Exposure to Neighbor Adoptions, Agenda Setting Behavior, and Policy Diffusion

Short Title: Exposure to Neighbor Adoptions and Diffusion

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Abstract: Recent scholarship has downplayed the role of geography in policy diffusion, giving more attention to state similarity. Geography, however, still appears to be important for some policies and contexts, and we know less about its importance in influencing outcomes at stages prior to adoption, such as agenda setting. In this paper, I examine the extent to which geography plays a role in shaping the agenda-setting behavior that precedes policy adoption. Taking advantage of mismatches between state boundaries and media markets, I look at the agenda-setting behavior of legislators who have been "exposed" to policy adoptions in neighboring states. Drawing on a database of policy adoptions of thirteen criminal justice policies, I find that legislators exposed to out-of-state adoptions are more likely to author and sponsor these bills, offering a micro-level mechanism that substantiates the role of geography in policy diffusion.

Keywords: policy diffusion; agenda setting; geographic diffusion; media markets; criminal justice

Supplementary material for this article is available in the Online Appendix.

Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse (https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop). The empirical analysis has been successfully replicated by the JOP replication analyst.

Scholarship on policy diffusion has witnessed a transformation over the past generation as it relates to the centrality of geography as an explanation. While early work on diffusion emphasized geographic diffusion (e.g., Berry and Berry 1990), there is some evidence that geography's role has faded over time (Mallinson 2021), and recent work has emphasized the importance of state similarity (Bricker and LaCombe 2021; Grossback et al. 2004). In what also might be seen as a challenge to the influence of geography, Desmarais et al. (2015) identify an interstate diffusion network consistently influencing innovation across policies. These findings, however, could be viewed as circumscribing, not ruling out, the impact of geography, and several studies support the idea of a conditional role. Geographic diffusion appears to be important in early stages (Mallinson 2021), for policies with some attributes (Makse and Volden 2011), and for inventing (and not borrowing) (Parinandi 2020).

Moreover, we know less about the importance of geography in influencing outcomes other than policy adoption. Policy diffusion research has dedicated increasing attention to the stages of policymaking that precede legislative adoption, including problem definition (Gilardi et al. 2021), agenda-setting (Makse 2021), and information acquisition (Karch 2007). With respect to the question of geography, Parinandi et al. (2021) find that ideological similarity matters more at the adoption stage than during the agenda-setting stage; to the extent that ideological similarity and geography are substitutes, it may follow that geography in turn matters more at the agenda setting stage.

In this paper, I examine the extent to which geography plays a role in shaping the agenda-setting behavior that precedes policy adoption. Taking advantage of mismatches between state boundaries and media markets, I look at the agenda-setting behavior of legislators who have been exposed to policy adoptions in neighboring states. Drawing on a dataset of criminal justice policy adoptions, I examine 157 bills across 13 policy areas in 20 states where these geographic mismatches are prevalent. I find that exposed legislators are more likely to author and sponsor policy these bills, offering a micro-level mechanism that substantiates geography's role in policy diffusion.

Geographic Contiguity and Agenda Setting

Agenda setting behavior, especially the authoring and sponsoring of bills, has received a good amount of attention, not only in the diffusion literature, but also in literatures speaking to ambition (Victor 2011), legislative success (Holman et al. 2022.), and representation (Bratton and Haynie 1999) in state legislatures. Studies at the intersection of agenda setting and diffusion are less numerous (Makse 2021; Parinandi et al. 2021), although others emphasize diffusion-relevant themes such as policy entrepreneurship (Anderson et al. 2020). Moreover, studies connecting agenda setting to constituencies (e.g., Bromley-Trujillo et al. 2019; Waggoner 2018) support the idea that diffusion might rely on the behavior of legislators whose constituencies predispose them to act.

In some ways, it makes more sense to talk about learning from neighbors when the unit of analysis is the legislator (Parinandi et al. 2021), especially because adoptions in one state lead directly to *consideration* in others, not immediately to adoption (Gilardi et al. 2021). The implication of this geographic diffusion argument, however, has not been fully developed in one sense: that some legislators in a state should be more likely to act due to differential "exposure" to the neighbor's adoption. This exposure could take several forms, including connections to legislators in other states, and efforts by legislators to learn about solutions in other states, but the most straightforward form of exposure might come through media coverage of other states' policies. Media coverage plays an important role in diffusion, especially in terms of policy framing (Gilardi et al. 2021) and salience, which is an important determinant of the patterns of diffusion (Nicholson-Crotty 2009).[1]

I argue, then, that legislators exposed, via media coverage, to adoptions in other states will be more likely to engage in agenda setting. More specifically, I contend that individual legislators are

[1] Parinandi et al. (2021) consider a similar concept as a control but use geographic contiguity (if a district borders another state), which misses roughly 30% of districts exposed to policy information.

more likely to directly receive information about the policy innovation adoptions of neighboring states when the legislator's district is partially in an out-of-state media market. Two caveats should be stated here. First, this argument does not offer a novel account of policy diffusion; it merely shifts the unit of analysis from the legislature to the individual in its account of how information about another legislature's adoptions is sent and received. Second, in looking at districts in out-of-state markets, there is a second, observationally equivalent, mechanism: exposure to the out-of-state adoption by citizens (e.g., Pacheco 2012) produces constituent demand for the innovation, rather than informing the legislator[2]. Auslen (2023), however, casts doubt on this, finding that coverage of state legislatures influences legislators via a "watchdog" mechanism, not via voter information.

To assess this argument, I rely on a research design rooted in treating media market-constituency correspondence as source of differential exposure to information (e.g., Lipsitz and Teigen 2010; Wichowsky and Niebler 2010), taking advantage of the 17% of state legislative districts partially in out-of-state media markets. Following this approach, I test the following hypothesis:

Adoption Exposure Hypothesis: Legislators will be more likely to author and sponsor policy innovations if their districts overlap media markets in states which are prior adopters.

Data and Methods

To test this hypothesis, I examine agenda setting for 13 criminal justice policies adopted between 1993 and 2004. These policies are a subset of criminal justice innovations described in Makse and Volden (2011), focusing on policies that were adopted in at least ten states during the 1990s and 2000s, the period for which the geographic data on legislative districts and media markets

[2] These data do not allow me to differentiate between these mechanisms. Future work, however, could possibly do so by comparing behavior in overlapping upper and lower chamber districts where both legislators were exposed to the innovation (i.e., have some of their district in an out-of-state market), but differ in terms of constituent exposure (i.e., percentage of the constituency exposed).

is available. The analyses include a total of 157 bills, including 131 that were passed[3]. A list of the policies and the states in which they were considered or passed is found in Appendix Table A-1.

Because the goal in this study is to compare legislators whose districts are in out-of-state media markets with those which are not, I exclude from the sample states with no counties in out-of-state media markets (AK, HI, LA, ME, ND, RI, UT), states with no in-state media markets (DE, NJ), and states where fewer than 5% of districts contain counties in an out-of-state media market. The remaining 20 states are somewhat, but not perfectly, representative of the 50 states (see Table A-2 in the Appendix). Using data that assigns counties to Nielsen's DMA media markets (Sood 2016), I calculate the percentage of each legislative district in a media market which is centered in another state. (See Appendix for additional notes on this procedure). Since DMAs are identified at the county level, this only requires knowing how a county's population is distributed across districts. An "exposure district" is one in which any portion is in a county whose DMA is centered in another state.[4] Map 1 shows the counties containing exposure districts. To test the Adoption Exposure Hypothesis, I create a dummy variable, **adoption exposure district**, indicating whether a legislator represents a district whose out-of-state DMA is in a state who previously adopted the policy. I expect those legislators to be more likely to engage in authorship and sponsorship for that policy.

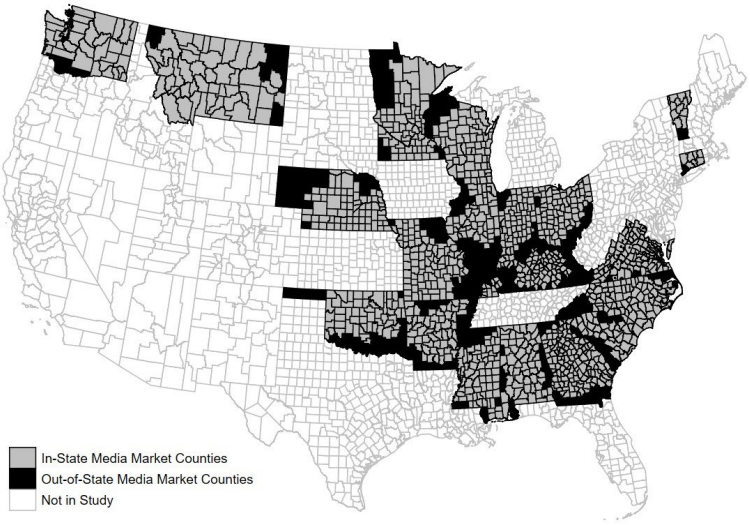
In addition, I consider **non-adoption exposure districts**, where the out-of-state media market is in a state that *has not* adopted. Examining these cases helps rule out that something else about exposure districts results in a higher likelihood of acting. Finally, I consider whether there is a difference between districts *completely* in out-of-state markets and those partially within in-state

[3] To alleviate concerns that only including adopted legislation biases the results, I include pieces of legislation that were introduced but not passed. Results are similar with these bills excluded.

[4] In the Appendix (see Table A-5), I test a more stringent definition and find similar results.

markets, as legislators in the latter may also be influenced by information from in-state media. Models that distinguish these **partial exposure** districts can be found in Table A-5.

Map 1: Location of Exposure Districts



I control for several factors that may influence sponsorship patterns. Descriptions of all variables can be found in Table A-3. Among legislator traits, I include dummies indicating whether the individual holds a **relevant committee position** (and separately, whether the member is **chair**), whether they hold a chamber **leadership** position and whether they are **majority party** members. I also account for **seniority**, whether the legislator is **female**, and **member conservatism**.

I also consider several institutional factors: whether the legislator is in the **upper chamber**, legislative **professionalism,** whether the state has **term limits**, and rules on **introduction limits** and **sponsorship limits**. Lastly, I include several policy-relevant covariates. First, I include a measure of **policy conservatism**, operationalized as the percentage of sponsors who are Republican for all bills relating to that policy. Second, I control for the **racial composition** of the legislator's district. Third, I interact member ideology with policy conservatism.

Analysis

To test the above hypothesis, I first examine raw rates of agenda setting behavior. Members in adoption exposure districts are more likely to author (9.1% vs. 7.6%, $p = .10$) and sponsor bills

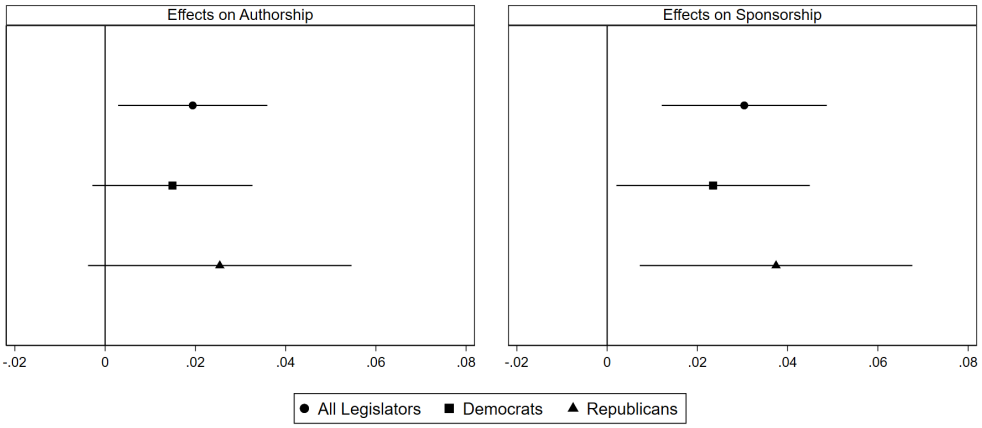
(17.4% vs. 12.5%, $p < .01$) than other legislators. Conversely, legislators in non-adoption exposure districts, author (4.6%, $p < .01$) and sponsor (13.1%, $p = 0.01$) bills at significantly lower rates. Turning to multivariate analysis, I use cross-classified multilevel logit models where legislator decisions are nested within both states and policies, with separate random intercepts to capture variation across each. Likelihood ratio tests support the inclusion of both random effects. Full model results can be found in Appendix Table A-4.

In both models, I continue to find that legislators in adoption exposure districts are significantly more likely to agenda-set. Holding other variables at their means, being in an adoption exposure district increases the probability of authorship from 6.9% to 8.9%, and the probability of sponsorship from 12.8% to 16.0%. To put the effect size in context, it is about 57% of the size of the effect for committee service in the authorship model and nearly 75% of that effect in the sponsorship model. I consider also consider two alternative models, one with state fixed effects in lieu of the multilevel modeling approach, and a second using coarsened exact matching to reduce model dependence. In both models, adoption exposure districts remain a statistically significant predictor of agenda setting behavior. More details can be found in Appendix Table A-5.

I also consider the role that partisanship plays, in two ways. First, I examine whether patterns depend on the legislator's party. I find no evidence of this; Democratic and Republican legislators in adoption exposure districts are similarly affected, as illustrated in Figure 1. Second, I consider, for adoption exposure districts, whether the neighboring legislature is controlled by the same party as the legislator. If the effect of exposure is driven completely by learning from legislatures controlled by the same party, the role of geography relative to state similarity might be considered more ambiguous. However, this is not the case. In adoption exposure districts, authorship (11% v. 7%, $p = 0.03$) and sponsorship (22% v. 16%, $p = 0.02$) are more common when

the legislator's party *differs* from the party which controls the neighboring legislature. If anything, then, this provides evidence that geography is an alternative to an ideological similarity mechanism.

Figure 1: Effects of Adoption Exposure Districts



Finally, I explore heterogeneity in the effects of adoption exposure districts by dividing the 13 policies according to their likelihood of being referred to a criminal justice committee. I argue that this measure captures whether a policy speaks to core questions of criminal justice policy or are at the intersection of criminal justice and other policy spheres. If the patterns illustrated above vary by policy domain, we might expect effects of exposure districts to differ across this dimension. Indeed, there is evidence of this: the effect of adoption exposure districts is concentrated in the core policies and absent in the remaining policies. (See Appendix Table A-6 for a fuller discussion.)

Conclusion

In this paper, I find evidence of a geographic mechanism connecting policy adoptions in one state to agenda setting behavior in neighboring states. While this finding does not contradict recent work that has downplayed the importance of geography in policy diffusion, it does identify one previously unexamined way that geography can play a role. It is possible that exposure to policy innovations through media markets is less important today than during the period covered by this study, owing to the changing information environment, the increasing relevance of ideology, or both. But given the small number of studies of agenda setting in policy innovation, compared to the

many studies of policy adoptions, it would be hasty to assume that the causes of agenda-setting behavior perfectly mirror the collective behavior of legislatures.

Insofar as this study examines one policy area during one period, the findings in this paper do not necessarily mean that these geographic patterns of learning occur for all policy types. Just as studies of policy adoptions have found geographic diffusion for some policies and have failed to find it for others, the role of geography may also be heterogeneous in the ways that individual legislators learn from neighbors and translate that knowledge into action. Indeed, even among the policies studied in this paper, there is heterogeneity in the effect of exposure to information. Future work should seek to explain this heterogeneity, including by studying comparable patterns in both highly ideological policies (e.g., abortion) and less ideological ones (e.g., economic development) .

Moreover, patterns of agenda setting behavior in diffusion may depend on the precise mechanism that drives diffusion (Shipan and Volden 2008), some of which render geography more important than others. Just as studies of policy adoption have clarified our understanding by studying many policies, that approach to studying agenda setting may be similarly fruitful. In addition to geography, other determinants of agenda setting (e.g., policy entrepreneurs, constituency factors) may depend on the policy, environment, and stage of the diffusion process.

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Online Appendix for "Exposure to Neighbor Adoptions, Agenda Setting Behavior, and Policy Diffusion"

Table A-1: Bills in Dataset by State and Policy Area[5]

Policy Area	States
Amber Alert	IL, IN, KY, MO, NC, OH, VA, VT
Concealed Carry	AR, IL*, KY, MN, MO, NC, NE*, OH, OK, SC, WI*
DNA Testing	AL*, AR, CT, GA, IL, IN, KY, MN*, MO*, MS, MT, NC, OH, OK, SC, VT*, WA
DWI 0.08 Limit	AL, AR, CT, GA, IL, IN, KY, MN, MO, MS, MT, NC, NE, OH, OK, SC, VA, WA, WI
Hate Crimes	AR*, GA, IN, KY, SC*, VA
Hazing	AR, IL, MN, NE, VA, VT, WA
Identity Theft	AL, AR, CT, GA, IL, IN, KY, MN, MO, MS, MT, NC, NE, OH, OK, SC, VA, VT, WA, WI
Megan's Law	AL*, AR, CT, GA, IL, IN, MN, MO, MS, NC, NE, OH, OK, SC, VA, VT, WI
Racial Profiling	AL*, AR, CT, GA*, IL, IN*, KY, MN*, MO, MS*, MT, NC*, NE, OH*, OK, VA*, VT*, WA, WI*
Stalking	AR, GA, IN, NE, VA, VT, WI
Terrorism Funding	AL, AR, CT, GA, IL*, IN, MO*, MS*, OH, VA, WA*, WI*
Three Strikes	AR, CT, IN, NC, SC*, VA, VT, WI
Victim Notification	AR, GA, IN, MS, VA, VT

*Bill in dataset was introduced but not passed.

Table A-2: Sample of States in Study

Characteristic	In Sample	Other States	Diff.
Per capita income	$26,687	$28,128	n.s.
Obama vote share, 2008	0.49	0.51	n.s.
Percent Black	13.6	8.5	p = 0.06
Percent Hispanic	6.9	13.6	p = 0.02
Legislative professionalism	0.17	0.19	n.s.
Legislature size	158	141	n.s.
State innovativeness	0.27	0.28	n.s.
Term limits	0.30	0.30	n.s.

States in study: AL, AR, CT, GA, IL, IN, KY, MN, MO, MS, MT, NC, NE, OH, OK, SC, VA, VT, WA, WI. Note: n.s. = no significant difference.

[5] Boot camps are another policy from this dataset, but there is no variation in the independent variable: bills are either in states outside the sample or have no sponsors in exposure districts.

Table A-3: Description of Variables

Variable	Mean	Range
Adoption exposure district[6]	0.08	[0, 1]
Bill authorship (Dummy: 1 = legislator authored bill)	0.08	[0, 1]
Bill sponsorship (Dummy: 1 = legislator sponsored bill)	0.13	[0, 1]
Relevant committee member (Dummy: 1 = legislator serves on criminal justice, corrections, or sentencing-related committee)	0.18	[0, 1]
Relevant committee chair (Dummy: 1 = legislator chairs criminal justice, corrections, or sentencing-related committee)	0.01	[0, 1]
Party leader (Dummy: 1 = legislator served as party leader—speaker, president [incl. pro tempore], majority/minority leader or whip)	0.07	[0, 1]
Female (Dummy: 1 = female)	0.21	[0, 1]
Majority party member (Dummy: 1 = in majority party)	0.61	[0, 1]
Member ideology (Shor and McCarty 2011)	0.01	[-2.18, 2.40]
% Black (of the legislator's district)	0.14	[0.00, 0.99]
Seniority (number of years served)	6.73	[0, 34]
Upper chamber member (Dummy: 1 = serves in upper chamber)	0.25	[0, 1]
Legislative professionalism (Squire 2007)	0.17	[0.07, 0.46]
Bill introduction limits (Dummy: 1 = legislature has limits; NCSL 1996)	0.15	[0, 1]
Bill sponsorship limits (Dummy: 1 = legislature has limits; NCSL 1996)	0.15	[0, 1]
Term limits (Dummy: 1 = legislature has term limits)	0.23	[0, 1]
Policy conservatism (% sponsors who are Republicans across states)	0.46	[0.14, 0.69]

[6] In four states (AR, KY, MN, MT), the Census data to calculate the percentage of a district in out-of-state media markets is not available for the 1990s, so I treat the county's population as being equally divided across districts in the county. Since the main analyses treat *any* non-zero value as "exposure," this decision is largely inconsequential.

Table A-4: Full Model Results, Main Models

	Authorship	**Sponsorship**
	Coefficient (S.E.)	**Coefficient (S.E.)**
Adoption exposure district	0.33 (0.14)*	0.33 (0.09)**
Individual-Level Controls		
Relevant committee position	0.58 (0.10)**	0.44 (0.06)**
Relevant committee chair	0.76 (0.26)**	0.55 (0.19)**
Party leader	0.13 (0.15)	0.16 (0.10)
Female	0.12 (0.10)	0.03 (0.07)
Majority party member	0.26 (0.09)**	0.21 (0.06)**
Member ideology	-2.29 (0.20)**	-2.19 (0.13)**
District racial composition	-0.16 (0.28)	-0.30 (0.18)
Seniority	-0.015 (0.007)*	-0.03 (0.004)**
Upper chamber member	0.59 (0.10)**	0.75 (0.07)**
Legislature and Bill-Level Controls		
Legislative professionalism	4.16 (1.91)*	4.88 (1.58)**
Bill introduction limits	-0.97 (0.58)#	--
Bill sponsorship limits	--	0.08 (0.22)
Term limits	0.34 (0.23)	0.69 (0.22)**
Policy conservatism	2.00 (0.94)*	2.46 (0.85)**
Policy conservatism * legislator ideology	5.03 (0.40)**	4.75 (0.26)**
Constant	-5.15 (0.63)**	-4.79 (0.53)**
σ (Intercept: policy)	0.23 (0.11)	0.23 (0.10)
σ (Intercept: state)	0.50 (0.20)	0.62 (0.22)
N	10,834	15,048
Log Likelihood	-2384.42	-4911.83

Note: # $p<0.10$; * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$. Number of cases is smaller in authorship model because only states that allow multiple authors on a bill are included.

Table A-5: Key Covariate Results, Robustness Checks

Effects of Adoption Exposure Districts	Authorship	Sponsorship
	Coefficient (S.E.)	Coefficient (S.E.)
Main models (from Table A-4)	0.33 (0.14)*	0.33 (0.09)**
State fixed effects in lieu of random effects	0.45 (0.19)**	0.42 (0.12)**
Coarsened exact matching[7]	0.34 (0.16)*	0.37 (0.10)**
Democratic legislators only	0.27 (0.18)	0.25 (0.12)*
Republican legislators only	0.42 (0.23)#	0.40 (0.16)**
Adopted bills only	0.35 (0.14)*	0.30 (0.10)**
Alternative definition for exposure district (25% or more of population)	0.25 (0.15)#	0.28 (0.10)**
Alternative definition of exposure district[8] (Multistate DMAs)	0.27 (0.12)*	0.26 (0.09)**
Excluding districts with multiple state overlaps and mixed adoption patterns[9]	0.37 (0.14)**	0.35 (0.09)**
Full exposure districts (100% out-of-state district)	0.29 (0.20)	0.40 (0.13)**
Partial exposure districts (<100% out-of-state)	0.36 (0.18)*	0.26 (0.13)*

Note: # $p<0.10$; * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$. Rows represent distinct model specifications, except for full exposure and partial exposure districts, which represent two separate indicators in one model.

[7] Legislators in exposure districts are matched with legislators in other districts in the same legislature based on the following covariates: being a committee chair or committee member, majority status, legislator ideology, and constituency racial composition. 74% of legislators in exposure adoption districts were able to be matched with at least one "untreated" legislator.

[8] Some DMAs are split more evenly across states and may cover the politics of multiple states (e.g., the Mobile AL-Pensacola FL-Ft. Walton FL DMA). In the main models, the influence only flows from the state in which the media market is centered (here, Mobile). In this alternative model, I also allow for the possibility that the Mobile media market might cover Florida politics, allowing for reciprocal influence. I identify such DMAs based on whether Nielsen lists secondary cities of the DMA that are in other states. Other DMAs affected by this alternative coding are: Greenville SC, Paducah KY, Burlington VT, Duluth MN, Joplin MO, Rochester MN, and Quincy IL.

[9] There are a small number of cases (49, or less than 0.1%) where a district overlaps two DMAs centered in different states, where one adopted the policy, and one did not. Excluding these cases also has no effect on the results.

Exploring Policy Heterogeneity: Core Criminal Justice Policies

Although all thirteen policies in this dataset are broadly in the domain of criminal justice policy, several of them overlap with other policy domains, such as racial profiling (civil rights), hazing (education), and DWI reform (transportation). Drawing on this heterogeneity allows us to explore whether policy innovations which more narrowly touch on criminal justice ("core") or other those which transcend policy domains are more likely to exhibit the patterns described in this paper.

To divide the policies into "core" and "other" policies, I calculate the percentage of bills that were assigned to criminal justice committees versus other committees (e.g., education for hazing bills, transportation for DWI bills). The six policies most assigned commonly to criminal justice policy committees were hate crimes (100%), stalking (100%), concealed carry (94%), Megan's Law (94%), and three strikes (91%), and identity theft (88%), The policies more frequently assigned to other committees were DNA testing (85%), victim notification (83%), terrorism funding (79%), DWI reform (75%), racial profiling (73%), Amber Alert (67%), and hazing (50%).

Table A-6 provides the key results for each subset of the policies, indicating that the core policies are more likely to produce patterns of agenda setting in which exposure to out-of-state adoptions is influential.

Table A-6: Results by Core and Non-Core Criminal Justice Policies

	Core Policies		**Non-Core Policies**	
	Authorship	**Sponsorship**	**Authorship**	**Sponsorship**
	Coefficient (S.E.)	**Coefficient (S.E.)**	**Coefficient (S.E.)**	**Coefficient (S.E.)**
Adoption exposure	0.49 (0.18)**	0.53 (0.13)**	0.01 (0.23)	0.03 (0.15)
σ (Intercept: policy)	0.42 (0.38)	0.20 (0.13)	0.11 (0.08)	0.22 (0.14)
σ (Intercept: state)	0.82 (0.37)	2.25 (0.94)	0.60 (0.26)	0.77 (0.27)
N	4727	6276	6107	8772
Log Likelihood	-1166.07	-2202.39	-1195.89	-2577.11

Note: # $p<0.10$; * $p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$. Number of cases is smaller in authorship model because only states that allow multiple authors on a bill are included. Additional covariates are the same as in Table A-4, but not reported.

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