

Ideology, Learning, and Policy Diffusion: Experimental Evidence

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We introduce experimental research design to the study of policy diffusion in order to better understand how political ideology affects policymakers' willingness to learn from one another's experiences. Our two experiments—embedded in national surveys of U.S. municipal officials—expose local policymakers to vignettes describing the zoning and home foreclosure policies of other cities, offering opportunities to learn more. We find that: (1) policymakers who are ideologically predisposed against the described policy are relatively unwilling to learn from others, but (2) such ideological biases can be overcome with an emphasis on the policy's success or on its adoption by co-partisans in other communities. We also find a similar partisan-based bias among traditional ideological supporters, who are less willing to learn from those in the opposing party. The experimental approach offered here provides numerous new opportunities for scholars of policy diffusion.

The ability to learn from other governments about the effects of policies is one of the more powerful tools available to public officials in federal systems. Learning from others is especially important for local, regional, and state officials who typically do not have the resources to conduct extensive policy analyses on their own. These sub-national officials can benefit from widespread experimentation with novel policies, in which policymakers abandon failures and help successes diffuse, learning from others' experiments.

However, officials may not always be open to learning about policies that do not fit their world-view. Indeed strong empirical results suggest that governments are most likely to adopt the laws and practices of

ideologically similar governments (e.g., Gilardi 2010; Grossback, Nicholson-Crotty, and Peterson 2004; Martin 2009). What is not clear, though, is the process by which policymakers brush aside or embrace ideologically incongruent policies.

By focusing on aggregate policy choices, current empirical research cannot discern the individual-level role of ideology in policymakers' learning processes, nor the conditions under which any ideological biases may be overcome. With some exceptions (e.g., Karch 2007), the literature on policy diffusion focuses mainly on which policies are adopted by which governments at which points in time (e.g., Graham, Shipan, and Volden 2013). These observational studies of *policy adoption* are too aggregated and

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tend to focus too late in the diffusion process to discern how ideology affects learning at the level of the individual policymaker.¹

We propose an alternative approach to study the role of learning in the diffusion process. Recently, political scientists have used experiments to study classic problems, often producing important, new insights (e.g., Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Butler and Nickerson 2011; Druckman 2004; Grimmer, Messing, and Westwood 2012). We argue that experiments can also be usefully applied to the study of policy diffusion. To be sure, there are limitations to this approach. For example, it is clear that little can (or should) be done to actually manipulate the policies chosen by governments and to observe the subsequent reactions of others. On the other hand, one can manipulate the information available to policymakers to determine the conditions under which they seek to learn from the experiences of others. This is precisely what we do in the current study.²

Specifically, we embedded experiments about information-seeking within surveys administered to local government officials across the United States. As part of the survey, we provided vignettes about other cities' experiences with current problems facing municipalities (zoning/mixed-used developments and home foreclosures). We then asked whether the official would like to learn more about the policy, offering a link to further information to be provided at the end of the survey. Our survey experiments reveal strong ideological biases in the policy learning process, with liberal policymakers being up to twice as likely as conservatives to express interest in learning more about the described government interventions.

The experimental part of the research design explored whether such ideological biases could be overcome by changing how the government's policy experience was described in the vignette. In the experiments, we varied whether the policy was characterized as successful or failing and whether the adopting government was Republican or Democratic. Both frames had a significant impact in altering whether conservative policymakers were interested in learning more, strongly mitigating their ideological bias against learning about these policies. Partisan framing also affected liberal policymakers,

who were significantly more interested in learning about the policy when they discovered that a Democratic government had implemented it than in learning about the same policy implemented by Republicans.

These findings shed new light on the ideological nature of learning and policy diffusion, and especially on ways that policy entrepreneurs and others can help overcome ideological biases. Specifically, we find: (1) ideological biases exist even at the municipal level and on common local policy choices, and (2) these biases can be overcome with an emphasis on policy success or on earlier adoption by co-partisans. Further, this work serves as a template for future experimental research on policy diffusion.

The Conditional Effect of Ideology on Learning and Policy Diffusion

Scholarship on policy diffusion is immense and fast-growing (e.g., Graham, Shipan, and Volden 2013; Meseguer and Gilardi 2009; Stone 1999). Some of the increased interest stems from the opportunity to understand diffusion processes well beyond the geographic clustering of policies. For instance, scholars have focused on the many diverse mechanisms through which policies spread (e.g., Shipan and Volden 2008; Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett 2006), the role of similarities across governments (e.g., Case, Hines, and Rosen 1993; Grossback, Nicholson-Crotty, and Peterson 2004; Simmons and Elkins 2004), the conditions under which diffusion is enhanced or diminished (e.g., Brooks 2005; Keleman and Sibbitt 2004; Walker 1969), the influence of policy success (e.g., Meseguer 2006; Volden 2006), and the extent to which the nature of policies themselves influences their diffusion (e.g., Makse and Volden 2011; Mooney and Lee 1995; Nicholson-Crotty 2009).

The experimental approach that we advocate can shed new light on each of these. For now we restrict ourselves to the mechanism of learning-based policy diffusion, the role of ideological similarity, the policy's perceived success, and the partisanship of previous policy adopters.

We expect officials' own ideological views to strongly affect their affinity for different policy alternatives. In broad strokes, conservative policymakers tend to be cautious about expanding the role of government, while liberal policymakers may hesitate to rely on market forces. We argue that government officials who hold such viewpoints will be less likely to seek out information about policies that they are ideologically predisposed against.

¹Some have placed the idea of "bounded learning" or "heuristic-based learning" central to their research agendas (e.g., Meseguer 2006), resulting in qualitative studies that highlight concerns about various biases that may emerge in the policymaking process (e.g., Weyland 2007).

²Similarly, scholars have used experiments to study the diffusion of other types of innovations (e.g., Rogers 2003, 70-72) and to examine policy learning among citizens (e.g., Taber and Lodge 2006).

Such avoidance of ideologically dissonant information may arise for psychological reasons (e.g., Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Lowin 1967).³ This reticence can also arise because officials simply do not want to spend time learning about a policy they are ultimately unlikely to support. However, by choosing to not learn about it at all, policymakers miss the opportunity to thoughtfully consider potentially useful programs and laws that they could in principle implement. We test this argument with the following hypothesis.

Ideological Learning Hypothesis: *Policymakers who are ideologically predisposed to adopting a policy will be more interested in learning about others' experiences than are those who are ideologically predisposed against the policy.*

Theoretical models suggest that the effect of such ideological considerations may be moderated by policy success. For example, the model in Volden, Ting, and Carpenter (2008) predicts that the policymakers most predisposed to a new policy idea will experiment with it regardless of evidence of failure or success. However, those who are less predisposed to the policy will only invest in learning about the policy if it has achieved success elsewhere.

Evidence of success may also work because unexpected information leads to learning (e.g., Atkeson and Maestas 2012; Meyer, Reizenzein, and Schutzwahl 1997; Schutzwahl and Borgstedt 2005). Officials who are predisposed against a policy will expect it to fail and so may be surprised when it achieves success. Consequently, evidence of success may make policymakers more willing to overcome their priors and seek out more information. As a result of these dynamics, the effect of ideology on learning should be conditional on policymakers' perceptions of the policy's effectiveness, as follows:

Success Overcoming Ideology Hypothesis: *Evidence of policy success will significantly increase the interest in learning about others' experiences among those who are initially ideologically predisposed against a policy.*

Ideological-based biases against learning may also be overcome by fellow co-partisans. When co-partisans embrace a policy that an official opposes, this may signal to the official that the policy is not as inconsistent with

her ideological worldview as she had initially thought. In this sense, the co-partisans' support for the policy may influence learning because it causes her to update her priors and thus be more likely to seek out additional information in order to find out why her co-partisans embraced the policy.

The actions of co-partisans may also lead to enhanced learning by providing officials with political cover. Policymakers may be reluctant to learn about a law or program that is not consistent with their ideological predispositions because of fears that embracing the policy will hurt their credibility within the party and their reelection prospects. However, when co-partisans elsewhere have already embraced the policy, officials have more political cover and are less likely to be singled out. Officials should thus be less likely to preemptively rule out these policies, which in turn should make them more willing to learn.

For instance, President Bill Clinton, by embracing free trade and exploiting the timely support of partisan allies, was able to win over a sufficient number of Democrats to secure passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (Box-Steffensmeier, Arnold, and Zorn 1997).⁴ In the context of policy diffusion, Governor Tommy Thompson's efforts in Wisconsin opened up welfare reform to experimentation by other Republican policymakers across the country. Such examples serve to highlight how partisanship can play a role in overcoming ideological biases, as outlined in our final hypothesis.

Partisanship Overcoming Ideology Hypothesis: *Evidence of policy experimentation by co-partisans will significantly increase the interest in learning about others' experiences among those who are ideologically predisposed against a policy.*

Testing the Determinants of Learning and Policy Diffusion

In recent years, scholars have made significant progress in characterizing the nature of policy diffusion by using new empirical approaches to confront a range of methodological problems (e.g., Berry and Baybeck 2005, Franzese and Hays 2008, Gilardi 2010, Volden 2006); but many obstacles remain. Testing the above hypotheses, for example, is difficult because the research design must isolate policy learning from other diffusion processes. In addition to learning, governments compete, coerce, and imitate one

³Also rooted in psychology is the idea that liberals and conservatives may be differentially open to new ideas and experiences (e.g., Carney et al. 2008). However, our experiments tend to indicate that any such biases can be easily overcome with framing, which tends against the idea of a strong innate opposition to learning. Ultimately, future research would be required to separate out (and adjudicate between) these competing psychological processes.

⁴Certainly other factors, such as side payments and President Clinton's political influence over his party, were also at play in garnering Democratic support for NAFTA.

another (e.g., Boehmke and Witmer 2004; Shipan and Volden 2008). Moreover, policy choices may appear inter-related merely because similar governments face similar circumstances at about the same time.

To test the above hypotheses, we believe it is helpful to move from studies of aggregate policy choices to examinations of individual learning within policy diffusion. Specifically, an ideal research design would (a) isolate the learning process involved during the consideration of a new policy, while (b) capturing characteristics of the specific policymaker engaging in learning and (c) exogenously manipulating the policymaker's perceptions of the policy's success and its acceptance among co-partisans. We are able to match these ideal conditions rather well by embedding experiments within an original survey of local government officials that we conducted in 2012.⁵ We focus on municipalities and ask about common local issues of zoning and foreclosure policy (discussed below), for two main purposes. First, at the local level, there remains an extensive diversity of preferences across officials, with members of each political party arrayed from liberal to conservative, thus better allowing us to isolate the influence of ideological positions apart from partisanship. Second, these are issues that, despite revealing ideological differences, have not been so tainted by partisan polarization as to close off any further consideration by members of either political party.⁶

The online survey was created using Qualtrics and was administered to municipal officials by sending them a link to the survey, yielding more than a thousand respondents across our two experiments. We sent an initial invitation with two follow up reminders in the subsequent week. Exploring possible non-response biases, the Supplemental Appendix reports an analysis comparing those who responded to our early versus late requests with respect to the findings we report below.⁷ Overall, the survey had a response rate of about twenty-three percent,

⁵The sample of city officials for the survey was constructed by first downloading a list of all of the cities in the U.S. Census. Research assistants then searched for the website of each town or city taken from the census. If the research assistants were able to identify the city's website, they then collected the name and email address of the city's mayor and council members (or the equivalent).

⁶Future work extending our approach to other levels of government or to more partisan-charged issues would be welcome. Moreover, some issues do not map easily onto ideological positions (e.g., Toshkov 2013), perhaps resulting in fewer biases that need to be overcome.

⁷The key comparison in our tests is between those who responded to our early requests versus those who responded to our third and final request. Those analyses reveal that when one takes the survey is not a statistically significant moderator for our main hypotheses. However, the size and direction of the interactive variables we include suggest that non-respondents may be less willing to overcome

on par with recent expert surveys of this nature (e.g., Fisher and Herrick 2013; Harden 2013). Policymakers from smaller towns were slightly less likely to take the survey, with the median city in the sample having a population of just over 10000. About twenty-three percent of the respondents were serving as the municipality's chief executive (mayor or the equivalent), with the remaining respondents serving as city councilors (or the equivalent). Staff members who filled out the survey on behalf of the actual municipal official were excluded from the analysis.⁸ A full description of the survey sample is provided in Appendix A.

We are able to test the effects of ideology on policy learning because we asked survey respondents about their positions on a large number of issues. Estimating ideology through these questions avoids the sorts of biases that tend to accompany traditional measures of ideology like self-identification (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008). We drew questions from the "Political Courage Test" (formerly the National Political Awareness Test) that Project Vote Smart has administered to state and federal candidates in every election cycle since 1996. Specifically, policymakers were asked 28 questions drawn from the sample of 53 questions listed in Appendix B. We asked these questions at the end of the survey, to avoid priming on ideological dimensions during the experiments themselves.⁹

Like previous researchers, we treated these questions with their binary response options like roll call votes to estimate the policymakers' ideal points (e.g., Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Shor and McCarty 2011). Ideal points are estimated using a Bayesian item-response model (Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers 2004; Jackman 2000, 2004), in which the model assumes that preferences are characterized by quadratic utility functions with independent and normally distributed errors.¹⁰ The scale for their ideal points is constructed with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. Higher values indicate more conservative preferences. We label this key

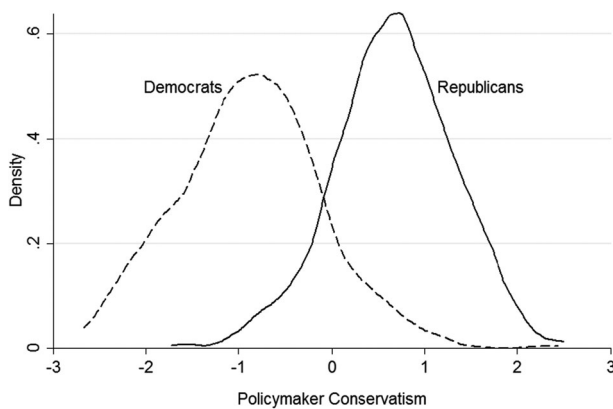
their ideological biases due to evidence of policy success and more willing to learn from co-partisans than were the early respondents.

⁸Gathering policy information may be a staff responsibility in many municipalities. Therefore, further research on the willingness of staff to learn from other cities would be welcome.

⁹Given the extensive number of questions used to measure ideology, relative to the single question for each experiment (and numerous unrelated questions in the survey), we believe there is little chance that the experimental treatments may have primed the ideology responses. Further, the bivariate relationship between the respondents' ideology scores and the treatments are neither statistically nor substantively significant.

¹⁰Estimation is done with the "pscl" package (Jackman 2011) in R.

FIGURE 1 Municipal Officials’ Conservatism



Note: The figure shows the Conservatism distribution for Democrats (on the left) and Republicans (on the right) across the two experiments discussed below.

independent variable *Conservatism*. Figure 1 displays the distribution of this measure for the Republicans (red) and Democrats (blue) in our sample. Interestingly, unlike the U.S. Congress, where Democrats and Republicans no longer overlap ideologically, a substantial number of self-identified partisan municipal officials overlap.

Experiment #1: Ideology, Learning, and Policy Success

In each of the two experiments, we described a policy used elsewhere and then asked the official if he or she wanted to learn more about the other government’s experiences. We varied key aspects of the policy we described in order to test whether those changes affected policymakers’ interest in learning. Respondents were randomly assigned to treatment conditions upon beginning the survey.

Our first experiment was designed to test the role of success in overcoming ideological biases against learning. In the experiment, officials read about a city that had recently converted an obsolete strip mall into a residential community (see Box 1 for the full text of the experiment).¹¹ We then asked, “Would you want to learn more about the pros and cons of a program like this to see if it would work in your area?” We asked this question because it captures the first, necessary stage of learning-

¹¹Based on Dillon’s Rule and various state restrictions, municipalities may vary in their autonomy and abilities to address the issues raised in the two experiments. Random assignment across treatments should help mitigate any concerns about the need to control for such external considerations.

based diffusion—information-seeking. We included balanced language about both the pros and cons in the question to ensure that we were not priming respondents to systematically favor either treatment. Policymakers who answered “Yes” were given a link at the end of the survey that took them to an information page on policies in this area at the National League of Cities’ website.¹² We use the official’s response to this question to measure the outcome (dependent variable) for the analysis, *Interest in Learning*, which takes a value of 1 for a response of “Yes” to this question and 0 for a response of “No.”¹³

Box 1: Experiment #1

Recently, many communities have confronted the problem of abandoned or underutilized retail stores or shopping centers. In some cases, city officials have chosen to re-purpose these properties, such as turning them into community centers or mixed-use developments. For instance, [one city]²⁸ recently helped convert an obsolete strip mall into a residential community **and quickly attracted enough residents to completely fill the community / but failed to attract sufficient residents to make the renovated community sustainable.**

Would you want to learn more about the pros and cons of a program like this to see if it would work in your area?

Yes (we’ll provide a link to an external website at the end of the survey)

No

Note: The experimental manipulations are given in bolded, bracketed text here. In the actual experiment it was displayed as regular text.

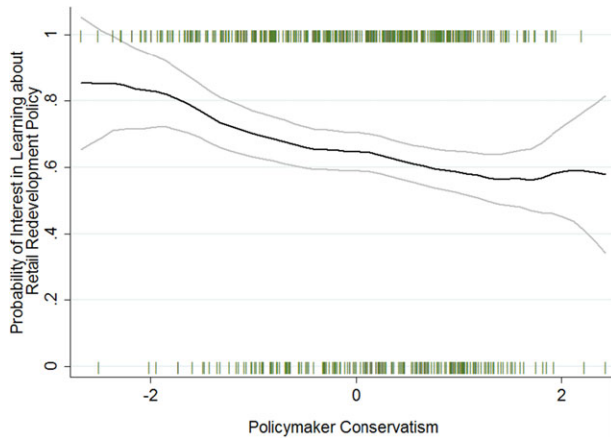
For the experiment, we varied whether the venture was a success. We indicated the success or failure of the policy in the last line of the description of the city and the policy it implemented. Policymakers assigned to the successful policy treatment read that the decision to convert the strip mall into a residential community “quickly attracted enough residents to completely fill the community.” Those assigned to the failed policy treatment read that the same decision “failed to attract sufficient residents to make the renovated community sustainable.”¹⁴

¹²Although we did not track the users beyond the survey itself, future work could also explore the amount of time that officials spent gathering more information about the policies in question.

¹³This dependent variable is therefore something of a low-cost signal of intention or interest in policy learning. Future survey experiments may expand upon this approach to see how long a respondent spends on a subsequently viewed website, for example, or whether the respondent participates in a conference call or attends a meeting to find out more about a policy. Behavior at later stages of the public policy process, such as placing policy proposals on a governmental agenda, voting in their favor, or ultimately changing policy, could be explored as well, although significant ethical considerations arise in conducting experiments that may greatly impact actual public policy choices.

¹⁴We also included a “control” group, leaving out the description of the success or failure of the policy. As might be expected, the *Interest in Learning* among this control group was between the levels for the success and the failure groups, somewhat more in line with successes than with failures. Multinomial logit results based on the full dataset offer support for the same hypotheses as those reported for the subset of success and failures only. Further attempts to isolate control group effects in survey experiments of the sort reported here are difficult, because at least some context

FIGURE 2 Diminished Interest in Learning among Conservative Policymakers



Notes: Local mean smoothing is used to calculate the average of the probability (and the associated 95 percent confidence intervals) for *Interest in Learning* in Experiment #1. Carpet and ceiling plots show the exact values for each observation.

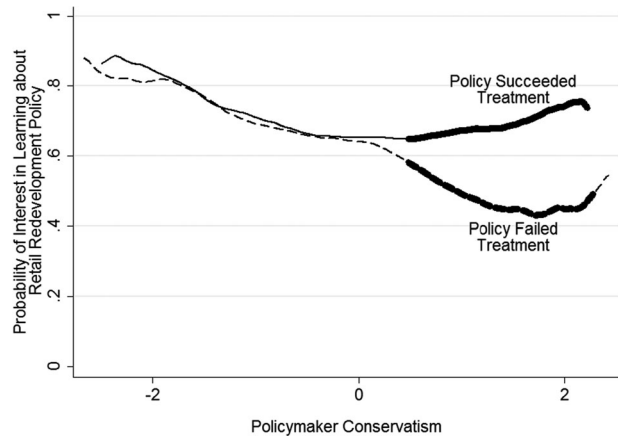
As an initial test of the Ideological Learning Hypothesis, Figure 2 illustrates policymakers' Interest in Learning across the ideological spectrum. The figure shows the raw data, with local mean smoothing and 95% confidence intervals.¹⁵ Consistent with the hypothesis, about 80% of the most liberal policymakers—who should be predisposed in favor of active government intervention in repurposing retail space—wish to learn more about the policy experience of other cities. In contrast, conservative policymakers were more than 20 percentage points less likely to express an interest in learning more. Although a majority still wanted to learn more, the drop in interest is quite large.

The level of interest is even lower among conservatives who were told that the policy had failed. Figure 3 shows similar smoothed curves, now broken down across the two experimental treatments, with policy success indicated by the solid line and policy failure indicated by the dashed line. Three main findings emerge from the figure. First, for liberal policymakers (on the left-side of the figure), interest in learning is not conditional on policy

must be offered when asking about interest in learning more about a policy. However, future work can and should consider relevant control groups when pursuing similar research.

¹⁵The polynomial is calculated using the default kernel function and a bandwidth of 0.40 within the 'lpoly' command in Stata. We use this approach consistently throughout the analysis to best match results from lowess smoothing, while also yielding the variance calculations needed for confidence intervals in Figures 2 and 4 and for ranges of significant differences across treatments in Figures 3 and 5.

FIGURE 3 Ideological Learning from Success



Notes: Local mean smoothing is used to calculate the average of the probability for *Interest in Learning* in Experiment #1. The solid line represents the “policy succeeded” treatment and the dashed line represents the “policy failed” treatment. The thick, bold sections of the lines show where the difference between the treatments is significant at the 95 percent confidence level ($p < 0.05$).

success. About 70–80% of them wished to learn more, regardless of whether the policy was described as a success or a failure. Second, both of the lines in the figure are downward sloping, suggesting that conservative policymakers are less interested than liberals in learning more about this policy. This is consistent with the Ideological Learning Hypothesis, given that conservatives are more distrustful of government interventions and so less interested in learning about such programs.

Third, the two lines diverge significantly for conservative policymakers. For the policy failure treatment, the line continues its downward trend. However, policy success is enough to stop this decline among conservatives. Consistent with the Success Overcoming Ideology Hypothesis, evidence of success is a significant factor in overcoming conservative policymakers' reservations about learning more about the other city's policy experiences. The bold portions of the curves in Figure 3 show areas of statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$). And the size of this difference is quite large. Among policymakers with ideal points above 1.0, the two lines are 20–30 percentage points apart; conservatives require greater evidence of policy success before they wish to learn more about policies that they initially view with suspicion.¹⁶

We explore the robustness of these results by estimating empirical models that test the effect of ideology and success on learning while also controlling for other

¹⁶As shown in Appendix D, these differences are found mainly among conservative officials in the Republican Party.

TABLE 1 Success and Ideological Learning

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Respondent's Conservatism	-0.34** (0.10)	-0.51** (0.14)	-0.55** (0.18)
Conservatism × Success		0.35 (0.19)	0.44* (0.21)
Treatment: Success		0.29 (0.19)	0.32 (0.20)
Considered Issue Before			1.26** (0.23)
Democrat			0.01 (0.32)
Republican			-0.04 (0.25)
Partisan Election			-0.13 (0.24)
Logged Population			0.08 (0.07)
Percent Black			1.19 (1.06)
Percent Latino			-0.03 (0.81)
Percent with Some College			-0.86 (0.93)
Unemployment Rate			-2.32 (2.08)
Percent: Unpaid 1st Mortgage			-1.69 (1.11)
Percent: Unpaid 2nd Mortgage			2.21 (2.74)
Constant	0.64** (0.09)	0.50** (0.13)	0.22 (0.91)
N	541	541	514
χ^2	13.3**	19.9**	71.1**

Notes: Logit analysis of the dichotomous *Interest in Learning* dependent variable, from Experiment #1. Self-identified Independents/Non-partisans are the excluded group in Model 3. Standard errors in parentheses. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, two-tailed.

relevant factors. Logistic regression models are used because our dependent variable, *Interest in Learning*, is binary. As reported in Table 1, each model includes respondents' *Conservatism* to explore the effect of ideology.

Model 1, which gives the results when not including any control variables, confirms the pattern shown in Figure 2. The negative coefficient on *Conservatism*, which is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), means that conservatives generally show a lower level of interest in learning about this policy.

However, this ideological bias is moderated by whether the policy in question was successful. Model 2 tests the moderating impact of success by including a term for the interaction between the ideology measure and the *Success* indicator, which takes a value of 1 for subjects exposed to the success treatment, in the regression model. The positive coefficient ($p = 0.04$, one-tailed) on the interaction term suggests that evidence of success is more important for conservatives than for liberals. This is in line with expectations from the Success Overcoming Ideology Hypothesis. The large negative coefficient on *Conservatism* indicates a significant ideologically based learning bias for policies described as failures, whereas the similar effect for successful policies is calculated by adding the coefficient on the interactive term to this main effect. In so doing, we see that the effect of ideology is diminished to a third of its size upon characterizing the policy as a success rather than a failure.¹⁷

These results are also robust to including control variables in the regression model. The control variables added to Model 3 come from the information gathered in the survey and from details about cities gathered independently from the American Community Survey.¹⁸ Using information from these sources, we controlled for the policymaker's partisanship (with self-identified Independents/Non-partisans representing the excluded category) and electoral status, as well as the city's size, racial makeup, average educational attainment, unemployment rate, and potential foreclosure status.¹⁹ All variables, their sources, and descriptive statistics are given in Appendix C.

Perhaps most importantly, we control for whether the officials had considered the issue before. We measure prior interest in the issue based on policymakers' responses to the following question that we asked earlier in the survey: "Have you ever considered redevelopment and rezoning of abandoned retail space in your area?" We control for prior interest in the issue to prevent omitted variable bias and to provide something similar to a manipulation check. If our experiment is capturing true

¹⁷The total effect for *Conservatism* among those receiving the successful treatment is $(-0.51) + 0.35 = -0.16$, which is only 31% as large as the -0.51 effect for the failed policy treatment. Of course, the impact of these variables on the probability of *Interest in Learning* taking a value of one depends on values taken by other independent variables and on the logit function.

¹⁸The smaller sample size is the result of missing data for some of the control variables.

¹⁹Additional controls for the type of government in the city and for size thresholds (beyond which learning might become more likely) did not have a meaningful impact on support for the main hypotheses in either of the experiments, nor were they statistically significant.

interest in a policy, then the policymakers who represent communities confronting this issue *should be more interested* in learning about the policy.²⁰

The large and positive coefficient on the variable *Considered Issue Before* provides strong evidence that our experiment is capturing real interest among policymakers in learning about the policy. Setting all other variables at their means in Model 3, the policymakers for whom mixed-use developments were recently relevant have a 73% chance of responding that they want to learn more, relative to only 44% for those who had not previously considered the issue.

The results of Model 3 provide further support for the Success Overcoming Ideology Hypothesis. Significantly, the moderating effect of success on the ideological bias in learning holds after controlling for the individual-level factors. In fact, the coefficient on the interaction term is about half a standard deviation larger in magnitude than in Model 2, and is statistically significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed). To put this in perspective, moderate policymakers (*Conservative* = 0) express an interest in learning from failures 70% of the time and from successes 77% of the time, when holding other variables constant at their mean values. In contrast, the comparable rates for conservatives (*Conservative* = 1.5) are 51% and 73%, a difference of 22 percentage points.²¹ This gap is about the same size shown in Figure 3 without controlling for other factors affecting the desire to learn. These results support the Success Overcoming Ideology Hypothesis, showing that many ideological policy skeptics require evidence of success in order to be enticed to learn more, whereas those ideologically predisposed to a policy do not require such evidence.

Experiment #2: Ideology, Learning, and Partisanship

In our second experiment we look at the moderating effect of partisanship on the ideological bias in policymakers' interest in learning more about housing policies to deal with foreclosures and vacant properties. This ex-

²⁰This enhanced interest may be partially offset by those who have already received sufficient information about the issue and therefore have little interest in additional information.

²¹This is calculated based on Model 3, setting all control variables to their means. The estimated marginal effects are for Republicans and are practically unchanged when looking at Democrats or Independents at those same levels of *Conservatism*.

periment was again embedded within the 2012 American Municipal Official Survey, although it was delivered to a different, randomly-chosen subset of officials than those in the first experiment. Our vignette, shown in Box 2, described a community that had an increase in foreclosures and dealt with it by passing various measures (including a measure to allow neighbors to buy and maintain a foreclosed property after the house was demolished). We then asked the policymakers, "Would you want to learn more about the pros and cons of a program like this to see if it would work in your area?" We altered the specific policy across Experiments #1 and #2 as a way to ensure that our findings for the baseline Ideological Learning Hypothesis were robust to alternative policies, although we maintained nearly every other aspect of the experiment for the sake of consistency. As in Experiment #1, we noted that if they clicked yes we would give them a link at the end of the survey to an external website on the topic (officials who clicked "yes" were redirected to information about these policies provided on the National League of Cities' website). We again code the variable *Interest in Learning* so it takes a value of 1 for "Yes" and 0 for "No."

Box 2: Experiment #2

In a community dealing with an increase in foreclosures, **[Republican/Democratic]** officials passed a comprehensive measure to address foreclosures and vacant properties. Among other aspects, the policy facilitated neighbors purchasing and maintaining their former neighbors' property after the house was demolished.

Would you want to learn more about the pros and cons of a program like this to see if it would work in your area?

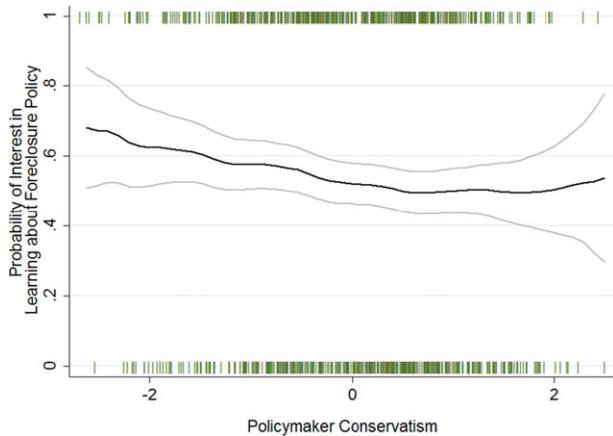
Yes (we'll provide a link to an external website at the end of the survey)
 No

Note: The experimental manipulations are given in bolded, bracketed text here. In the actual experiment it was displayed as regular text.

We experimentally manipulated whether the officials who implemented the policy were Republicans or Democrats (see the bolded text in brackets in Box 2) in order to test whether government officials are more interested in learning from co-partisans. If the Partisanship Overcoming Ideology Hypothesis is correct, officials should be more interested in the policy implemented by their co-partisans than by the opposing party, especially among those respondents who are ideologically predisposed against the policy.

Figure 4 gives the average percent of policymakers expressing an interest in learning more about the policy as a function of their ideology. As with Figure 2, this figure shows the raw data across both treatments, smoothed locally. Once again, the figure offers preliminary support for the Ideological Learning Hypothesis. The more-conservative policymakers are about 15 percentage

FIGURE 4 Conservative Disinterest in Learning about Foreclosure Policy



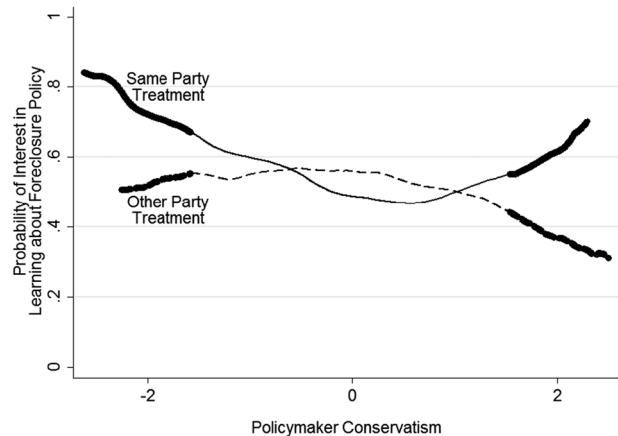
Notes: Local mean smoothing is used to calculate the average of the probability (and the associated 95 percent confidence intervals) for *Interest in Learning* in Experiment #2. Carpet and ceiling plots show the exact values for each observation.

points less interested in learning about other cities' foreclosure policies than are their liberal counterparts.²²

The key treatment in the second experiment is whether the officials in the implementing community were from the same party as the respondent. Therefore, based on whether the officials in the vignette were described as Republican or Democratic, we created the indicator variable *Same Party* to take a value of 1 if respondents were from the same party as the officials in the vignette and 0 if they were from the opposing party. Non-partisan and Independent respondents are thus excluded from this analysis (and from the results shown in Figure 4).

If the Partisanship Overcoming Ideology Hypothesis is correct, we should see that ideological conservatives (who in this case are almost entirely Republicans) should be much more interested in learning from members of their own party than in learning from the other party. Illustrating a smoothed version of the raw experimental data, Figure 5 shows just such a pattern. As with Figure 3, the two lines show locally weighted average interest in learning across treatments, here with the dashed line showing the level of interest when the implementing

FIGURE 5 Ideology and Learning from One's Own Party



Notes: Local mean smoothing is used to calculate the average of the probability for *Interest in Learning* in Experiment #2. The solid line represents the same party treatment and the dashed line represents the other party treatment. The thick, bold sections of the lines show where the difference between the treatments is significant at the 95 percent confidence level ($p < 0.05$).

officials are from the opposition party and the solid line when the implementing officials are co-partisans.

The results are striking. While conservatives (typically Republicans) have little interest in learning about the opposition's policies in this area, their interest is piqued when given the opportunity to hear about Republicans' activities. This interest in learning from co-partisans mitigates and actually reverses the ideological bias. For policymakers who are very conservative, their interest in learning from co-partisans is even higher than the interest among moderates. For the most conservative respondents, the interest-in-learning gap between the other-party treatment and the same-party treatment rises to about 30–40 percentage points. Perhaps they are intrigued by other Republican governments embracing the policy of neighbors, rather than the government, purchasing and maintaining foreclosed properties.

While less relevant to testing the Partisanship Overcoming Ideology Hypothesis, the other parts of the figure are also intriguing. For moderates, there is little difference between wishing to learn from co-partisans or from the opposing party, with perhaps even a small enhanced desire to reach across party lines. These moderates appear like "ambivalent partisans," as the source of the policy evidence does not affect their interest in learning (e.g., Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012). In contrast, only half of liberal Democrats (on the left side of the figure) are interested in learning from Republicans, whereas more than 70% want to hear about Democratic policy

²²While we argue that this policy is generally liberal-leaning (in its government involvement in the market), the specific policy of neighbors (rather than the government) buying the property has a market-based component. This consideration may help explain the smaller ideological effect in Experiment #2 compared to that in Experiment #1. In contrast to the liberal-leaning policies explored in these two experiments, future work replicating and extending our analyses on conservative-leaning policies would be welcome.

experiments. Thus the effect of partisanship, while helping overcome the ideological bias among conservatives, raises concerns for a new partisan-based bias among liberals. Rather than being a force that solely broadens the pattern of learning and policy diffusion, partisanship can also undermine such learning precisely where it is most likely to occur absent any partisan cues. Finally, as shown in Appendix D, the same patterns in Figure 5 emerge upon examining Democrats and Republicans separately, with the difference on the liberal end occurring among Democrats and that on the conservative end emerging mainly among Republicans.

In Table 2, we test the robustness of the results relating to ideological bias and partisan learning by using logit regressions to estimate models that include the same set of controls used in the regressions from the first experiment. Model 4, like Model 1 in Table 1, provides strong support for the Ideological Learning Hypothesis. Conservatives are considerably less likely to express an interest in learning about other municipalities' policies in this area than are liberals. Model 5 shows something of a muddled result, with neither the main effect for *Conservatism* nor its interaction with the *Same Party* treatment attaining statistical significance. This is a consequence of trying to project a linear model onto a clearly nonlinear pattern, as illustrated in Figure 5. To account for this, we create a new variable, *Extremism*, which equals the policymaker's *Conservatism* if the respondent is Republican; but for Democratic policymakers, *Extremism* is set at (-1) \times *Conservatism*.²³ Thus, the most conservative Republicans and most liberal Democrats have the highest values of *Extremism*.²⁴

In Model 6, the patterns of Figure 5 clearly emerge once again. Most notably, the large, positive, and statistically significant coefficient on the interaction between *Extremism* and *Same Party* reveals the enhanced desire to learn from co-partisans among conservatives and liberals. Put simply, more ideologically extreme policymakers exhibit a stronger co-partisan learning bias.

Model 7 shows that this same relationship holds even when we include the individual-level and municipal-level control variables found in Table 1; ideological extremists from both sides of the spectrum strongly prefer to learn

²³As detailed in the Supplemental Appendix, the results uncovered in the figures and tables here are robust to exploring further nonlinearities through generalized additive models.

²⁴This approach differs somewhat from merely taking the absolute value of *Conservatism*, which would lump together very conservative and very liberal Democrats, for instance. Although such an alternative approach largely yields the same patterns uncovered here, we believe that the direction of a policymaker's extremism relative to others in his or her party is important.

TABLE 2 Ideological Extremism and Partisan Learning

	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Respondent's	-0.18*	-0.12		
Conservatism	(0.08)	(0.12)		
Treatment:		0.11	-0.48	-0.54
Same Party		(0.17)	(0.25)	(0.28)
Conservatism \times		-0.10		
Same Party		(0.16)		
Ideological			-0.18	-0.20
Extremism			(0.18)	(0.19)
Extremism \times			0.81**	0.90**
Same Party			(0.25)	(0.27)
Considered				1.03**
Issue Before				(0.20)
Democrat				0.26
				(0.19)
Partisan				0.29
Election				(0.21)
Logged				0.12
Population				(0.06)
Percent Black				1.65*
				(0.84)
Percent Latino				-0.22
				(0.73)
Percent with				-2.69**
Some College				(0.95)
Unemployment				-2.85
Rate				(2.60)
Percent: Unpaid				-0.79
1st Mortgage				(1.12)
Percent: Unpaid				-2.74
2nd Mortgage				(4.17)
Constant	0.15	0.10	0.23	-0.19
	(0.08)	(0.12)	(0.18)	(0.87)
N	575	575	575	551
χ^2	4.9*	5.7	15.8**	85.3**

Notes: Logit analysis of the dichotomous *Interest in Learning* dependent variable from Experiment #2. Standard errors in parentheses. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, two-tailed.

from co-partisans. For example, the probability that an ideologically extreme Republican (*Extremism* = 1.5) will indicate *Interest in Learning* more about the policy rises from 33% to 52% as we move from the other party treatment to the same party treatment.²⁵ The results for extreme Democrats are nearly identical.²⁶ In contrast, for

²⁵Calculations reported here hold all other variables at the means.

²⁶The probability that an ideologically extreme Democrat (*Extremism* = 1.5) will indicate *Interest in Learning* more about the policy

the more moderate policymakers of both parties (*Extremism* = 0), *Interest in Learning* is actually lower for co-partisans, consistent with the findings from Figure 5. Taken together, these results offer strong evidence for the Partisanship Overcoming Ideology Hypothesis.

The results from Model 7 also show that prior interest in this issue (*Considered Issue Before* variable) strongly predicts interest in learning more about the policy. This is the same pattern we saw in the first experiment. It is worth reiterating that the experiments involved two different sets of randomly chosen policymakers. Yet in both cases, the policymakers who cared most about this issue were the ones who wanted to learn more. This provides strong evidence that policymakers' desire to learn about the policy (i.e., our dependent variable) captures real engagement with the issue and is not simply cheap talk.

Discussion and Future Directions

In order to gain the benefits of learning-based policy diffusion, ideological-based biases against learning from others must be overcome. These biases are endemic and have a substantial effect on learning and policy diffusion. In the two municipal policy experiments presented here, conservatives were much less willing to learn about others' activist policies. On the basis of our evidence, we would expect that liberals would be similarly averse to learning about conservative, market-based policy interventions, such as privatization of traditionally city-provided services. If policymakers, both liberal and conservative, are unwilling to learn from others, they stand little chance of adopting somewhat ideologically incongruent but promising policies at home.

However, our experimental manipulations show that these biases against learning can be overcome to a large degree. Emphasizing either the success of these policies or co-partisan experimentation in other communities significantly enhances the willingness of ideologues to learn about others' experiences. Such findings offer clear implications to policy entrepreneurs looking to facilitate the spread of successful policies (e.g., Balla 2001, Haas 1992, Mintrom 1997). That said, there is a subtlety in our findings, in that emphasizing the acceptance of a policy by an opposing party can undermine the learning process among those who would otherwise be interested in learning.

rises from 39% to 59% when moving from the other party treatment to the same party treatment.

These findings complement and extend earlier scholarship. For example, consistent with previously untested theoretical predictions (Volden, Ting, and Carpenter 2008), we establish that policymakers seek out additional information if the portrayal of the policy as a "success" overcomes their natural disinclination to consider a given intervention. Moreover, learning is conditional not only on ideology but also on partisanship. Both liberal and conservative policymakers are more likely to express an interest in learning from their co-partisans than from those in the opposing party. In contrast, moderates are equally willing to learn from the policy experiments conducted by officials in either political party. Extending observational studies that find enhanced policy adoptions by ideologically similar governments (e.g., Grossback, Nicholson-Crotty, and Peterson 2004), we establish that ideological biases arise at the individual level, early in the diffusion process. Without an intervention, such as an emphasis on consistency with partisan goals or highlighting the policy's success, ideological biases in learning may seriously alter the policy choices entertained by ideologically motivated policymakers.

In reaching these conclusions it is important to note that our study focused on how local officials responded to liberal proposals dealing with zoning and foreclosure policies. More work can be done to test whether the results apply more broadly. Our study provides a template for how to incorporate experimental research design into studies of policy diffusion to better judge the generalizability of our findings and to generate knowledge in entirely new areas. For example, scholars have been interested in discerning among the many possible *mechanisms* that lead to policy diffusion. We focus here on learning; but mechanisms such as competition, imitation, socialization, or coercion could be examined with clever experimental designs. For instance, policymakers could be primed to think about competition with their neighbors through a description of policies designed to lure away businesses. Under what conditions are competitive pressures heightened?

Second, scholars have been interested in the *conditional* nature of policy diffusion. We highlight two such conditions, but there are many others that can be studied carefully through experimental designs. For example, future experiments could manipulate information about the communities that implement the policy in the vignette to assess the role of similarities across governments in learning. Likewise, whether policy entrepreneurs, information clearinghouses, and interest groups are characterized (and perceived) as nonpartisan, as bipartisan, or as made up of co-partisans may influence policymakers' initial consideration of their ideas.

Third, the *types* of policies themselves affect the diffusion process and thus merit careful analysis. Future experiments could focus on policies that vary on many additional dimensions, including policy complexity, economic vs. morality policy, perception as a local vs. national issue, or favorability to conservatives rather than liberals, to name but a few. Future experiments could also extend beyond local officials to those at the state or national level, both within the U.S. and beyond, and to other relevant political actors such as bureaucrats or legislative staff members.

While we see fertile ground for experimental research on policy diffusion, ultimately the most useful conclusions will come from uniting theoretical, observational, and experimental approaches. For instance, observational studies have well characterized aggregate decisions at the policy adoption stage in the diffusion process. In contrast, we capture individual interest in learning more about other governments' policy experiences early in the diffusion process. Combining these approaches can foster a better understanding of why the spread of policies appears to be based on the partisanship and ideology of policymakers. Scholars can expand upon this work with observational studies of bill introductions, experimental studies of policy entrepreneurs and interest groups, and theoretical understandings of still other stages of the public policy process. Doing so will allow us to better trace out the causal steps that lead to the interrelated web of policies across governments, and to better understand the politics behind such policy choices.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website, including Appendices and the following:

- Figure A1:** Number of Municipal Officials (from each State) Participating in either Experiment 1 or 2
- Figure A2:** Response Rates (by State) of Municipal Officials Invited to Participate in either Experiment 1 or 2
- Figure A3:** Density Plot of Cities' Population by Email Availability and Response
- Table B1:** Issue Position Questions
- Table C1:** Summary Statistics for Variables in Table 1
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- Figure D1:** Figure 3 Showing Republicans Only
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- Table S1:** Interest in Learning by Timing of Response
- Table S2:** Effect by Timing of Survey Response
- Table S3:** Generalized Additive Models, Smoothing Ideology Variables
- Figure S1:** Figure 3 with 95% Confidence Intervals
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- Figure S4:** Figure D2 with 95% Confidence Intervals