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Policy Diffusion Dynamics in America

Policy Diffusion Dynamics in America integrates research from agenda setting and epidemiology to model factors that shape the speed and scope of public policy diffusion. Drawing on a data set of more than 130 policy innovations, the research demonstrates that the “laboratories of democracy” metaphor for incremental policy evaluation and emulation is insufficient to capture the dynamic process of policy diffusion in America. A significant subset of innovations triggers outbreaks—the extremely rapid adoption of innovation across states. The book demonstrates how variation in the characteristics of policies, the political and institutional traits of states, and differences among interest-group carriers interact to produce distinct patterns of policy diffusion.

Graeme Boushey is Robert Wood Johnson Scholar in Health Policy Research at the University of Michigan, on leave from his post as Assistant Professor of Political Science at San Francisco State University. His teaching and research are organized around practical and theoretical questions of state and federal policy making. He recently coauthored a review of individual and organizational decision making for the *Handbook of Public Policy*, and he also has coauthored an article in the *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* on immigration policy in federations.

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To my parents, Homer and Virginia Boushey

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Acknowledgments

This work explores the diffusion of public policy innovations in the United States. I became interested in the topic as a graduate student at the University of Washington, where I was introduced to research on policy making in federations. Although I appreciated the purported benefits of decentralized policy making, I could not reconcile ideal models of innovation and diffusion with my experiences growing up in California, where many of the prominent policies that the state adopted in the 1990s did not match the neat, cost-benefit decision-making processes outlined by researchers of an earlier generation. As I began to read research on agenda setting, it became clear that the process of public policy innovation and diffusion is dynamic, one in which incremental decision making is often interrupted by sudden moments of attention-driven policy change. I became interested in identifying what determines the pattern of innovation diffusion, whether by gradual increments or by sudden outbreak.

In pursuing this interest, I could not help but notice that a similar pattern emerged in my own work – long periods of gradual improvement interrupted by new insights and sudden productivity. Unlike models of the policy process, the causes of these breakthroughs are easy to explain. They came after meetings and conversations with those friends and colleagues who graciously showed an interest in this project, and who took the time to offer suggestions for improvement. I wish to thank each of them for their attention and support.

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I am blessed to have a family that has provided unwavering support over the years that I have worked on this research. As I collected data for this project, my parents Homer and Virginia Boushey became active students of policy innovation and diffusion. My mother forwarded newspaper clippings about interesting new policies and the problematic legacy of California's initiative process. My siblings Geoff and Sarah Boushey were close confidants when I became excited by a new idea or frustrated by a setback. My father, a professor of medicine at the University of California San Francisco, was always willing to read drafts of my manuscript, and provided perspective on examples I chose from studies of epidemiology.

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