

States that heavily invest in legislature more influential in public policy

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Around election season, some politicians try to pass more legislation to give off an air of productivity for voters.

But could their policies be impacting more than just their constituents?

Penn State professor Bruce Desmarais spearheaded research into the connection between how states influence each other in [public policy](#).

"Researchers in [political science](#) and public policy for at least 60 years have tried to understand the ways in which different policies spread across states," said Desmarais, associate professor of political science, Institute for CyberScience faculty co-hire, and the William and Monica DeGrandis-McCourtney Early Career Professor in Political Science. "For about 55 of those 60 years, it was assumed that states follow their geographic neighbors in adopting policies. For example, if New York adopts a policy, Pennsylvania's more likely to do it."

While Desmarais and fellow researchers believed that geography was the largest factor in how a policy is spread from state to state, the data told a different story.

Using more than 100 years of public policy data to pinpoint patterns between any states adopting similar policies, Desmarais found that sizable states, such as California, New York or Florida with the income to invest in creating full-time legislative positions, are generally the starting points for any new legislation.

States that do not have highly professionalized legislatures seek out these policies to continue innovation. The influence is strong to the point that, oftentimes, large portions of powerful states' legislation are directly copied and inserted into another state's adopted policy, according to Desmarais.

"The states vary a lot with how many days their legislators are in session throughout the year and whether their legislators are truly professionalized," Desmarais said. "In New York or California, working as a state legislator is a full-time job that you get a salary for. If you're in New Hampshire, then that is more so a volunteer legislator. They serve very short periods of time and they don't get paid nearly enough to serve that as their full-time job."

While the data showcased that geography was not as significant of an influence as once believed, accounting for approximately just 20 percent of the public policy relationships identified, it also showed a shift in where the influencers are located.

The hubs for public policy influence have moved out of the Northeast, where Massachusetts was noted as innovative through the 1970s. Large western and southern states like California and Florida are gaining a foothold in influence, as well as states that have received a population influx like Arizona.

Desmarais said that information like this can be used by advocacy groups to figure where to spend their lobbying efforts in hopes of creating the biggest impression possible for their policy.

"If you want to promote a [policy](#) within the states, then you're probably better off focusing your efforts in a few influential [states](#) to get those chains of dominos falling, instead of spreading your advocacy efforts evenly across the [states](#) or to focus them regionally and try to get neighbors looking at each other," Desmarais said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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