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Diffusion Through Democracy

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Many argue that international norms influence government behavior, and that policies diffuse from country to country, because of idea exchanges within elite networks. However, politicians are not free to follow their foreign counterparts, because domestic constituencies constrain them. This article examines how electoral concerns shape diffusion patterns and argues that foreign templates and international organization recommendations can shift voters’ policy positions and produce electoral incentives for politicians to mimic certain foreign models. Experimental individual-level data from the field of family policy illustrates that even U.S. voters shift positions substantially when informed about UN recommendations and foreign countries’ choices. However, voters receive limited information about international developments, biased towards the policy choices of large and proximate countries. Aggregate data on the family policy choices of OECD countries show how voters’ limited information about international models shapes government decisions: governments are disproportionately likely to mimic countries whose news citizens follow, and international organizations are most influential in countries with internationally oriented citizens.

A growing body of evidence indicates that international norms are spreading within regions and across the globe and causing radical domestic policy shifts (Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007; Goodman and Jinks 2004). International organization proposals and neighboring states’ choices shape diverse domestic policies, such as the introduction of mass public education (Schofer and Meyer 2005), the adoption of democracy and expansion of political rights (Gleditsch and Ward 2006; Ramirez et al. 1997), the expansion of human rights (Goodman and Jinks forthcoming), the turn to environmentalism (Frank et al. 2000), the reform of state administrative structures (Finnemore 1993; Lee and Strang 2006), and the adoption of liberalization policies (Simmons and Elkins 2004).

While aggregate data about the cross-national influence of ideas are accumulating, the microlevel logic of diffusion processes remains unclear. Many studies analyze states by analogy to individuals: individuals face uncertainty, learn, mimic, and seek peer approval; therefore states, composed of individuals, do the same. Political leaders may learn new information about a policy and correctly update their beliefs (Volden, Ting, and Carpenter 2008), leaders may receive information that is biased and process it in a biased way (Weyland 2005), or they may be persuaded to shift their fundamental goals (Checkel 2005; Risse 2000). In addition, leaders may be socialized into networks of like-minded thinkers and imitate one another to gain peer approval (Johnston 2001). Empirical studies examining how much individual leaders respond to international norms yield mixed results: some authors point to subtle but substantial shifts (Johnston 2008), others to modest changes (Kelley 2004), and still others find no evidence of elite socialization (Hooghe 2005).

More critically, a theoretical framework that assumes that changes in leaders’ positions will translate directly into major policy shifts is inconsistent with theories of democracy. Theories of democracy center on the proposition that voters’ opinions heavily constrain politicians’ positions. Moreover, this proposition finds substantial empirical support in both the United States and the comparative literature (Bender and Lott 1996; Burnstein 2003;
In using shifts in political leaders’ preferences to explain large policy changes, existing diffusion research assumes that these leaders have powers they likely lack. Existing diffusion research tells us little about whether domestic political processes correct for, or reinforce, shifts in leaders’ positions.

This article develops and tests a theoretical framework to explain how electoral mechanisms shape the patterns of policy diffusion. Because prior studies have established the breadth of policy areas where diffusion occurs, this article examines a single policy area in depth, using three types of evidence: individual-level public opinion data, qualitative evidence of politicians’ decision making, and cross-national data of policy adoption and implementation. The empirical analysis examines diffusion claims in the context of family policy decisions in advanced industrialized countries for two main reasons. First, work on diffusion, norm change, and “soft” international organization influence is often subject to the criticism that any observed responses are largely symbolic and superficial (Meyer et al. 1997, 149–57). Concentrating on social policy in OECD countries permits identifying what international norm adoption means in practice, because accurate data on policy adoption and government expenditures are available, in addition to an extensive set of domestic politics controls. Second, the theoretical model proposed here requires that government policy be constrained by voter opinion; this assumption is particularly well substantiated in empirical studies of social policy development (Powell 2004, 282–84).

The theoretical framework begins with the observation that voters face substantial uncertainty in evaluating domestic policy proposals. When a foreign government adopts a policy, or an international organization recommends it, this sends a strong signal to voters. Voters now know that an outsider has vetted the policy and therefore may increase their support for this proposal. To examine these claims, this article presents a public opinion experiment on a representative sample of U.S. voters. Americans are not considered particularly receptive to international norms and thus constitute a difficult case for the theory. This experiment shows that Americans respond very positively to information about international models; for example, a UN recommendation shifts public opinion substantially more than a recommendation from U.S. experts. Not all people respond in the same way: while UN recommendations resonate with a wide range of people, they influence people who have a favorable view of the United Nations the most. In addition, voters with limited information about a policy respond more strongly than well-informed voters, a pattern consistent with the theoretical claim that international models offer voters valuable information.

However, voters pay little attention to developments abroad. Voters get their information passively, through the media, and the media in turn covers only some foreign developments. As a large number of cross-national media studies show, the media focuses on culturally proximate countries and on economically powerful states. When a rich and culturally proximate country adopts a new law, voters may hear about it. When a poor or distant country adopts a new law, this information may never reach voters. Similarly, some international organizations are more prominent than others, and voters in some countries are more attuned to international organization messages than voters in other countries.

This creates a problem for politicians. Politicians have much greater capabilities and incentives than ordinary voters to collect information about developments abroad. For example, politicians can consult extensively with expert communities. However, because in democracies politicians cannot impose their preferred policy, they cannot use all of the available information. If a politician believes that a policy adopted by a small and remote foreign country is the best choice for their country, she might anticipate an uphill battle in persuading her fellow citizens that this is the best proposal, and drop it. Similarly, electoral incentives can sometimes prompt a politician to adopt the dominant international model despite her doubts.

To illustrate this proposition, this article presents qualitative data on the U.S. adoption of family leave. Activists and experts focused on family policy success in Sweden, and the Swedish model was central to the adoption of family leave through the courts. However, Sweden was largely absent from policy debates in Congress. Members of Congress and the president focused instead on the experiences of Japan and Germany, two countries with unremarkable family policies, but with great prominence in U.S. media in the early 1980s and 1990s.

To test this proposition systematically and examine how much politicians change course in response to these electoral incentives, the article studies the international and domestic determinants of family policy development across OECD countries. This analysis indicates that governments mimic countries whose news voters follow, and that international organization influence is greatest in countries whose publics are internationally oriented. Competitors’ choices do not influence government decision making in the family policy field. However, diverse domestic interest groups matter: labor union protests, women in office, and Christian parties explain important variation in family policies. If voters’ informational limitations shape patterns of policy diffusion, this has important implications for activists and international organizations trying to spread particular messages, as well
as for critics concerned with the democratic deficit of international institutions and transnational networks.

The next section develops the article’s theoretical argument. Three empirical sections follow. First, a public opinion experiment shows that even U.S. voters respond significantly to information from abroad. Second, qualitative evidence illustrates how U.S. politicians use information from abroad selectively, only referencing countries familiar to voters in public debates. Third, a study of maternity leave development across 18 OECD countries over 25 years follows, demonstrating that governments imitate countries that are prominent in the news. This third empirical section also develops and tests alternative diffusion mechanisms, such as competition and learning from policy success. A final section concludes with implications for diffusion scholarship and for activists and international organizations interested in spreading messages across countries.

### Theoretical Predictions

**Proposition 1.** Voters have limited information about policy proposals.

Voters desire policies that will bring about good results at an acceptable cost. However, voters often face substantial uncertainty in figuring out which policies meet this test (Burden 2003, 6–8). Domestic sources of information can help with this task: past national experiences with similar policies, academic studies, and interest-group positions can all inform voters. In federal states, regional governments’ policy experiments might be particularly informative. However, even after receiving information from domestic sources, many voters are still uncertain about policy consequences (Gilens 2001). In such cases, information from abroad can be influential. This model does not assume that information from foreign sources is more influential than information from domestic sources; it merely assumes that domestic information does not eliminate all voter uncertainty.

**Proposition 2.** International models can influence voters’ support for policy proposals.

If voters receive information from abroad, they may respond for two main reasons. First, many voters care about domestic policy outcomes. Voters who receive information that a particular policy has been independently vetted by foreign decision makers may gravitate towards that policy in the expectation that it will bring about better outcomes, domestically, as compared to a new, untested proposal. Information that a foreign country adopted a policy proposal is a costly signal that foreign leaders have vetted this proposal: a foreign government independently evaluated the proposal and found it to be a good enough policy to enact domestically. It is a signal unlikely to be issued for the purpose of influencing the domestic election; in most fields, foreign governments care too little to invest in a domestic program in order to create policy incentives for their neighbors.

Voters’ views of the foreign government likely shape their responses. Voters will be strongly influenced by policy adoption abroad if they believe that a competent foreign government is pursuing desirable policy goals in a similar socioeconomic environment. The less these conditions hold, the less relevant the foreign experience becomes. When multiple foreign governments make the same policy choice, voters gain more information and are likely to respond more positively than when a single foreign government has adopted the policy, or than when different foreign governments have made different policy choices. Similarly, when an international organization collects and articulates the policy choices of multiple countries in the form of a policy recommendation, voters receive a particularly strong signal. Based on this informational mechanism, we should expect voters who have high prior levels of information not to gain much new information from the fact that a policy is adopted by a foreign government; information effects should be strongest among voters with low levels of initial information.

International models can also be influential because some voters may be directly concerned with how foreign countries are acting and with what international organizations are proposing: they may prefer that their country conform to international norms. Whether voters will want their government to conform to the international community likely depends on voters’ perception of this community. Voters favorably disposed to the United Nations, for example, may want to follow UN recommendations for the sake of conformity; voters negatively disposed may prefer that their government ignore UN recommendations, or act in a contrary fashion.

**Proposition 3.** Voters receive information about certain international models only.

Voters generally receive information about developments abroad passively; they become aware of the policy choices of countries covered in the media and remain unaware of other countries’ choices (Barabas and Jerit 2009). In turn, media coverage focuses disproportionately on certain countries. Diverse studies indicate that news cov-
Proposition 4. Politicians have electoral incentives to mimic international models when voters are aware of these.

Politicians may seek to enact particular policies, shaped by their personal and partisan beliefs, and by the preferences of interest groups and activists. However, democracy constrains them: politicians must balance their desire to enact their preferred policies with their fear of losing the next election; this drives politicians away from their preferred policies and towards policies attractive to voters (Wittman 1983).

Recent game-theoretic models illustrate how international organizations can influence this calculus. International organizations can provide valuable information to voters and create electoral incentives for leaders to conclude trade treaties (Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorf 2002), comply with environmental agreements (Dai 2005), and seek UN Security Council approval on military questions (Fang 2008). Analogously, the yardstick competition literature suggests that within federations, voters compare tax policies in neighboring states in deciding whether to reelect incumbents (Besley and Case 1995). A key intuition in such models is that voters cannot know whether a policy is well or poorly designed to serve voters’ preferences, even after the policy has succeeded or failed, because voters lack the information to distinguish flaws in policy design from exogenous shocks. Leaders have incentives to enact policies that others have vetted, so that they can signal to voters that the policy was well designed, that any negative consequences were unforeseeable, and that they should therefore be reelected despite any policy failures.

Extending these models’ intuitions to cross-national policy diffusion requires highlighting and examining two assumptions empirically. First, both legally binding international commitments and nonbinding international organization recommendations, as well as foreign government choices, must have the potential to convey credible information to voters, and generate positive responses among them, as Proposition 2 outlines. Second, information from abroad must reach voters for these electoral incentives to work; as Proposition 3 outlines, voters are more likely to receive information about large and proximate countries than to hear about the policy choices of small and distant countries. If these assumptions are met, politicians will have incentives to mimic the policy choices of countries and international organizations familiar to voters and to ignore useful information from other sources not visible to voters. Relatedly, politicians who have severe personal doubts about particular international models will nonetheless have incentives to publicly embrace these models when the electorate is aware of them (cf. Scharfstein and Stein 1990).

The existing diffusion literature suggests that foreign models can shape national choices in several ways: by altering the material incentives domestic actors face, through the mechanisms of conditionality and competition, and by providing new information, through the mechanisms of learning and emulation. Such mechanisms can often work in parallel with the proposed electoral mechanism: politicians must often balance voter preferences with interest group pressures and international obligations. This article examines diverse diffusion mechanisms in the cross-national analysis, after exploring the electoral mechanisms proposed here through experimental public opinion data and qualitative evidence.

Voters’ Responses to Information about International Models

Do voters’ positions shift when they are informed about international models? This article extends experimental techniques used to study voters’ responses to international military conflicts (Grieco et al. 2011; Tomz 2007) to the study of policy diffusion. A representative sample of 1,291 U.S. adults was used. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of five groups. Respondents in the first, baseline group were asked: “To what extent

Knowledge Networks administered the survey. Of people offered the survey, 63% responded. To construct a representative sample, Knowledge Networks uses random-digit dialing and address-based sampling methods to select participants and create a panel that is representative of the entire U.S. population. Once selected, respondents answer questionnaires online. Households are provided with Internet access and hardware if necessary. Households that already have Internet access receive incentive points, redeemable for cash, for completing their surveys. Prior research confirms that the Knowledge Networks sample is not only representative as regards demographic variables reported in the Current Population Survey, but also closely matches more specialized surveys recording interest in politics (Tomz 2007, 837).
To examine the conformity mechanism, respondents receiving information about an international norm (Groups 3 and 4), as well as respondents in the baseline group (Group 1), were also asked: “Do you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of the United Nations?” Fifty-six percent responded that they had a very or somewhat favorable opinion of the UN, while 44% responded that they had a very or somewhat unfavorable view. These data track the 2007 Pew Survey, where 55% of Americans expressed a favorable opinion of the UN and 45% an unfavorable one. However, Americans’ support for the UN is substantially lower than support recorded in all OECD countries included in the 2007 Pew Survey, except Japan. This suggests that Americans’ responsiveness to international prompts, reported here, is probably not larger than that of citizens in other OECD countries; further experiments in different countries would be necessary to ascertain this.

To examine how information levels and attitudes towards the UN condition shifts in attitudes, probit models predicting support for an increase in taxes for the purpose of introducing maternity leaves are presented in Table 2 below. Model I presents baseline support based only on the experimental treatments. Model II predicts support based on the experimental treatments and a set of foreign models can shed light on what explains these effects. The theoretical discussion offers two possible pathways: the informational pathway, according to which voters gain information about the likely domestic consequences of a particular proposal, and the conformity pathway, according to which voters prefer that their country conform to international norms. To investigate the informational pathway, all respondents were asked how familiar they were with social policy issues. Specifically, they were asked: “Employers and employees pay taxes and fees for benefit programs such as health insurance, pensions, and childcare. In general, how well informed are you about the costs and benefits of such programs? Would you say you are very well informed, fairly well informed, not too well informed, or not at all informed?” Forty-eight percent of respondents answered that they were either very or fairly well informed, while 52% replied that they were either not too well or not at all informed. This indicates that some voters face substantial informational limitations in evaluating social policy proposals, in support of Proposition 1.

Table 1 presents the basic results of this experiment. Each row represents an experimental group. The columns give the percentage of respondents who expressed agreement (“Strongly Agree” and “Somewhat Agree”) and disagreement (“Strongly Disagree” and “Somewhat Disagree”). Ninety-five percent confidence intervals appear in parentheses. Aggregate support for a tax increase to introduce paid maternity leave increases by about 20 percentage points when it is presented as the policy choice of Canada, the policy choice of most Western countries, or as the recommendation of U.S. experts. Aggregate support increases even more—by 28 percentage points—when the policy is introduced as a UN recommendation. The differences between each of the introductions and the baseline are statistically significant at the 0.10 level at least, as is the difference between the UN recommendation, on the one hand, and any of the other introductions, on the other.

Respondents in Groups 2 through 5 received the same baseline question, prefaced by different introductions. For Group 2, the preface was “Canada provides mothers of newborn children with paid leave from work.” For Group 3, the preface was “Most Western countries provide mothers of newborn children with paid leave from work.” For Group 4, the preface was “The United Nations recommends that all countries should provide mothers of newborn children with paid leave from work.” For Group 5, the preface was “American family policy experts recommend that the United States should provide mothers of newborn children with paid leave from work.”

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How different groups respond to information about foreign models can shed light on what explains these effects. The theoretical discussion offers two possible pathways: the informational pathway, according to which voters gain information about the likely domestic consequences of a particular proposal, and the conformity pathway, according to which voters prefer that their country conform to international norms. To investigate the informational pathway, all respondents were asked how familiar they were with social policy issues. Specifically, they were asked: “Employers and employees pay taxes and fees for benefit programs such as health insurance, pensions, and childcare. In general, how well informed are you about the costs and benefits of such programs? Would you say you are very well informed, fairly well informed, not too well informed, or not at all informed?” Forty-eight percent of respondents answered that they were either very or fairly well informed, while 52% replied that they were either not too well or not at all informed. This indicates that some voters face substantial informational limitations in evaluating social policy proposals, in support of Proposition 1.

Table 1 Support for a Tax Increase to Introduce Paid Maternity Leave

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>Agree (%)</th>
<th>Disagree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(95% Conf. Interval)</td>
<td>(95% Conf. Interval)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Introduction</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Group 1: N = 252)</td>
<td>(15, 25)</td>
<td>(75, 85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada Introduction</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Group 2: N = 256)</td>
<td>(34, 46)</td>
<td>(54, 66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Western Countries</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>(Group 3: N = 265)</td>
<td>(34, 46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN Recommendation Introduction</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Group 4: N = 264)</td>
<td>(42, 54)</td>
<td>(46, 58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Experts Introduction</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Group 5: N = 254)</td>
<td>(34, 47)</td>
<td>(53, 66)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table 2 Models Predicting Support for Maternity Leave

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 2 (Canada)</strong></td>
<td>0.58***</td>
<td>0.65***</td>
<td>0.93***</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 3 (Most Western countries)</strong></td>
<td>0.58***</td>
<td>0.60***</td>
<td>0.84***</td>
<td>0.83***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
<td>(0.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 4 (UN recommendation)</strong></td>
<td>0.78***</td>
<td>0.81***</td>
<td>0.94***</td>
<td>0.62***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>(0.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 5 (U.S. expert recommendation)</strong></td>
<td>0.59***</td>
<td>0.63***</td>
<td>0.74***</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-UN</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well informed on social policy</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.38***</td>
<td>0.33*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.19)</td>
<td>(0.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2 * Well informed</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.25)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Group 3 * Well informed</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—0.54**</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.25)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4 * Well informed</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—0.25</td>
<td>—0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.25)</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 5 * Well informed</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—0.24</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.24)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3 * Pro-UN</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4 * Pro-UN</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>—0.06</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children (0–12)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—0.13</td>
<td>—0.14</td>
<td>—0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
<td>(0.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female * Children (0–12)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>0.39**</td>
<td>0.47*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>(0.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—0.02***</td>
<td>—0.02***</td>
<td>—0.01***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (high school graduate)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—0.19</td>
<td>—0.21*</td>
<td>—0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (some college)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—0.24*</td>
<td>—0.28**</td>
<td>—0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (bachelor's or higher)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—0.05</td>
<td>—0.01</td>
<td>—0.07</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—0.20**</td>
<td>—0.20**</td>
<td>—0.21*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.51***</td>
<td>0.52***</td>
<td>0.35***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>—0.83***</td>
<td>—0.27</td>
<td>—0.41*</td>
<td>—0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.90)</td>
<td>(0.21)</td>
<td>(0.23)</td>
<td>(0.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1291</td>
<td>1291</td>
<td>1284</td>
<td>769</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***significant at the 0.01 level, **significant at the 0.05 level, *significant at the 0.10 level; standard errors in parentheses.
demographic variables identified in the public opinion literature on family policy (Bolzendahl and Olafsdottir 2008). Model III examines how information about social policy conditions the impact of experimental stimuli. Model IV examines how both information and support for the UN conditions the impact of these stimuli.

To interpret these effects, first differences were calculated using simulations (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2003). When other variables are held at their mean, Model III indicates that support for a tax increase to introduce maternity leave is 19 points higher among Democrats than among Republicans; 8 points lower among whites as compared to nonwhites; 10 to 19 points higher among women with young children as compared to women without young children, men with young children, and men without young children; and 12 points higher among 30-year-olds as compared to 50-year-olds, with all differences significant at least at the 0.10 level.

Figure 1 below shows how prior information about social policies influences responses to each of the prompts, again based on Model III estimates, and holding demographic variables at their means. For example, the far left column shows that when told that Canada provided maternity leaves, respondents who rated themselves as well informed increased their support for maternity leave by 13 percentage points (standard error 6). The second column from the left shows that the effect was much larger among respondents who believed they had limited prior information about social policy—their support increased by 30 percentage points (s.e. 5). Figure 1 shows that persons who did not consider themselves well informed responded less than persons who considered themselves well informed to each of the prompts, although the difference between well- and ill-informed persons’ responses was only statistically significant for the first two prompts (Canada and most Western countries introductions). These findings are consistent with the claim that information is a key pathway through which foreign models influence public opinion.

Simulations based on Model IV, holding demographic variables at their means, show that people who have favorable views of the UN respond significantly more to the UN recommendation than people who have unfavorable views of the UN; attitudes change by 36 percentage points (s.e. 5). In contrast, responsiveness to the prompt about the practices of most Western countries does not depend on attitudes towards the UN. The finding that UN supporters respond more to the UN prompt is consistent both with the conformity and with the information mechanisms. People who hold favorable views of the UN may prefer that the United States conform to international norms because this is intrinsically desirable, or they may consider the UN to be a credible source of information about which policies work domestically. The strongest evidence for a conformity effect is the fact that responsiveness to a UN recommendation is in aggregate stronger than responsiveness to any of the other prompts, and that large shifts in attitudes occur even among persons who consider themselves well informed about social policy.

This experiment yields several additional surprises that could spark further research. First, even persons with negative views of the UN responded positively to the UN recommendation, although the effect was much smaller than for people with positive views of the UN. Perhaps the standard Pew survey question about attitudes to the UN, replicated here, conflates two dimensions: beliefs about the UN’s goals and beliefs about the UN’s efficacy. Perhaps some people with unfavorable views towards the UN are supportive of its goals, and thus swayed by its recommendations, but skeptical of its institutional capabilities to carry out these goals. Another surprising finding is that while attitudes towards the UN condition responsiveness to the UN recommendation, they do not influence responsiveness to the prompt concerning policy adoption by foreign countries. The fact that people with positive and negative views of the UN are equally likely to be influenced by foreign country policies suggests that no coherent “pro-international” attitude exists. Attitudes towards foreign endorsements may be nuanced; it is worth investigating responsiveness to particular foreign sources. Also surprising is that the adoption of a practice by Canada triggers just as large a response as the adoption of a practice by many Western countries. This suggests that, for U.S. voters, Canada may be the most influential foreign country; replacing Canada with “Great Britain” or “France” in subsequent experiments will likely yield smaller effects.

How much are such effects likely to matter outside of the experimental setting, given that a large literature on political communication shows that voters respond differently to public opinion polls that raise different considerations? A recent review of this literature concludes that there exists “a clear and systematic limit to framing,” namely “perceived source credibility” (Chong and Druckman 2007a, 1061). Indicatively, prior experiments show that an endorsement from the New York Times shifts voters’ policy views, but not one from the National Enquirer; similarly, an endorsement from Colin Powell changes voters’ policy views, but not one from Jerry Springer (Druckman 2001). The evidence presented above adds to domestic research on endorsements by showing that foreign endorsements can also trigger large opinion shifts. Notably, the adoption of a practice by the Canadian
government appears to be a credible endorsement, as it triggers an opinion shift as large as the shift that results when U.S. experts recommend a policy. More surprisingly, a recommendation coming from the UN triggers a larger response than a recommendation coming from U.S. experts. Prior research suggests that the magnitude of these effects will likely decrease when voters are presented with competing information, but that the endorsement effects will not disappear entirely (Chong and Druckman 2007b). Another important caveat concerns the information differential reported above: while less informed voters might be more likely to change their views if they get new information, they might also be less likely to receive this information if they are generally inattentive to politics. Ultimately, public opinion data as such cannot show how much endorsements will influence voters outside a controlled setting, and to what extent politicians will deviate from policies they would otherwise pursue, in order to increase voter support by gaining credible endorsements. The article therefore continues by examining qualitative evidence on politicians’ rhetoric as well as aggregate data on how family policy develops over time and space.

**Politicians’ Strategies and Rhetoric**

According to the proposed theory, politicians expect that only a few countries and international organizations will resonate with voters. Politicians might hear about developments in additional countries if information collection is cheap. For example, policy experts might eagerly share their views about successes abroad, and domestic interest groups and international organizations might advertise their preferred models. The theory predicts that politicians should often disregard expert advice and interest group preferences and focus instead on countries familiar to voters. However, we should not observe a discrepancy between politicians’ and voters’ knowledge in all contexts. If information collection is costly even for politicians, politicians might concentrate their searches on the few countries that resonate with voters.

In the development of family policy, arguments about international models occupy center stage even in U.S. debates. The United States is currently the only industrialized country in the world without laws mandating paid parental or maternity leave. This argument has been a central theme in advocacy efforts to introduce paid leave (Lester 2005). It was made repeatedly in debates on the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA), the federal statute that provides for unpaid parental leave. In introducing this legislation, Senator Dodd described the maternity leave policies of Canada, France, Germany, and Japan (139 Cong. Rec. S987, February 2, 1993). Dozens of senators and representatives echoed these themes: the congressional record includes over 30 specific references to Germany, Canada, and Japan, more than 10 references to France, and many more references to the policies of
industrialized nations generally. In signing the FMLA, President Clinton concluded with this theme, highlighting that “American workers in all 50 states will enjoy the same rights as workers in other nations” (1993 U.S.C.C.A.N. 54, February 5, 1993).

Politicians’ emphasis on Germany, Japan, and Canada is consistent with the prominence of these countries in the U.S. media in the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, the references to Germany and Japan in particular are puzzling to family policy experts: both these countries fare particularly poorly in international comparisons of maternal employment rates (OECD, various years). If experts, advocacy groups, and policy success considerations were driving congressional debates, we should instead expect multiple references to Sweden, and yet these were scarce. Even critics of the legislation chose to challenge the relevance of the German and Japanese examples, instead of attacking the legislation by connecting it to Sweden. These efforts to introduce family leave through Congress contrast with efforts to introduce family leave through courts. Advocacy efforts to influence the federal judiciary focused on Sweden (Franklin 2010) perhaps because electoral and other audience costs are lower in this forum.

These brief descriptions of U.S. debates on family leave are illustrative. In a companion manuscript, I develop full case studies on the role of foreign models in the development of family, employment, and health policies across South European countries (Linos 2007b). Studying diffusion in Southern Europe allows one to distinguish clearly between references to countries prominent in the media and salient to voters (e.g., France, Britain, and Germany), from references to trade competitors (e.g., Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Greece).

### International Influences in OECD Governments’ Family Policy Choices

The sections that follow examine how international influences shaped family policy in 18 OECD countries over 25 years. The countries are Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, West Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The period is 1970 to 1994. Because the EU mandated maternity leave for its members starting in this year, 1994 is used as a cutoff. The EU directive had modest effects, because EU member states only agreed on a directive after they all had adopted national maternity leave laws (Falkner et al. 2005, 89–91). Nevertheless, distinguishing diffusion from EU influence after 1994 would be difficult.²

Paid maternity leave is measured in weeks (Gauthier 2003; Gauthier and Bortnik 2001).³ OECD governments increased paid maternity leave from a median of 12 weeks in 1970 to 15 weeks in 1994. However, this average hides substantial variation between and within countries over time. In the period under study, three OECD countries—New Zealand, Australia, and the United States—did not offer any paid maternity leave. We also see substantial variation within countries over time; several governments expanded the length of maternity leave at different points in time, while other administrations cut back these benefits, most notably in Italy and Norway in the mid-1980s.

Prior research attributes cross-national variation in governments’ family policy choices, and governments’ social policy decisions more generally, to the preferences and relative strength of domestic interest groups, such as labor unions, employer associations, left- and right-wing parties, and religious and feminist movements. This article shows that international developments are a key missing part of the story; foreign government choices and international organization proposals substantially influence government policies by providing voters with valuable information. To test diffusion models, researchers create spatial lags. These represent the weighted average of the policy choices of a country’s “neighbors.” Researchers specify which countries are considered neighbors theoretically: for example, country A could be defined as country B’s neighbor if it shares a border, competes in the same markets, or is covered heavily in country B’s media. Researchers then test whether “neighboring” countries’ choices are imitated disproportionately. To test the theory that governments imitate countries whose news voters follow disproportionately, the next section outlines what information reaches voters, and how the relevant spatial weight matrix was constructed. Subsequent sections outline how other international and domestic influences are examined, elaborate on the empirical strategy, and present results.

²For a discussion on how the EU has developed antidiscrimination law, see Linos (2010); for a discussion of how EU social directives shape member state legislation, see Linos (2007a).
³It was also possible to use maternity leave weighted by the generosity of this leave. These measures correlate at 0.92, because maternity leave is well compensated across OECD countries. While little hinges on this choice, maternity leave length is used because of the theoretical expectation that qualitative features of policies diffuse, and because data on leave length are more complete. However, as a robustness check, I also show results where maternity leave weighted by the generosity of this leave is used as the dependent variable. Results do not change significantly.
Media Coverage of Large and Proximate Countries: Specifying a Weight Matrix

Voters get information from television, radio, newspapers, magazines, as well as other media: ideally, coverage data for each of these sources would be used. However, such data are not available in a cross-nationally comparable format for 18 OECD countries in the 1970 to 1994 period. Indeed, even leading newspapers in major European countries only make their texts available in electronic format starting in the late 1980s (e.g., Le Monde, France) or even early 1990s (e.g., Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Germany, and Corriere de la Serra, Italy). To create cross-national comparisons, communication scholars have studied the domestic coverage of foreign news through ambitious collaborations involving multiple national teams (e.g., Janssen, Kuipers, and Verboord 2008; Mohammadi et al. 1987). However, even these collaborative projects cover four or five OECD countries at most and cannot be used directly to create a weight matrix.

What is instead available in cross-nationally comparable format for the entire period and set of countries under study are foreign newspaper and magazine sales from each country in the sample to each other country in the sample. Foreign newspaper sales are a useful metric because they correlate highly with the domestic press’s coverage of foreign news (Mohammadi et al. 1987; Ovsiovitch 1993). Two mechanisms account for this close connection. First, and most importantly, both measures reflect country-specific understandings of newsworthiness. Culturally proximate countries pay far more attention to each other’s developments and exchange far more newspapers than culturally distant countries (Buckman 1993; Swain 2003). However, these exchanges are asymmetrical, with richer countries receiving much greater prominence in domestic news, and exporting far more newspapers, than poorer countries (Ramos, Ron, and Thoms 2007).

Second, established channels of news production reinforce these patterns by making it easier and cheaper to report on rich and proximate countries. Domestic media collect information about foreign developments using three main sources: international wire services, foreign correspondents, and foreign newspapers. International wire services originate from and overrepresent a handful of very rich countries; foreign correspondents tend to be stationed in rich, proximate countries; and foreign newspapers disproportionately cover domestic events in the country in which they are published (Weaver et al. 1987, 85). The appendix presents the spatial weight matrix used here, based on foreign newspaper sales, and reviews prior scholarship on cross-national communications to show that foreign newspaper sales and domestic coverage of foreign events reflect the same geographic patterns. In Table 3 below, the effects of this spatial lag are reported under Imitation of Countries in Media.

Other Pathways of International Influence

This article also examines four other pathways of international influence highlighted in prior literature: country-to-country policy diffusion due to competition, country-to-country policy diffusion due to learning from policy success, international organization influence through the ratification of international conventions, and international organization influence through internationally active nongovernmental organizations. These theories are not necessarily competing explanations. For one, various diffusion mechanisms could work in parallel; for example, leaders might be concerned to satisfy both voters and interest groups, both domestic and international audiences. Additionally, prior work does not always specify the actors involved in diffusion pathways such as competition and learning. Perhaps firms are most likely to raise competitiveness considerations, and elected leaders might be directly concerned about evidence of policy success and about international legal obligations. However, such concerns might also be relevant to voters. To be conservative, any observed evidence of diffusion through these pathways is credited to alternative theories rather than to the voter information model developed here.

Several recent diffusion studies emphasize competition as a key driver of policy diffusion (Elkins, Guzman, and Simmons 2006; Simmons and Elkins 2004; Swank 2006). Governments eager to attract firms or fearful that firms will relocate to countries with less “burdensome” regulatory environments may pay particular attention to the policy choices of countries with which they compete. Other scholars of comparative politics emphasize that governments do not imitate competitors’ choices piecemeal, as it is sets of institutions, rather than individual policies, that drive national competitiveness (Hall and Soskice 2001; Iversen and Soskice 2006). Whether trade competition shapes imitation in this field is therefore an open empirical question. Following Elkins, Guzman, and Simmons (2006), trade competitors are defined as countries that exported similar types of products (WDI 2007); results are in the row labeled Competition.

Learning from policy success is the theory that governments imitate policies when they receive evidence of policy success. In prior work, the imitation of policies that correlate with positive outcomes is understood evidence of learning from success. For example, prior work emphasizes that downsizing policies correlated with GDP growth
are particularly likely to spread quickly (Lee and Strang 2006), as are hospital financing reforms associated with reduced health expenditures (Gilardi et al. 2010). In the period examined here, maternity leaves were adopted to help women reconcile work and family; therefore countries are coded as success models if they achieved high female labor market participation.\footnote{More specifically, the regressions examine whether countries that are in the top 10\% of this measure in particular years were imitated disproportionately. In an alternative coding, countries that were top performers throughout the period under study were marked as the template countries. Results did not differ.} Results are labeled Learning from Success in Table 3. More accurately, however, such measures test whether the policies that appear successful spread quickly: correlations between policies and positive outcomes could be due to a third omitted variable or result from a reverse causal relationship.

Additionally, international legal obligations could cause governments to adopt policies they would otherwise avoid. The International Labour Organization
promulgated multiple maternity leave conventions; the
analysis below examines whether governments that rat-
ified these conventions, and governments that ratified
them early on, adopted more extensive leave policies
domestically.\(^5\) Results are reported under ILO Ratifications.
Interpreting ratification data requires great caution,
because governments could decide on what policies to adopt
based on domestic considerations alone, and only ratify
international instruments as a step in carrying out these
predetermined policies.

International organizations spread messages through
governments, but also through citizens and NGOs att-
tuned to their messages. Sociologists of the world culture
school have examined citizen participation in interna-
tional nongovernmental groups, on the theory that coun-
tries whose citizens are involved in transnational groups
are more attentive to global shifts. Prior research illus-
trates how global connectedness rises and falls over time
and how it varies by sector (Boli and Thomas 1999). While
sectoral data were only made available to researchers for
a single year (1988), on the basis of these data, Boli and
Thomas concluded that “world culture is heavily ‘eco-
nomic’ in that not-for-profit bodies concerned with busi-
ness and economic activity (industry and trade combined
with tertiary economic organizations) account for about
one-fourth of all active INGOs” (1999, 41). Moreover,
the structure of the International Labour Organization
calls for unusually great involvement of nongovernmen-
tal bodies, specifically employers and labor unions, in the
development and monitoring of conventions. The preva-
ience of labor-related NGOs, and their close links with
the relevant international organization, makes it likely
that policies related to the workplace diffuse especially
rapidly.

The citizen participation measure uses the number of
international nongovernmental organizations to which a
country’s citizens belong (Yearbook of International Or-
ganizations, various years). In Table 3, the row Many
INGOs reports results based on a binary classification—
countries are coded as either having large numbers of
INGO memberships (1), if they fell in the top 20% of the
sample, or not (0). This measure was chosen because at
the 20% cutoff, a clear break in the data appears. Alterna-
tive ways of coding these data, including using different
cutoffs, using continuous rather than binary measures,
and adjusting for top performers by year, yield similar
results. A correlation between citizen participation in IN-
GOs and policy outcomes when an international organi-

5The measure records years elapsed since particular countries rati-
ified any of the relevant conventions. For more details on the influ-
ence of ILO conventions, see Helfer (2006).

zation model existed (i.e., in maternity leaves), and the
absence of such a correlation when no international or-
ganization model existed (i.e., in family benefits), is a
probative, if indirect, test of international organization
influence.

**Domestic Determinants of Family Policy**

This section outlines the main political, economic, and
demographic variables expected to shape family pol-
icy. The family policies examined here consist of state-
provided social benefits and state regulation of employ-
ment contracts. They are thus often analyzed as social
policies, alongside measures on unemployment, sickness,
or pension benefits (Kangas and Palme 2000; White 2002).
The dominant theory in the social policy field, the power
resources approach, identifies social-democratic govern-
ments and organized labor as the forces for increased
employment protection (Esping-Andersen 1990; Korpi
1989). Thus, we might expect trade unions and social-
democratic parties to support maternity leaves. In con-
trast, Christian democratic parties have often opposed
paid maternity leave policies and other policies facilitat-
ing women’s workforce participation, in support of alter-
native policies that would permit mothers to stay at home
with their children (Morgan 2003; Morgan and Zippel
2003).

Following Huber, Stephens, and their collaborators,
cumulative left cabinet seats from 1946 to the date of
the observation were used as a measure of left-wing
power (Left Cabinet), and the cumulative cabinet score
for Protestant and Catholic parties of the right and center
was used as a measure of Christian conservative power
(Conservative Cabinet) (2001). Union power was mea-
sured as the percentage of unionized workers in the labor
force (Huber, Ragin, and Stephens 1997).

Whether a country has women in government should
also influence the family policies it adopts. Many stud-
ies across advanced industrialized countries report that
women in parliament have different preferences from
their male counterparts on women’s issues and are more
likely to support initiatives promoting family and labor
issues (O’Regan 2000). Whether female politicians differ
from male politicians is not the question here: the women-
in-parliament variable also proxies for general societal
support for women’s and families’ issues. Countries with
women in power should have longer maternity leaves.
The percentage of seats in parliament held by women is
used to examine this hypothesis (Women in Parliament
(IPU 1995 and IPU website).
Women’s labor force participation and unemployment levels could plausibly influence government willingness to carry out family policies at particular points in time and are included as controls. Women’s labor force participation was measured as the percentage of women aged 15–64 in the labor force (OECD, various years) (Women in Workforce). Women’s unemployment rates were also based on OECD data (OECD, various years) (Unemployed Women). Because the causal relationships between family policy and these demographic and economic conditions could go in both directions, one should interpret these coefficients with particular care. All are lagged by one year to mitigate this endogeneity concern.

**Estimation**

The subsequent sections test whether family policy choices in OECD countries are shaped by the choices of other countries covered in the news and by international organization messages and examine the determinants of family policy across OECD countries more generally. Pooled cross-sectional time-series models predict maternity leave length and expenditures on family allowances, as described above, in 18 OECD countries over 25 years. Estimating such models is challenging; the analysis below follows Franzese and Hays (2007, 2008).

The models estimated take the following form:

\[ y = \varphi \beta y_{i,t} + \rho \gamma j_{i} + X \beta + \epsilon \]

\( y \) is an \( N \times 1 \) vector (\( N \) units, \( T \) time periods per unit) of the dependent variable, i.e., maternity leave length in each country each year. \( \varphi \) is the first-order temporal lag; incremental policymaking characterizes family policy and much of social policy more generally.

\( \rho \) is the spatial autoregressive coefficient. It captures the strength of the diffusion process. \( W \) is the spatial weight matrix. The elements of this matrix, \( w_{i,j} \), reflect the degree of connectedness from unit \( j \) to unit \( i \). As described above, the researcher specifies this weight matrix; its elements can reflect various relationships, e.g., whether countries \( i \) and \( j \) share a border, whether they export similar products, or whether country \( j \) is covered by country \( i \)’s news media. This matrix need not be symmetric: for example, larger countries may have a bigger influence on smaller countries than the reverse. The degree of connectedness between a country and itself is set to 0 by convention. For the regressions below, the weight matrices are row-standardized.

\( \gamma j_{i} \) is the spatial lag. For each observation \( y_{i,t} \), the corresponding element of \( \gamma j_{i} \) gives a sum of \( y_{j,t-1} \) (neighbors’ policies in the prior year), weighted by the degree of connectedness between the country and each neighbor. The theory of cross-national influence proposed above calls for this one-year lag for imitating neighboring countries’ policies: governments’ responses to developments abroad likely take a short period to materialize. In addition, this one-year lag facilitates estimation (Beck, Gleditsch, and Beardsley 2006, 40; Franzese and Hays 2008).

\( X \) is an \( NT \times K \) matrix of observations on \( K \) independent variables. \( \beta \) is a \( K \times 1 \) vector of coefficients. Because the independent variables discussed above do not capture all country-specific factors, the model also includes country-level fixed effects. \( \epsilon \) is the vector of error terms.

A key challenge facing diffusion models generally is that unobserved shocks might generate contemporaneous changes in neighboring countries, without any exchanges having occurred between them. Therefore, specifications also include proxies for unobserved common shocks. Following Blanchard and Wolfers (2000), dummies for particular years are included. It is also possible that common shocks are translated at different speeds by national institutions; notably, countries with many veto players may respond more slowly. Therefore, again following Blanchard and Wolfers (2000), some specifications include an interaction between five-year periods and a “constitutional structure veto points index”; this turns out not to be significant and is not included in the final specifications.\(^6\)

To estimate these models, OLS with a spatial lag was used, as recommended by Franzese and Hays (2008, 15; Franzese and Hays 2007; Beck, Gleditsch, and Beardsley 2006). It is possible that this could yield results that are biased, but alternative estimation strategies do not have superior properties for data sets of this size and moderate spatial correlations, and simulations show that the size of any biases should be quite small (Franzese and Hays 2007, 23–24).\(^7\) Indeed, because the spatial lag is temporally lagged, one might be more concerned about misspecification. If some policy diffusion occurs within

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\(^6\) This index comes from Huber, Ragin, and Stephens (1997) and summarizes national levels of federalism, presidentialism, strength of bicameralism, single-member districts or proportional representation, referenda, judicial review, and authoritarian legacies.

\(^7\) Franzese and Hays (2007) run Monte Carlo simulations for data sets exhibiting spatial correlation, where the number of cross-sectional units ranges from 5 to 40, the number of time periods from 20 to 40, and imperfections in the weight matrix are allowed for. When the diffusion coefficient is on the order of 0.1, the combined effect of a slight bias in the estimate of the coefficient, and a somewhat bigger bias in the estimate of the standard error leads to a misestimation of the overall strength of diffusion between about 10 and 30%. Samples where the number of observations over time is high relative to the number of observations over space, such as the one used here, permit the clearest separation of diffusion from common shocks effects.
the year of the initial policy adoption, rather than in the subsequent year, as modeled here, these cross-national relationships will not be accounted for. Thus, if some governments respond to their neighbors rapidly, the reported effects might be smaller than the full diffusion effects.

**Results and Discussion**

The regressions below examine how international and domestic factors shape OECD governments’ choices in the field of maternity leave. The results support the hypotheses that governments are disproportionately likely to mimic countries whose news voters follow, and to follow international organization models more closely when citizens are active in international NGOs. The results also confirm the centrality of unions and women in politics in the extension of maternity leave policies and the importance of Christian conservative opposition.

The analysis begins with models examining the role of domestic factors alone, following the comparative social policy literature, and continues by exploring the role of diverse international influences. The first specification (Model I) contains all potentially relevant domestic variables, the second specification (Model II) contains domestic variables that turn out to be significant at any point, and subsequent specifications examine international diffusion mechanisms. Model III introduces international effects: it includes a baseline diffusion specification where the spatial lag is based on shared borders, as well as measures of international organization influence. All subsequent models also include this spatial lag based on shared borders. The discussion below is based primarily on the final specifications containing all relevant domestic and international variables, Model VIII, but also highlights any differences between specifications.

The theoretical discussion presents three mechanisms of cross-national diffusion: governments may imitate trade competitors, governments may imitate top performers, and governments may imitate countries whose news citizens follow. The results show that only the last mechanism shapes family policy development. While the competition coefficient is positively signed, it is not statistically significant either when studied alone (Model V) or when studied alongside other diffusion mechanisms (Model VII). This result differs from prior literature; researchers have identified competition effects in several policy areas that directly or indirectly tax firms. Perhaps firms focus their lobbying efforts on policies more costly than maternity leaves; perhaps governments are less receptive to firm lobbying in policy fields that are visible and easily understood by the electorate. The results also do not support the hypothesis of unbiased learning from policy success: countries that have the most women in employment each year are not disproportionately imitated across the OECD (Models IV and VII). Using a broader measure of policy success, GDP per capita, similarly reveals no general, unbiased, imitation of top performers (results available upon request). This finding is consistent with recent studies indicating that to the extent learning happens, it is severely biased (Gilardi et al. 2009; Weyland 2005).

The results support the hypothesis that governments imitate countries that are covered disproportionately in the news. As described above, foreign newspaper sales are used as spatial weights to characterize media relationships between country pairs; the regressions then test whether the policy choices of countries covered in the media are imitated disproportionately in countries receiving these news sources. Model VII is a robustness test; it replicates model VI, but uses maternity leave length weighted by its replacement rate, rather than maternity leave length alone, as the dependent variable (and in the construction of the temporal and spatial lags). The coefficients on this measure are significant and similar in size in all specifications (Models VI, VII, and VIII). The effect is moderate: for every 10 days’ increase in the leaves of countries whose news voters follow, a country increases its leave by about a day (Models VI and VIII). These effect size estimates are conservative. First, they assume a uniform one-unit shift in a country’s neighbors’ policies. If a country’s neighbors shift their policies by one unit on average, but do so asymmetrically, effect sizes will change. If the more influential neighbors experience above-average changes, effect sizes will increase, and vice versa. More critically, these are short-run effects; larger effects unfold over time. Additionally, we might expect to see larger effects if the dependent variable were a 0/1 measure of policy adoption rather than policy expansion and contraction. This is because governments might adopt policies due to international pressures and then fail to implement them.

The hypothesis that global norms influence national choices also finds support: both ratification of relevant ILO conventions and having a large number of international NGOs correlate with increased maternity leave length. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution. As a large literature on international organizations has debated, a positive relationship between ratification and policy outcomes can either reflect the influence of international organizations, or a prior interest of a government in the policy the international

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8See Franzese and Hays (2008) for a discussion and methods to estimate long-run effects.
organization is promoting; moreover, the ratification finding does not reach conventional levels of significance in all specifications. The internationalist orientation of a country's citizens is more easily separable from particular policy proposals that might interest a government. As expected, countries with many international NGOs have longer maternity leaves, but are no different in their family benefits policies (results available upon request). More specifically, countries with the most international NGOs (top 20%) have maternity leaves that are about a week longer than those of other countries, but do not have different family benefits policies. Other codings of the NGO variable yield similar results. This comparison between two family policies mitigates concern that an omitted variable correlated with a citizenry's internationalist orientation is driving the maternity leave results. However, this is an indirect test of international organization influence. Moreover, the links between international organizations and NGOs in the field of workplace relations are particularly tight, as described above; we might expect weaker connections, and even some conflict, in other issue areas.

Domestic variables perform in the expected direction and generally support modified versions of the power resources thesis: conservative Christian cabinets impede, while unions and women in power facilitate the development of maternity leave policy. These effects are sizeable. Simulations show that moving from a country where conservative Christian parties have a limited role in government to a country where they play a substantial role, i.e., shifting from the 20th to the 80th percentile on this variable, decreases paid maternity by almost four weeks. Relatedly, moving from a country with weak unions to one with strong unions, again a 20th to 80th percentile shift, increases maternity leave by approximately two weeks, as does moving from a country with few women in parliament to a country with many women in parliament (20th to 80th percentile shift).

Conclusions

This article develops a model in which voters' informational limitations and politicians' reelection concerns shape policy diffusion patterns. It tests this model in the field of family policy, and finds substantial support in individual-level public opinion data and aggregate policy data. The theoretical starting point is that voters lack full information about the consequences of policy proposals. Information that a foreign government has adopted a policy, or that an international organization recommends it, can increase voters' support for a proposal, by signaling that a credible outsider has vetted the proposal. Experimental evidence shows large shifts in Americans' views in response to foreign models, shifts that are especially large for people with limited prior information.

Shifts in voters' views create electoral incentives for politicians to espouse foreign models. However, unlike politicians, who can collect extensive information, voters receive limited information about developments abroad, biased towards the policy choices of large and proximate countries. Politicians therefore have incentives to espouse the policy choices of countries with which voters are familiar and disregard the policy choices of smaller and more distant countries. Qualitative evidence illustrates that in the United States, senators, representatives, and the president all focused their advocacy on prominent countries, not on policy models advanced by experts and interest groups. More generally, regressions predicting maternity leave developments across OECD countries show that governments are more likely to imitate foreign countries whose news citizens follow and that international organizations are more influential in countries with internationally oriented publics.

This theoretical model has important implications for the study of diffusion and international organization influence in diverse contexts; further testing outside the area of family policy and outside the OECD is therefore necessary. Based on this theory, we should expect geographic biases in policy diffusion patterns to persist even as politicians and national bureaucracies become better able to collect information from diverse sources. We should see more substantial diffusion in policy areas that are salient to the electorate, as compared to policy fields and countries where elites are shielded from public scrutiny and able to impose their preferred policies. There is no reason to suspect that these diffusion effects should only hold among OECD countries; indeed, prior research suggests that diffusion effects are often stronger among developing countries (Brooks 2005, 2007). Similarly, the theory should also extend to policy diffusion across states within federal systems, where related efforts to clarify diffusion mechanisms are underway (cf. Shipan and Volden 2008).

The implications of this study also extend to actors interested in spreading particular messages. This article's findings suggest that activists and international organizations interested in shaping national policies should target their messages directly to citizens. Relatedly, this research mitigates concerns about the democratic deficit of international organizations and transnational networks, by suggesting that domestic leaders may only be able to promote international models domestically to the extent that domestic publics shift their views. However, the model
proposed here heightens worries that suboptimal policies may spread across countries.

References


Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Table A1: Newsprint Imports across OECD Countries
Table A2: Languages Spoken Fluently in European Countries (1987)

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