for certain students — primarily those who are Black, LGBTQ or who come from LGBTQ families.”

At the Wood County chapter meeting, Marie Rogerson, national executive director of program development, said the group experienced a large membership spike shortly after the SPLC report.

Since it started in January 2021 Moms for Liberty says it has expanded to 285 chapters in 46 states with over 125,000 members. In Wisconsin, chapters in Kenosha, Marathon, Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Polk, Rock, St. Croix, Vilas, Washington, Winnebago and Wood County have popped up over the past two years.

It’s hard to pinpoint how many members are active in Wisconsin — the Wood County and Ozaukee County chapters estimated that there are 400 and 6,000 members in their groups, respectively. A national spokesperson said they do not have updated state membership numbers.

The national group has remained unapologetic in the face of criticism. At the group’s second summit in Philadelphia co-founder Tiffany Justice [defended](https://twitter.com/highbrow_nobrow/status/1677716097494134784) an Indiana chapter that quoted Adolf Hitler in its [newsletter](https://apnews.com/article/moms-for-liberty-adolf-hitler-newsletter-quote-bcce698e901b9e782970030ccd710512) and later [apologized](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2023/08/did-a-moms-for-liberty-chapter-quote-hitler/).

“One of our moms in a newsletter quotes Hitler. I stand with that mom,” she said to applause.

“If @Moms4Liberty is a ‘hate group,’ add me to the list,” GOP presidential candidate and former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley [tweeted](https://twitter.com/NikkiHaley/status/1666608479480455171?lang=en) a few days later.

The group planned to visit Milwaukee ahead of the first Republican presidential debate on Aug. 23. Moms for Liberty is hosting a discussion titled "Giving Parents a Voice” with U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson. They initially planned to host a candidate town hall event but pivoted after they said the venue, the Italian Community Center, [canceled the event](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2023/08/10/moms-for-liberty-plans-milwaukee-presidential-town-hall-before-debate/70566796007/).

**Membership is spreading from Southeast Wisconsin throughout the state**

Moms for Liberty first made headlines in Wisconsin two years ago amid mask mandates and social distancing measures, when members in Kenosha [shut down a school board meeting](https://www.cbs58.com/news/kenosha-unified-school-district-reschedules-board-meeting-after-spacing-concerns-leads-to-early-adjournment) holding signs that said “We do not Co-Parent with the Government.”

One of the Kenosha members, [State Rep. Amanda Nedweski, R-Pleasant Prairie](https://legis.wisconsin.gov/assembly/61/Nedweski/about/), went on to run for [county board](https://www.kenoshacounty.org/2189/Election-Results-for-452022) and [state Assembly](https://ballotpedia.org/Amanda_Nedweski). Nedweski helped lead an unsuccessful September 2021 [recall petition](https://kenoshanews.com/news/local/education/efforts-to-recall-kusd-school-board-president-fall-short-unseating-incumbents-in-april-election-groups/article_5c292beb-9a34-5488-b1dc-b8c406e7d9b4.html) against Kenosha School Board President Yolanda Santos Adams, which boosted her profile ahead of her county board election.

"Is this losing steam? Is this going to stop? No, it's only going to gain momentum as we move forward," Nedweski told the [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2021/12/02/school-board-recall-organizers-moms-liberty-ready-more/8766970002/) in December 2021 following the failed recall, adding that one of her goals is “to have a Moms for Liberty T-shirt in every school board meeting across the country.”

In Ozaukee County, a [recall effort](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/us/republicans-schools-critical-race-theory.html) led by Scarlett Johnson and Amber Schroeder against four Mequon-Thiensville School Board members in November 2021 [raised nearly $50,000](https://www.jsonline.com/story/communities/northshore/news/mequon/2021/11/02/mequon-thiensville-school-board-recall-election-results-november-2-2021/6250162001/), with Republican donor Richard Uihlein donating to the campaign and Former Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch helping organize outreach.

The effort didn’t unseat any incumbents but the group morphed into Moms for Liberty when Johnson and Schroeder formed an Ozaukee chapter in July 2022. Johnson serves as the [Republican Party of Ozaukee County](https://www.ozaukeerepublicans.com/contactus)’s second vice chair and Schroeder is a member at large.

Johnson this past spring [lost a bid](https://www.jsonline.com/story/communities/northshore/news/mequon/2022/04/05/mequon-thiensville-school-board-election-results-april-5-2022/7217563001/) for the Mequon-Thiensville School Board, receiving 21% of the vote.

Sitting at a bench behind the Frank L. Weyenberg Library in Mequon, where Johnson and Schroeder spent summer 2021 collecting recall signatures, they reflected on the chapter’s growth.

“A lot of families do go to church around here and a lot of families do have very freedom-loving, patriotic, constitution-loving values, and if you're going to come and start taking those away from people, you're going to tick off a lot of people,” Schroeder said.

Schroeder and Johnson were both previously stay-at-home moms, and Schroeder pulled her younger kids out of public school during the pandemic. Most Moms for Liberty members “weren't paying attention 10 years ago or five years ago,” Schroeder said. “COVID-19 really helped open everybody's eyes because our students started struggling.”

**Wisconsin strategy mirrors national movement**

Moms for Liberty was founded in Florida by former school board members Justice and Tina Descovich, as well as Bridget Ziegler, a current Sarasota County school board member. The group started as a way to fight against COVID-19 safety protocols in schools and gained wider attention with their appearance on the [Rush Limbaugh Show](https://www.mediamatters.org/critical-race-theory/how-right-wing-media-launched-moms-liberty) in January 2021.

Similarly in Wisconsin, a surge of conservative groups that initially organized amid pandemic mask mandates and distancing restrictions formed the basis for Moms for Liberty. The Kenosha chapter of Moms for Liberty was one of 73 groups that signed onto an August 2021 [Wisconsin United For Freedom](https://www.facebook.com/WisconsinUnitedForFreedom/posts/798159237526614/) [open letter](https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/bb1e0437-9b1d-4ffc-a72e-270dba6f7a3a/downloads/Biden%20Evers%20Media%20Release.pdf?ver=1628096284861) against mandatory COVID-19 vaccines. Members across those groups, as well as members of [MTSD Parents for Moving School Forward](https://www.facebook.com/groups/433192387575165/) in Mequon and [Concerned Citizens of Marshfield](https://www.facebook.com/concernedcitizensofmarshfield), have funneled into Moms for Liberty, according to Johnson, Schroeder and Scheuller.

Johnson added that conservative media, such as [Wisconsin Right Now](https://www.wisconsinrightnow.com/scarlett-johnson-2/), the [Vicki McKenna Show](https://www.iheart.com/podcast/139-vicki-mckenna-27246267/episode/the-vicki-mckenna-show-three-120888594/) on 1310 WIBA and 1130 WISN and the [Meg Ellefson Show](https://on.soundcloud.com/pPYXA) on the WSAU Wisconsin Morning News, helped give the group a platform to grow.

In Marshfield, the valedictorian issue was first brought to [Tara Tremelling](https://www.marshfieldnewsherald.com/story/news/politics/elections/2023/03/13/marshfield-school-board-candidates-on-the-spring-2023-ballot/69975768007/), a Moms for Liberty-[endorsed](https://www.onfocus.news/moms-for-liberty-endorses-four-candidates-for-marshfield-school-board/) board member who graduated in 2003, by Dillon Scheuer, a Northwestern University freshman who graduated in May from Marshfield High School.

“He was feeling like he had nowhere to really take the topic,” Tremelling said.

In an interview, Scheuer pointed to Moms for Liberty’s national [Constitution challenge](https://www.momsforliberty.org/constitution/#:~:text=I%20commit,before%20September%2017th.) and to the Marshfield group’s partnering with [The 917 Society](https://www.917society.org/) to provide pocketbook constitutions for students as an example of what he believes is positive work. Constitution day on Sept. 17 has been a public school observance day in [Wisconsin](https://dpi.wi.gov/education-events/events/us-constitution-day-2021) since 1987.

“If someone thinks Moms for Liberty, what they jump to right away is ‘Oh, book burnings, and they hate the LGBTQ community,’ ” Scheuer said. “I think that's something that gets a lot of press attention because it gets people fired up. … It's less sexy to say ‘Hey, these people want school board accountability and these people want everyone to understand the Constitution.’ ”

Community members have voiced their concerns about the chapter’s growing presence in Marshfield. At their [June](https://videoplayer.telvue.com/player/dPcc0-8Tpa1TXgczFV-MDZZSIEysEfp3/media/808193?autostart=false&showtabssearch=true&fullscreen=false) school board [meeting](https://www.livebinders.com/play/play?id=1293142), one parent speaking about Moms for Liberty said she was worried that community members didn’t know the group’s background and cited the SPLC report.

“I want us all to be aware of the possible motivation that could be behind some of the things right here in Marshfield schools,” said Nicole Johnson, who is a member of LGBTQ+ advocacy group [PFLAG Marshfield](https://pflag.org/chapter/marshfield/). “Just because they may say they are doing these things because of parents' rights, and they find buzzwords that can make the public think things are happening in the schools that are not does not mean they're speaking for all parents.”

“Just because you are loud and angry doesn’t make you correct,” she added.

**Looking ahead to elections and shaping public policy**

In 2022 more than half of the 500 candidates the group endorsed in school board elections were elected to seats across the country, according to the [Associated Press](https://apnews.com/article/moms-for-liberty-school-board-races-2024-5311cc11cd657a04e233216ac783d8f3). This past April cycle in Wisconsin, eight of the 27 candidates it [endorsed](https://www.momsforliberty.org/endorsements/) were elected, seven of whom were to Ozaukee County school boards.

At the group’s second summit held June 29 through July 2, the fight against “woke” rhetoric took center stage and served as a platform for 2024 GOP hopefuls to champion their values. Speakers included Haley, former President Donald Trump, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, former Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson and entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy.

“I think parents are going to help decide this next election more than ever. And I think that's why at the Moms for Liberty summit in Philadelphia, we had every single (Republican) candidate speak,” Johnson said. “They know that they need to come talk to the mama bears.”

The summit provided [training](https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/moms-for-libertys-national-summit-5-takeaways-for-educators/2023/06?s_kwcid=AL!6416!3!602270476281!!!g!!&utm_source=goog&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=ew+dynamic+recent&ccid=dynamic+ads+recent+articles&ccag=recent+articles+dynamic&cckw=&cccv=dynamic+ad&gclid=Cj0KCQjw8NilBhDOARIsAHzpbLBcQ6G8ittfROVqP2NLpYD7qIgGSgpAKio37Jz5YN-ETDLVzyuxesEaAuApEALw_wcB) on how to win school board elections and included [sessions](https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2023/06/29/moms-liberty-summit-injects-extremism-mainstream) on topics like “Comprehensive Sex Education: Sex Ed or Sexualization” and “Protecting Kids from Gender Ideology,” according to SPLC.

During the conference, Justice told the [AP](https://apnews.com/article/moms-for-liberty-school-board-races-2024-5311cc11cd657a04e233216ac783d8f3) that Moms for Liberty will use its political action committee to [endorse](https://youtu.be/cON8et8KU2o) candidates for state education boards, state superintendents and local school board races across the country.

The group in Wisconsin is in the candidate recruitment process for the spring 2024 school board elections and spring 2025 Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction election. They have worked with the conservative Leadership Institute on candidate and recruitment training, Johnson said.

Asked what solutions Moms for Liberty supports for closing Wisconsin’s huge racial disparities in education outcomes, Johnson, who is Hispanic and grew up in a poor area of Milwaukee, said the state needs less diversity coordinators and more reading and math specialists.

“Since we've started to focus on equity and not excellence, we have seen that gap grow because we're not giving kids what they need,” Johnson said. “We are focused too much on virtue signaling and not actually doing the virtuous thing, which is educating children.”

The most recent [National Assessment of Educational Progress](https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2022-61.pdf) showed Wisconsin had the [largest gap among the states](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2022/10/24/naep-report-card-wisconsin-has-widest-score-gap-between-black-and-white-students/69581393007/) between white and Black student test scores, though those disparities have existed for decades.

Johnson and Schroeder said one of Moms for Liberty's primary goals in Wisconsin is shaping public policy. They recently formed a Moms for Liberty state legislative committee, which Johnson chairs, that will help them prepare to support legislation this fall.

They plan to testify in support of [legislation](https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2023/related/proposals/sb378) that would prohibit puberty blockers for minors and ban transgender athletes from participating in athletic teams designated for females and require schools to designate teams as falling into male, female, or co-ed categories. Democratic Gov. Tony Evers has [vowed to veto it](https://captimes.com/news/government/evers-vows-vetoes-of-legislation-targeting-transgender-wisconsinites/article_89e78a99-3cad-5861-a582-14c4eae41bf5.html).

Johnson, Schroeder and Nedweski were among those who testified in support of a Republican-supported [Parent Bill of Rights](https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2021/related/proposals/ab963) that Evers [vetoed](https://captimes.com/news/education/wisconsin-parent-bill-of-rights/article_2d5184d9-a840-5b8f-816f-7db0c7aa9504.html) last year. Provisions requiring students to have parental authorization to use different names and pronouns in school have since been added to school board district policies in [Kettle Moraine](https://www.jsonline.com/story/communities/lake-country/news/delafield/2022/07/29/kettle-moraine-bans-pride-and-political-flags-classrooms/10173368002/), [Arrowhead](https://www.jsonline.com/story/communities/lake-country/news/hartland/2022/09/16/arrowhead-students-need-parental-permission-change-names-pronouns/10378343002/), [Waukesha](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2023/01/13/waukesha-school-board-approves-contested-parental-rights-resolution/69799136007/), [Germantown](https://www.jsonline.com/story/communities/northwest/news/2022/11/04/germantown-student-challenges-school-districts-transgender-policy/69607853007/) and [Muskego-Norway](https://www.jsonline.com/story/communities/waukesha/2023/01/18/muskego-norway-school-board-approves-controversial-pronoun-policy/69818535007/).

On July 12, the Waukesha School District fired [first grade teacher Melissa Tempel](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2023/07/12/what-to-know-about-the-events-leading-to-melissa-tempels-firing/70249191007/) in the months after she publicly criticized the district's request that she remove from a school concert the song ["Rainbowland,"](https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/mileycyrus/rainbowland.html) The song celebrates diversity and encourages everyone to “dig down deep inside (and) brush the judgment and fear aside.” The district [said it](https://www.fox6now.com/news/rainbowland-miley-cyrus-waukesha-heyer) "could be perceived as controversial."

That morning, Johnson and Schroeder lined up outside of the district’s offices to oppose a silent protest of the firing organized by the Alliance for Education Waukesha.

“There are only two genders,” read a sign that Johnson posted a photo of on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/scarlett4kids/status/1679172076194742272/photo/3) alongside a selfie of her and Schroeder with the caption: “supporting the Waukesha School District as they work to keep ideology and politics out of first-grade classrooms.”

John Norcross, a parent and community organizer in the Arrowhead School District​​, was there to support Tempel. He has tracked connections between school board policies and political organizations since the pandemic and said Moms for Liberty has more national strategy and resources behind it than most organizations.

“There's no equivalent from a party perspective,” Norcross said.“Democrats aren't doing it, whether because they don't want to or can't. … But what's countering it is what I call a communitarian response.”

**Book removals in the works**

Earlier this year, a [111-page Moms for Liberty document](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BNfax73kzqWwMMfkjcopgEXMDBD-fr4O/view) identified several books, many dealing with gender identity and race, that they deemed inappropriate in schools. Among others, the list included Maia Kobabe’s “[Gender Queer,](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Dr6z4Tv-ToNWosXB4JQ4zK4973JdhEuk/view)” Toni Morrison’s “[The Bluest Eye](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YoH9MrBq030EZp4WzgGi_RQC_6S7Sl0n/view)” and Margaret Atwood’s “[The Handmaid's Tale](https://drive.google.com/file/u/1/d/1KnMSGf465CIJlEuhzFXhfQWjT2Ve627S/view?usp=drivesdk).”

The nonprofit freedom of expression organization PEN America’s [Index of School Book Bans](https://pen.org/report/banned-in-the-usa-state-laws-supercharge-book-suppression-in-schools/) found 1,477 instances of individual books banned in fall of 2022 and connected Moms for Liberty to 58% of all advocacy-led book bans around the country. Despite their growing efforts, a 2022 [poll](https://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2022/03/large-majorities-voters-oppose-book-bans-and-have-confidence-libraries) found that nearly three-quarters of parents oppose book banning. Critics have raised [concerns](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/01/books/maia-kobabe-gender-queer-book-ban.html) that banning books that explore gender and sexuality sends a harmful message to kids struggling with their identity.

Moms for Liberty members say they are [“curating”](https://www.newsnationnow.com/cuomo-show/moms-for-liberty-founders-book-bans-school-libraries/) books in school libraries, not banning them. But groups like the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Library Association and PEN describe the removal of those books as a ban.

So far in Wisconsin removing books from schools hasn’t been at the forefront of Moms for Liberty’s goals, but chapters are looking to remove books they deem inappropriate for schools in the future.

In Marshfield, Schueller in May 2022 sent a request to remove four books — “[Lucky](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1c88-oA0f6FH2rz2aAPGegJgS-6Y7N8_v/view),” “[Push](http://booklooks.org/data/files/Book%20Looks%20Reports/P/Push.pdf),” “[Sold](http://booklooks.org/data/files/Book%20Looks%20Reports/S/Sold.pdf)” and “[Tricks](http://booklooks.org/data/files/Book%20Looks%20Reports/T/Tricks.pdf)” — from Marshfield High School’s library but did not respond to the school’s response that outlined the process for moving forward with the complaint. She said she plans to wait until more group members can actively review the district’s books.

Tremelling hopes to eventually remove from Marshfield’s school libraries several titles dealing with violence, sexual nudity, child rape and profanity, including “[Push](http://booklooks.org/data/files/Book%20Looks%20Reports/P/Push.pdf),” “[Sold](http://booklooks.org/data/files/Book%20Looks%20Reports/S/Sold.pdf),” “[Tricks](http://booklooks.org/data/files/Book%20Looks%20Reports/T/Tricks.pdf),” “[Damsel](http://booklooks.org/data/files/Book%20Looks%20Reports/D/Damsel.pdf),” “[A Court of Mist and Fury](http://booklooks.org/data/files/Book%20Looks%20Reports/C/A%20Court%20of%20Mist%20and%20Fury.pdf),” “[A Court of Frost and Starlight](http://booklooks.org/data/files/Book%20Looks%20Reports/C/A%20Court%20of%20Frost%20and%20Starlight.pdf),” “[A Court of Wings and Ruin](http://booklooks.org/data/files/Book%20Looks%20Reports/C/A%20Court%20of%20Wings%20and%20Ruin.pdf),” “[Crank](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1n7IN09l4nkNXjHVpmto1wKR5m_f2jy3F/view)” and “[Infandous](http://booklooks.org/data/files/Book%20Looks%20Reports/I/infandous.pdf).”

Half a dozen [scholarly historian groups](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/28/arts/design/moms-liberty-museum-american-revolution.html) criticized the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia for renting space to the group ahead of the national summit. The American Historical Association wrote in a [letter](https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-sends-letter-opposing-museum-of-the-american-revolutions-hosting-of-moms-for-liberty-event-%28june-2023%29) that Moms for Liberty “has vigorously advocated censorship and harassment of history teachers, banning history books from libraries and classrooms, and legislation that renders it impossible for historians to teach with professional integrity without risking job loss and other penalties.”

Johnson, who attended the national summit, said protesters there told her that she deserved to be raped and murdered and that they wanted to kill her children. She called it the “most vile, horrific thing” she had ever witnessed.

"Basically, if you're not on the left, you're a hate group,” Johnson said of the criticism the group receives. “You're akin to a very extreme, something horrific like the KKK, just because you're a Republican. And that’s wrong. And that is demoralizing, and it's also dehumanizing. And that's where we have to be careful. We should not dehumanize people that we don't agree with."

**‘Proxies for a national culture war’**

Liberal groups, including [Stop Moms for Liberty](https://www.stopmomsforliberty.com/), [Defense of Democracy](https://defenseofdemocracy.org/about/) and [Red Wine & Blue](https://redwine.blue/bbb/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw2eilBhCCARIsAG0Pf8v82_S30MwNVYYSrOS4EDvff_85OgvVmH_KtwijB0LSEjg80Gu2xMMaAmyDEALw_wcB), have formed to counter Moms for Liberty, mobilizing suburban, Democratic voters at the school board level and starting campaigns related to racial equity and stopping book bans.

Critics say the politicization of school boards is creating a hostile environment for marginalized students. Elisabeth Lambert, founder and principal of the Wisconsin Education Law and Policy Hub, has represented students in discrimination cases against school districts across the state, including in [Chippewa Falls](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2021/06/11/former-students-claim-discriminatory-culture-chippewa-falls-schools/7621183002/), [Cedarburg](https://www.jsonline.com/story/communities/northshore/news/cedarburg/2022/05/02/judge-cedarburg-schools-must-reinvestigate-racial-harassment-claims/9585585002/) and [Burlington](https://journaltimes.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/elected-racine-county-official-pays-34-500-to-settle-lawsuit-filed-by-former-anti-racism/article_32d1c0c6-3dcf-11ed-b6f4-2fc1fdfedc16.html). She said her clients often receive “astounding harassment” that reduces what they’re experiencing to a “culture war narrative,” with those who speak out labeled as “anti-American” or a “corrupting influence.”

“They're sort of viewing these local peoples as proxies for a national culture war and so it's really not about problem-solving at all,” Lambert said. “It's just about feeling like part of whatever team you happen to identify with, and using these other folks in your community and the fact that you share a public school system as an opportunity to perform your allegiance to that national agenda.”

Melissa Deckman, a political scientist who studies gender, religion and the role of women in conservative politics, said that Moms for Liberty’s growth is a response to the country’s growing diversity in terms of race, ethnicity and gender, specifically citing that [one in five Gen Z adults identify as LGBT](https://news.gallup.com/poll/389792/lgbt-identification-ticks-up.aspx).

“Those sorts of things are challenging to the worldview of conservative Christian women who don't like these changes in society,” Deckman said, noting how they’ve utilized the unique historical position of the pandemic to their advantage. “It really has allowed them to organize and pretty effectively tap into a lot of parents who were unhappy about COVID and those restrictions, but now, of course, it has spread to concerns about critical race theory or transgender policies or LGBT policies.”

Ahead of the 2024 election cycle, Norcross said he’s concerned about the group gaining more funding and getting more active throughout Wisconsin and is worried their anti-LGBTQ rhetoric will negatively impact vulnerable groups. With the suburban Milwaukee counties growing increasingly Democratic, he sees conservatives “driven by a fear that their local area is changing.”

“They're losing Republican suburbs because of the demographic changes,” Norcross said. “They don't want to lose that and they've seen this as a play to get it.”

Looking ahead, Johnson said the group is focused on growing its membership in northern Wisconsin and believes there will be a burst of membership over the next year.

“With all of the national attention that's going to be on Wisconsin because we are having the Republican convention here, by the summer, I would think that we're going to see huge growth in Moms for Liberty,” Johnson said.

*The nonprofit Wisconsin Watch (*[*www.WisconsinWatch.org*](http://www.wisconsinwatch.org)*) collaborates with WPR, PBS Wisconsin, other news media and the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Journalism and Mass Communication. All works created, published, posted or disseminated by Wisconsin Watch do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of UW-Madison or any of its affiliates.*