

How getting the right actors involved can help successful local policies spread across the country

One of the oft-cited advantages of the US system of government is that it gives state and local governments the ability to innovate in policymaking. But how can policies which are successful in one area be taken up elsewhere? In new research which examines the introduction by states of drug courts for non-violent offenders, [James W. Douglas](#), [Ringa Raudla](#), and [Roger E. Hartley](#) write that the spread of such policies is influenced by other governments who have already adopted the policy, state and local governments, and professional, national, and regional associations and lobby groups. Without the support of such key actors, they write, successful local policy innovations are unlikely to spread widely.



Local governments in the United States have the potential to serve as important laboratories for policy innovations. Theoretically speaking, when one local jurisdiction develops a beneficial program, other jurisdictions will learn from this experience and implement the innovation themselves—a process known as *policy diffusion*. While this process sounds very straight-forward, it can be quite complicated and drawn out. After all, there are tens of thousands of local governments operating in the country. Simply finding out what innovations have been attempted by other jurisdictions can be a monumental task for local officials.



In general, local jurisdictions go through three main phases during the policy diffusion process: the *discovery* of the policy innovation by officials within a jurisdiction, the *assessment* of the policy innovation to determine its potential usefulness for the jurisdiction and, finally, the *decision to adopt* the policy.



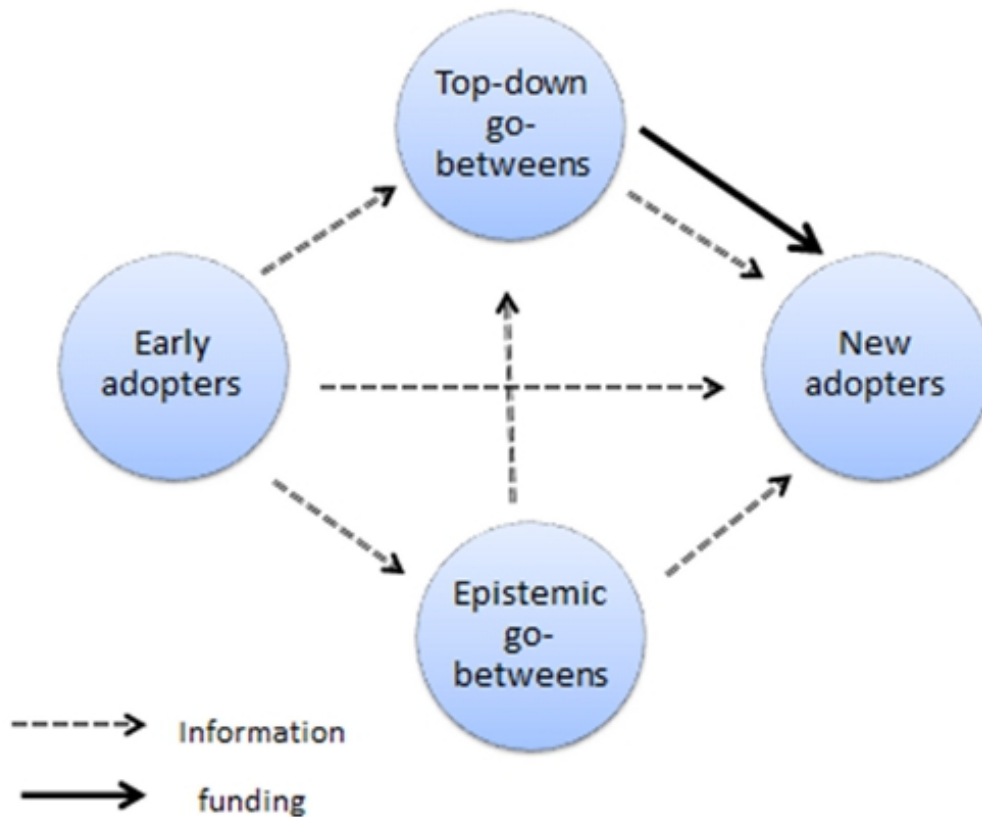
Final decisions to adopt policy innovations are often driven by three key motivators. First, local officials may perceive an innovation to be a solution to an important problem facing their jurisdiction (e.g. reducing drug crime). Second, the innovation may be perceived to enhance the reputation or legitimacy of the jurisdiction (e.g. becoming a sanctuary city). Third, the jurisdiction may be responding to inducements by higher-level governments, either positive (e.g. federal grants) or more coercive (e.g. state or federal rules). Of the three, the first, perceiving an innovation to be an effective solution to a problem tends to be the most effective at garnering commitment to the policy change by adopting governments.

The larger policy environment plays a substantial role in influencing which of these motivators serve as the primary drivers for the spread of a particular policy. The diffusion process evolves over time as the key actors interact with one another, and these interactions play a major role in determining how successfully a policy innovation spreads across the country. In [our study](#) of the diffusion of drug courts, we describe the different types of actors and show how their interactions can affect all phases of the diffusion process: discovery, assessment, and the decision to adopt.

The spread of a policy is influenced by three main types of actors: other governments who have already adopted the policy, top-down go-betweens, and epistemic go-betweens. Go-betweens are actors who are promoting the policy to local jurisdictions. Top-down go-betweens are higher-level authorities (such as the federal and state governments) which can exert top-down pressures on lower-level jurisdictions. These pressures can come in the form of inducements (such as grants, tax incentives, legislation, sanctions, etc.) and information about the benefits of adopting the policy. In contrast, professional associations, national and regional organizations, advocacy groups and the like play the role of epistemic go-betweens. These actors promote a policy innovation largely through the

dissemination of information and/or active lobbying. Figure 1 shows the complex interactions these main actors may have with one another.

Figure 1 – Networks of diffusion for policy innovations



The case of the drug court movement shows how vital these relationships are to fostering diffusion. Drug courts are therapeutic courts centered on the rehabilitation of non-violent drug offenders rather than punishment. The first drug court was established in 1989 in Miami as a mechanism for reducing drug addiction and crime. The diffusion process began when criminal justice officials in other local jurisdictions took note of this new type of court and assessed it as a potential answer to their own drug-related caseload problems. The diffusion process moved very slowly at first because it was driven entirely by early adopters. Jurisdictions discovered the innovation through contact with early adopters, but few existed, limiting the opportunities to learn about them. Drug courts were also new, so little evidence existed with which to assess their effectiveness. Finally, drug courts were not costless, so funding was needed to start and maintain them. Thus, few jurisdictions adopted the reform. Between 1989 and 1993 only 21 drug courts were established nationwide.

The 21 original drug courts served as laboratories through which the reform was tested. Officers in these original jurisdictions became convinced of the reform's effectiveness and became advocates who established the National Association of Drug Court Professionals (NADCP) in 1994. The NADCP served as an epistemic go-between that promoted drug courts by providing information and trainings to local officials, and lobbying Congress to offer funding. At the same time, the Department of Justice (DOJ) became aware of the early drug courts and began to function as a top-down go-between by offering planning and start-up grants to local jurisdictions. The involvement of the NADCP and DOJ raised the profile of drug courts, making them easier to discover. Additionally, the DOJ planning grants and NADCP information and trainings made assessment easier. Finally, DOJ grants solved the funding problem facing many jurisdictions, at least in the short-term. As a result, the number of drug courts in operation grew to 675 by 2000.

A major point of concern became the short-term nature of federal grants, which provided money for planning and start-ups but left long-term financing up to the grant recipients. The NADCP (as well as other epistemic go-betweens that had become supporters) and local adopters began to lobby state governments to provide more support and stable funding. Where they were successful, state governments became powerful top-down go-betweens; for example, New York provided a line-item in its budget to support drug courts and put training procedures in place. The funding caused the number of adopters in the state to increase by over 500% between 2000 and 2013. The training procedures ensured that local jurisdictions adopted the reform for the right reason—a commitment to reducing the drug problem rather than an effort to garner more resources or simply to please important state officials. In contrast to the New York experience, the drug court movement was more stagnant in states that opted to play less active roles in providing support.

The major lesson from the drug court movement is that successful policy innovations at the local level are not likely to spread widely without the support of key actors in the larger policy environment. Expecting innovations to spread on their own, from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, in a rapid manner is unrealistic in most cases given the time and effort each local government would have to invest simply to discover and assess new ideas. Under such conditions, identifying and adopting a useful innovation is a mere game of chance.

Successful policy diffusions are more likely to occur when early adopters are able to demonstrate the effectiveness of an innovation to state and federal officials as well as professional organizations. Convincing such go-betweens to become advocates for the reform can significantly reduce the cost of discovery and assessment for local jurisdictions and provide the resources necessary to encourage widespread adoptions. Finally, developing effective planning and training mechanisms improves the chances that jurisdictions will be motivated to implement innovations as means to solve problems rather than to simply reap rewards or enhance their reputations.

This article is based on the paper, 'Shifting Constellations of Actors and Their Influence on Policy Diffusion: A Study of the Diffusion of Drug Courts', in Policy Studies.

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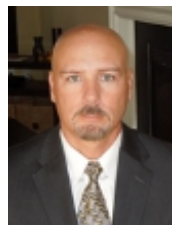
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About the authors

James W. Douglas – *University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

James W. Douglas is a professor in the Department of Political Science & Public Administration at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. His research interests include public budgeting and finance, judicial administration, and public administration more generally. His most recent publications have appeared in *Public Administration Review* and *Policy Studies Journal*.



Ringa Raudla – *Tallinn University of Technology*

Ringa Raudla is professor of public finance and governance at Ragnar Nurkse School of Innovation and Governance, Tallinn University of Technology, Estonia. Her research interests include fiscal governance, fiscal policy, public budgeting, institutional economics, and public management reforms. Her most recent publications have appeared in *Public Administration Review*, *Policy Studies Journal* and *Governance*.

Roger E. Hartley – *University of Baltimore*

Roger E. Hartley is dean of the College of Public Affairs at the University of Baltimore. His research and teaching interests are in administration and policy issues that impact judicial systems. He is the author of the book *Alternative Dispute Resolution in Civil Justice Systems*.

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