

Walker J L. The diffusion of innovations among the American states.
Amer Polit. Sci. Rev. 63:880-9, 1969.
[University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI]

Decision makers in the American states tend to emulate policy innovations adopted in other states that they regard as legitimate points of comparison. As a result of this decision rule, regional clusters of states have emerged whose policies closely resemble each other [The *Science Citation Index*® (SCI®) and the *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI®) indicate that this paper has been cited in over 205 publications, one of the most cited in this journal]

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One of my first duties at the University of Michigan was to oversee an internship program in Lansing, the state capital. I was in Lansing almost every week and often spent hours between meetings with nothing to do. As much out of boredom as for any scientific purpose, I often visited legislative hearings while waiting for my next appointment.

Discussions in these hearings about the adoption of new legislation usually led immediately to comparisons with the experiences of other states. Bureau chiefs were almost always asked by legislators, many of whom were attorneys, if there were any precedents for the new programs that they were proposing. It appeared that the legislators were trying to control the administrators, in sorting out the many complex issues before them, by emulating the decisions of legislators in other states who had already dealt with similar problems.

Legislators were much more inclined to accept a new idea if it had been given a trial in a state that was similar to Michigan. The

proposals made by the civil servants were derived from specialized publications and conferences sponsored by their professional societies. The legislators were acting as gatekeepers for proposals arising from these expert networks and only approved of innovations that had proved successful in the states they regarded as legitimate points of comparison. I reasoned that if legislators were employing this same decision rule in all states, a stable pattern of adoption of new ideas must exist, perhaps with the more cosmopolitan states acting as leaders, and the more parochial ones acting as followers.

I believe that the paper has been cited so often because it provided a simple way to derive new meaning from the hundreds of otherwise unrelated case studies of governmental policy making that had been published over the years. The paper drew upon studies of individual political actors and also upon studies of national patterns of policy making. These two bodies of literature before had seemed unrelated. It was a quantitative study that appeared just as quantitative research was becoming popular in this field, and it included a convenient innovation score for each state that many other scholars were able to employ in their own research.

Several people also cited the paper because they thought it was wrong. Some expressed doubts about whether similar bills enacted decades apart could serve as legitimate bases of comparison, and others, while agreeing that distinct patterns of emulation exist, argued that the patterns differ within each policy area in state government.¹⁻³ The paper was also cited in newspaper editorials in New York, Wisconsin, and California, which bragged about their leadership, and in Nevada and New Hampshire, where they noted that a scientific study had proved what they knew all along—that they were living in one of the most backward states in the Union!

1 Gray V. Innovation in the states: a diffusion study. *Amer Polit Sci Rev* 67:1174-85, 1973 (Cited 65 times)

2 Walker J L. Problems in the research on the diffusion of policy innovations. *Amer Polit Sci Rev* 67:1186-91, 1973

3 Gray V. Rejoinder to comment by J L Walker. *Amer Polit Sci Rev* 67:1192-3, 1973