

Cambridge Elements

Elements in American Politics

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WHY BAD POLICIES SPREAD (AND GOOD ONES DON'T)

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-95836-3 — Why Bad Policies Spread (and Good Ones Don't)
Charles R. Shipan , Craig Volden
Frontmatter
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009100304
DOI: 10.1017/9781108956123

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First published 2021

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-009-10030-4 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-108-95836-3 Paperback
ISSN 2515-1606 (online)
ISSN 2515-1592 (print)

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Abstract: Building on a deep theoretical foundation and drawing on numerous examples, we examine how policies spread across the US states. We argue that for good policies to spread while bad policies are pushed aside, states must learn from one another. The three ingredients for this positive outcome are observable experiments, time to learn, and favorable incentives and expertise among policymakers. Although these ingredients are sometimes plentiful, we also note causes for concern, such as when policies are complex or incompatible with current practices, when policymakers give in to underlying political biases, or when political institutions lack the capacity for cultivating expertise. Under such conditions, states may rely on competition, imitation, and coercion, rather than learning, which can allow bad policies, rather than good ones, to spread. We conclude with lessons for reformers and policymakers and an assessment of our overall argument based on states' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: American politics, federalism, policy diffusion, public policy, state politics

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ISBNs: 9781009100304 (HB), 9781108958363 (PB), 9781108956123 (OC)
ISSNs: 2515-1606 (online), 2515-1592 (print)

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