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Fall 2018

## Federalism and the Politics of Bottom-Up Social Policy Diffusion in the United States, Mexico, and Canada

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### Recommended Citation

Beland, Daniel; Medrano, Anahely; and Rocco, Philip B., "Federalism and the Politics of Bottom-Up Social Policy Diffusion in the United States, Mexico, and Canada" (2018). *Political Science Faculty Research and Publications*. 69.

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# Federalism and the Politics of Bottom-Up Social Policy Diffusion in the United States, Mexico, and Canada

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THE FORMATION OF SOCIAL POLICY IDEAS and instruments is a fundamentally spatial process.[ 3] After achieving their goals in one site of policymaking, change agents often actively work across scales and jurisdictional boundaries to enroll new adherents, construct policy “movements,” and consolidate policy norms and paradigms.[ 4] Yet studies of social policy diffusion carry a number of implicit biases about how and where such movements occur. Consistent with the often-employed metaphor of “policy diffusion,” many studies assume that social policy transfer is a horizontal process in which structurally equivalent jurisdictions—national governments, subnational territories, or municipalities—adopt efficient or politically congruous social programs.[ 5] This focus ignores the role of policy actors in mobilizing ideas and instruments across jurisdictions with heterogeneous structural features. A growing number of studies of federal systems, however, suggest that policies pursued by lower levels of government, such as municipalities and states, can diffuse to higher levels of government, including national governments.[ 6]

Despite the recognition that such “bottom-up” processes occur, the theoretical grounding for “vertical” policy diffusion is quite limited in scope. In particular, we know little about how policy actors within subnational jurisdictions influence agenda setting and policy development within larger, more politically and territorially heterogeneous national jurisdictions. Typically, social policy analysis conceptualizes decentralization as an instrument of policy implementation.[ 7] Yet once locked in, decentralized policy arrangements may also help restructure national choices about the content of public policy.[ 8]

In this article, we provide a comparative perspective on what we call bottom-up social policy diffusion. We focus our attention on federal systems, analyzing how social policies adopted at the substate level can impact policy agendas and decisions at the national level. To generate hypotheses about bottom-up diffusion, we draw on case studies from three countries with federal systems: health care reform in the United States, noncontributory pension reform in Mexico, and child care reform in Canada.

These three cases were selected because they all feature a substate policy innovation that triggered a national debate in a specific social policy area. Yet the outcomes of these debates varied greatly. For instance, in the United States, the 2006 health care reform in Massachusetts had a direct and explicit impact on the development of the 2010 federal Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA). In Mexico, the introduction of Mexico City's universal noncontributory pension in 2001, recognized as a social right, made it possible to move the universalization of social security onto the national policy agenda. In 2014, the lower house of Mexico's Congress approved a federal universal pension well after the federal government had introduced a universal noncontributory pension scheme on the ground, despite initial negative reactions. At present, noncontributory pensions constitute an important element of the Mexican social security system. Finally, in Canada, the publicly subsidized child care system implemented in the province of Quebec during the late 1990s directly shaped federal debates in this policy area; half a decade later, however, efforts to adopt a national child care framework inspired largely by the Quebec example failed.

The evidence suggests that bottom-up diffusion may be more likely in federal systems in which policy competence is shared between the national and substate governments, and in presidential systems, which are less likely to experience a complete turnover in government control to the adversaries of a substate policy. The timing of bottom-up diffusion may depend on the congruence of substate policies with the beliefs of pivotal actors at the national level. Finally, bottom-up policy diffusion may happen more quickly when there are strong intergovernmental policy networks that act as conduits for policy ideas.

The article is divided into five main parts, which respectively define bottom-up vertical policy diffusion, discuss the factors that may shape it, outline the methods used and the logic behind the case selection, present the results of our three empirical case studies, compare these three cases and, finally, draw general conclusions from this research.

## BEYOND “HORIZONTALISM”: DEFINING BOTTOM-UP SOCIAL POLICY DIFFUSION

The literature on social policy diffusion, particularly horizontal diffusion taking place across states in federal systems, has provided important insights into the mechanisms and determinants of the policymaking process responsible for diffusion. Broadly speaking, policy diffusion can be defined as “one government's policy choices being influenced by the choices of other governments.” [ 9] In other words, diffusion “occurs when government policy decisions” in a specific jurisdiction “are systematically conditioned by prior policy choices made in other” jurisdictions. [ 10] Thus, policy diffusion “is a consequence of interdependence and is not defined exclusively (or even primarily) by the fact that something has spread.” [ 11] Policy diffusion is also fundamentally a process rather than an outcome. As Karch and Rosenthal suggest, this process can be deconstructed into distinct “phases” to examine the extent to which ideas and instruments are adopted and adapted in new jurisdictional contexts. [ 12] Further, policy diffusion is not a passive process; instead, policy agents actively assemble and reconfigure policy instruments and actors around distinctive policy “models” that they aim to transport across jurisdictional boundaries. [ 13]

A wide variety of scholarship suggests that social policy diffusion has helped establish a convergence among and within Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. [ 14] Peck and Theodore, for instance, document a process of policy isomorphism in which global governance institutions, including the World Bank, have helped create policy expert networks, leading, in turn, to a convergence of policy norms among major metropolitan centers in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. [ 15] Similarly, at the subnational level, Hertel-Fernandez illustrates how the American Legislative Exchange Council has taken advantage of weak institutional capacities in American state governments to facilitate the diffusion of ideas associated with social policy retrenchment. [ 16]

These examples, and in fact much of the literature on policy diffusion, characterize horizontal processes, which involve the mobilization and reconfiguration of policies across structurally equivalent jurisdictions, such as national governments or subnational entities. [ 17] In the context of federal systems, innovations adopted in one or several states can influence policy change in other states. As a growing number of studies show, it is also important to look at diffusion processes that occur between units that are structurally heterogeneous, including diffusion that occurs “top-to-bottom” (that is, from the federal government to substate entities) or “bottom-up” (that is, from substate entities to the federal government). [ 18] There are good reasons to believe that the vertical diffusion of policies between structurally heterogeneous jurisdictions, such as state and national governments in a federal system, involves different actors, tactics, and processes than horizontal diffusion. To explore these distinctions in greater detail, we focus on the process of bottom-up policy diffusion, which occurs when the adoption of a policy by a substate government (at the municipal or state level) directly influences federal policy decisions. [ 19]

### Agenda Setting and Policy Formulation

Bottom-up policy diffusion involves a distinctive set of agenda-setting and policy formulation processes. Agenda setting refers to how some problems come to occupy the attention of governmental officials more than other problems. [ 20] Policy formulation relates to “generating options about what to do about a public problem” and involves “a process of identifying and addressing possible solutions to policy problems or, to put it another way, exploring the various options or alternatives available for addressing a problem.” [ 21] To better understand how bottom-up diffusion actually takes place in federal systems, we divide the phases in the process into substages; in reality, any stage in the policy cycle can be bypassed or compressed, and the ordering can be reversed. [ 22] In the case of agenda setting, we focus on the crucial step in which a policy idea that originated at the subnational

level up moves up to the formal political agenda at the national level, as seen in its inclusion in a political party platform or an open manifestation to adopt it by the federal government.

In the case of policy formulation, we focus on the policy design and decision-making substages. Policy design simply refers to the actual elaboration of a proposal for a social program or law that the federal government committed to put into practice. In this case, the evidence of bottom-up policy diffusion is the extent to which such a proposal resembles a policy first implemented at the subnational level. Decision-making refers to a process that leads to the final adoption of a policy idea. [ 23] According to the specific rules determined by the political system, decision-making may involve an arduous deliberation process within the different branches of federal government. As a result, systematic interactions may occur between different branches—for example, executive and legislative—during this stage. In this stage, actors at the subnational level may actively try to influence the decision-making process at the national level through formal and informal channels, as determined by the rules of the political system in place. The policy adoption process can extend beyond two rounds. Therefore, policy formulation can easily loop back in the policy diffusion process, which, in turn, may extend a considerable period of time and even span different administrations. In this substage, the evidence of bottom-up policy diffusion is the implementation of public program—or of the enactment of a law—that was originally developed at the subnational level.

### Length of the Diffusion Process

The time between the introduction of a given substate policy and its adoption by federal authorities can be much longer than a single government's term. [ 24] In federal systems, bottom-up policy diffusion involves the interplay of two dimensions of political conflict: one related to intergovernmental relations—for example, central-state relations—and another related to the interactions, and eventual conflict, within the federal government during policymaking, remarkably between the executive and legislative branches of government in congressional federations such as the United States and Mexico. In fact, congresses offer a particularly suitable venue to receive influence from state-level policymaking, [ 25] but they are also arenas of natural conflict, especially in the context of divided government at the national level. Hence, the interplay between the dimensions of intergovernmental and intragovernmental relations shapes the pace of bottom-up policy diffusion. In the United States, where much has been done to study policy diffusion, this may be one of the main reasons why quantitative analysis typically fails to capture relevant patterns of bottom-up policy diffusion. Notable exceptions to this include studies by Lowery, Gray, and Baumgartner; Mossberger; and Boeckelman. [ 26] The relative lack of evidence of states or cities serving as policy laboratories for the federal government may be due to the dynamics of bottom-up policy diffusion, as policy change may take more time to materialize than in cases of horizontal policy change.

### Power Relations

Finally, the nature of unequal intergovernmental relations between the federal and substate governments influences the pace and nature of bottom-up policy diffusion. In policymaking, federal governments may have more or less power and resources to either influence or resist substate entities. These asymmetric power relations may have considerable impact on the timing and nature of bottom-up policy diffusion. Although federalism offers institutional channels for territorial representation, which facilitates the introduction of subnational interests in the political process at national level, [ 27] bottom-up diffusion is ultimately dependent on the willingness of the federal government to actually embrace such ideas. In the case of social policy, this willingness is mediated by issues including ideological considerations and credit claiming. Since “the popularity of social provision becomes a source of potential conflict among competing centers of political authority. Social policy debates in federal systems are frequently as much or more about the locus of policy control as about policy content. . . . [Government authorities] want the political benefits obtainable through claiming credit for social provision.” [ 28] For this reason, in addition to the potentially long lag between the initial adoption of a

particular policy at the substate level and its influence on federal policy, it is sometimes more difficult to find hard evidence of bottom-up policy diffusion (that is, open recognition by federal authorities of their replication of a substate policy). This is at least the case as far as policy learning is concerned, which would imply that federal actors intentionally seek to learn from substate policies without acknowledging it.

## FACTORS THAT CAN SHAPE BOTTOM-UP DIFFUSION

Explaining bottom-up diffusion requires us to move beyond theories that explain the enactment of social policy at the national level.[ 29] Whereas these studies are simply concerned with the conditions under which new social policies are enacted, regardless of their origins, our goal is to better understand why policy ideas that develop at the subnational level emerge on the national policy agenda and are adopted and implemented. Thus, despite having variables in common with other studies in the welfare state literature (for example, institutional fragmentation, party control of government), the specific configurations of variables that matter are unique. When attempting to influence the adoption of a substate social policy at the national level, agents of policy change attempt to finesse three key dimensions of the policy context. As summarized in Table , these are contextual factors (the institutional rules that shape intra- and intergovernmental relations in federal systems), as well as political and ideational factors that shape the actual pace and specific struggles in the bottom-up diffusion process.

Table 1. Factors Affecting Vertical Policy Diffusion

Factor	Explains	Description
Shared policy competence	Likelihood of policy consideration	National governments are more likely to consider substate policies when competence sharing between national and substate governments creates legal support structures for doing so.
Separation of powers at national level	Likelihood of policy consideration	National governments are more likely to consider substate policies when power is separated, allowing for both executive and legislative branch policy entrepreneurs to take up policy ideas independently.
Intergovernmental policy networks	Timing of policy consideration	National governments will more quickly consider substate policies when intergovernmental policy networks exist and transmit these ideas.
Ideational congruity	Likelihood of policy adoption	National governments are more likely to adopt substate policies when they are congruent with the ideational environment at the national level. In presidential systems, diffusion is more likely to occur when substate policies are congruent with the beliefs of the president and pivotal actors in the legislature. In parliamentary systems, diffusion is more likely to occur when substate policies are congruent with the beliefs of the prime minister.

1 Source: Author's analysis.

### Shared Policy Competence

Most basically, bottom-up policy diffusion requires the national government to be capable of implementing (directly or through vertical fiscal transfers) the policy initially crafted by a substate government.[ 30] This means that policies developed at the substate level may have difficulty gaining a foothold at the national level when the federal government does not share policymaking competences. In highly perforated “dual” federal systems such as Canada, substate units retain a good deal of constitutionally protected control over domestic policymaking, making it difficult for the federal government to scale up local experiments to nationwide policies.[ 31] In contrast, federal systems in which the federal government increasingly shares competence with substate governments provide the legal infrastructure for the transmission of local policies to the national level. In the

United States, for example, greater judicial solicitude in the aftermath of the New Deal created a pathway for entrepreneurs to scale up substate social policies to the national level.[ 32]

### Separation of Powers at the National Level

A second significant institutional factor is the separation of powers at the national level. Numerous welfare studies have suggested that because fragmented presidential systems require a greater degree of consensus in order to legislate, they are more likely to create barriers to social policy change compared with parliamentary systems.[ 33] Yet while presidential systems act as a barrier to social policy adoption, especially under conditions of divided government, they are more likely than parliamentary systems to facilitate the consideration of substate policy ideas at the national level regardless of partisan control of national governing institutions. Whereas bottom-up diffusion in parliamentary systems may be impossible if the majority party has no interest in considering a substate policy, the separation of the executive and legislative branches found in presidential systems may create a greater number of opportunities for vertical policy diffusion, especially because presidents have unique institutional capacities for bargaining and can, on occasion, become focal points for collective action.[ 34] In some instances of intergovernmental policymaking, presidents can use “executive federalism” to shape the range of policy alternatives by granting states permission to carry out planned variations within existing social programs.[ 35] As Teles and Prinz show in the U.S. case, the Ronald Reagan administration helped set the stage for welfare reform during a period of divided government by increasing the discretion of state governments to carry out welfare-to-work demonstrations in the 1980s.[ 36]

### Intergovernmental Policy Networks

Bottom-up policy diffusion may also occur more quickly when well-developed organizational networks transmit substate policy solutions to federal governing parties.[ 37] Such networks often involve actors located at both the substate and national levels and may include members of political parties working within federal and substate legislative bodies or strong substate lobbies,[ 38] as well as professional actors[ 39] or advocacy coalitions.[ 40] Interest group behavior, which is an important factor in policy diffusion, is also significant here.[ 41] Overall, the existence of strong intergovernmental policy networks explains the timing of substate policy consideration at the national level.

### Ideational Congruity

Whereas institutional factors may shape the overall likelihood of policy diffusion, the timing of diffusion may depend on how substate policies interact with ideational factors within the policy process, including shared norms, policy paradigms, social values, and partisan ideology, since they impact the policy formulation process.[ 42] Our analysis focuses on a specific ideational factor: the congruity of policy ideas between the federal government and the substate innovator from which it could borrow as it relates to the content of the policy initiative at hand. Whereas some studies of policy diffusion have emphasized ideological similarity as a key causal factor, they have tended to focus primarily on partisanship.[ 43] Yet the content of preexisting policy ideas can also be more or less congruous between jurisdictions, and, more important, ideas are analytically distinct from partisanship and should not be considered mere epiphenomena.[ 44] Considering this, partisanship and policy ideas can overlap empirically, but they must remain distinct analytically. Therefore, our analysis examines social policy arenas (health care, noncontributory pensions, and child care) in which the principle of universality is a key source of ideational conflict.[ 45] In general, we expect substate policies to be adopted by the national government when they are congruent with the beliefs of pivotal actors at the national level. In parliamentary systems, this means that substate policies will be adopted when they are congruent with the beliefs of the prime minister. In presidential systems, substate policies will be more likely to be adopted by the national government when they are congruent with the ideas of both the president and pivotal legislative actors, such as the filibuster and veto pivots in the U.S. Congress.[ 46]

## METHODS

Because bottom-up social policy diffusion is poorly understood, we use case studies to heuristically identify new variables and hypotheses, creating an analytical framework that future scholarship can test and expand upon.[ 47] As Gerring suggests, case studies allow us to examine whether potential causal factors have a prima facie connection with the outcome of interest. Relationships between these factors provide such evidence because they “are all at the scene of the crime.” Such studies are especially useful when little is known about a social process—when “there is no identifiable suspect and the crime itself may be difficult to discern.”[ 48]

We analyze cases of substate policy innovation that triggered national debates in three North American OECD countries with federal systems: the United States, Mexico, and Canada. Within each of these countries, we examine one case of policy innovation in which a substate government expanded social policy coverage in a manner that could be adopted or adapted by the national government. Thus, while each case focuses on a unique policy area (health care in the United States, noncontributory pensions in Mexico, and child care in Canada), each involves a similar social process: a potential transfer of social policy ideas from the subnational to the national level.[ 49] Table describes the cases we examine, their characteristics, and the observed outcomes in each case.

### Case Characteristics

	<b>U.S.</b>	<b>Mexico</b>	<b>Canada</b>
Shared policy competence	Yes	Yes	No
Separation of powers	Yes	Yes	No
Intergovernmental policy networks	Strong	Weak	Strong
Ideational congruity	Strong	2001–2012: Weak 2013–2015: Strong	2006–2015: Weak
Time between substate and national policy adoption	4 years	>15 years	Policy was considered but not adopted

2 Source: Author's analysis.

In each case, we examine how policy actors mobilized policy ideas and instruments over time and across jurisdictional boundaries. To be clear, our research design aims to probe the plausibility of our analytical framework rather than provide a confirmatory test of this framework. This comparative process-tracing exercise allows us to identify the role of specific factors in shaping the outcome of the diffusion process—that is, the federal government's final adoption (or not) of a substate policy initiative. It also allows us to identify evidence of the influence of subnational policymaking in different phases of bottom-up policy diffusion.

The three substate governments analyzed here (Massachusetts, Mexico City, and Quebec) are considered to be progressive governments in their respective national contexts. These substate jurisdictions exist in different national contexts but have several features in common. For instance, the U.S. and Canadian welfare states and the Mexican dual welfare system are less likely than Scandinavian social-democratic regimes to lead to the development of universal programs.[ 50] This, however, should not hide the existence of major universal programs such as Canada's Medicare, a program run by the provinces and not the federal government.[ 51] Regardless, the introduction of more comprehensive social policies in all of these countries is expected to be a rather difficult task because of fiscal pressures, prevailing policy legacies in key policy areas, and, sometimes, outright ideological opposition. Nevertheless, with regard to the social programs under investigation, some forms of bottom-up policy diffusion have taken place in each country, and comprehensive policies have been introduced in two of them while, thus far, failing in the other. Explaining these divergent policy outcomes is at the heart of our comparative analysis.

## RESULTS

In this section, we present the results of our three case studies: health reform in the United States, noncontributory (or social) universal pensions in Mexico, and child care policy in Canada. In each case, we document the presence or absence of the four institutional, political, and ideational factors described earlier. We then assess the extent of substate policy diffusion across several policy stages (agenda setting, policy design, and decision-making).

### Health Care in the United States

In the United States, there is strong evidence that the 2006 Massachusetts health care reform known as Romneycare, so called for Republican governor Mitt Romney, helped shape the content of the federal law that would become known as Obamacare. This is the case because the Massachusetts reform “provided Democrats with both policy and political blueprints for passing health reform, since its enactment suggested that national health reform could be realized if Congress and the president emulated the state's successful formula.”[ 52] As Starr suggests, during Barack Obama's presidency, Democrats “carried the Massachusetts model to the national level.”[ 53] The actual content of the 2010 federal health care law, especially the individual mandate and health insurance exchanges, two key aspects of Romneycare, supports this claim.[ 54]

Massachusetts is one of the most left-leaning states in the United States, and it is known as a pioneer in the field of health care reform. In April 2006, the Massachusetts health care reform took effect. As the official title of the legislation suggests (An Act Providing Access to Affordable, Quality, Accountable Health Care), the objective of the law was to control costs while expanding health insurance coverage. In order to do this, the law required the vast majority of state residents to acquire coverage. Other key aspects of the reform included an expansion of the state's Medicaid program and the creation of a health insurance exchange known as the Health Connector. Among other things, the Health Connector regulated health insurance plans available to individuals and families; it worked “with insurance companies to create new health insurance choices for individuals and employers.”[ 55] By late 2011, more than 98 percent of Massachusetts residents had health insurance coverage, up from 93.6 percent in 2006, when Governor Romney signed the legislation.[ 56] Although the reform received support from citizens and stakeholders, health insurance premiums in the state remained high.[ 57]

Despite divided opinion on the outcomes of what became widely known as Romneycare, the Massachusetts law featured prominently in the federal health care debate in the early Obama years, leading to the enactment of the ACA in March 2010. For networks of Democratic Party policy experts, the Massachusetts reform proved politically appealing, in part because it appeared bipartisan.[ 58] In fact, although the enactment process proved anything but smooth, in the end, a Republican governor signed the 2006 legislation. Yet the influence of the Massachusetts reform on the ACA transcended the realm of political rhetoric to shape policy design for several reasons.

First, it was clear to many in Washington that the federal government, with nearly half a century of experience with Medicare and Medicaid programs, shared sufficient policy competence with the states to translate the Massachusetts reform into federal legislation, even if comprehensive health reform had long eluded federal policymakers. As Quadagno suggests, public officials and policy experts from across the political spectrum had championed federal health reform along the lines of the ACA since at least the early 1990s.[ 59]

Second, although the presence of a Democratic majority in Congress made reform possible in the first place, President Obama served as a critical advocate and focal point for reform efforts. Jon Gruber, an economist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a former Mitt Romney adviser, claimed that White House officials “really wanted to know how we can take that same approach we used in Massachusetts and turn that into a national model.”[ 60] Importantly, however, Obama coupled these policy ideas with a political strategy that

diverged from past presidential efforts at health reform. As Oberlander shows, the Obama administration was capable of learning from past failures by delegating the design of the package to congressional committees and negotiating deals with health industry groups such as the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America and the American Hospital Association to agree to reductions in Medicare and Medicaid payments.[ 61]

Third, intergovernmental policy networks facilitated the transmission of ideas to Washington. Senior White House officials “had a dozen meetings in 2009 with three health-care advisers and experts who helped shape the health care reform law signed by Romney in 2006, when the Republican presidential candidate was governor of Massachusetts. One of those meetings, on July 20, 2009, was in the Oval Office and presided [over] by President Barack Obama, the records show.”[ 62] Additionally, as Dinan shows, state officials successfully promoted ideas related to the creation of insurance exchanges and Medicaid expansion throughout the legislative process. Yet given the partisan nature of the debate, this did not occur through traditionally nonpartisan “intergovernmental lobby” organizations such as the National Governors Association. Nor did states deliberately advocate for the re-creation of a full-scale version of the Massachusetts model carried out by the federal government. Rather, individual states added momentum to the ACA by pursuing their own policy objectives. In particular, states lobbied heavily in favor of an extensive federal matching rate to finance the Medicaid expansion. Specialist organizations such as the National Association of Insurance Commissioners also helped speed the adoption of the Massachusetts model of a state-based health insurance exchange. They did so not by advocating specific features of the policy implemented in Massachusetts but instead by arguing that a federal health insurance reform should allow states to retain a wide degree of autonomy in regulating insurance markets.[ 63] In this way, intergovernmental policy networks both added to the momentum for the adoption of the ACA and helped shape its content.

Finally, where ideological congruence is concerned, it is hard to underestimate the role of unified Democratic government in speeding the adoption of the Massachusetts model at the federal level.[ 64] Yet beyond the fortuitous timing of the implementation of Romneycare and Obama's election in 2008, the Massachusetts legislation was also ideologically congruent with the president's own preference for a policy solution that could be enacted with a minimum of political conflict, rather than a radical reform of the health care system.[ 65] President Obama never attempted to conceal the influence of the Massachusetts model on the ACA. For instance, in October 2013, long after the adoption of the ACA, the president acknowledged that Massachusetts provided a “template” and a “model” for the law, declaring that “the worst predictions about health care reform in Massachusetts never came true. They're the same arguments that you're hearing now . . . and it's because you guys had a proven model that we built the Affordable Care Act on this template of proven, bipartisan success. Your law was the model for the nation's law.”[ 66] Tellingly, elements of the policy that moved too far outside the Massachusetts template were ultimately abandoned by the Democratic Party as the legislation moved through Congress.[ 67]

Although one might think the president was simply attempting to flatter his Boston crowd by praising their state, even a superficial comparison of the Massachusetts reform and the ACA suggests that the former helped shape the latter, as the president claimed. First, both the Massachusetts and the federal reforms included an “individual mandate,” meaning that most people who fail to purchase health insurance coverage are fined.[ 68] Second, both reforms featured subsidies aimed at allowing lower-income families to buy health insurance. “While the amount of individual subsidies vary, and the income levels for eligibility differ, both laws provide financial assistance to lower-income households so that health insurance is affordable.”[ 69] Third, despite clear differences between the two laws, both the Massachusetts and the federal reform compelled certain employers to offer health insurance to their workers and to pay a fee if they failed to do so.[ 70] Fourth, although they did so in different ways, the two reforms broadened the scope of Medicaid to increase coverage among low-income families.[ 71] Finally, the Health Connector created as part of the 2006 Massachusetts health insurance reform

provided an early example for the state health insurance exchanges that constituted a major component of the ACA. Like these exchanges, the Health Connector emerged as “an independent public authority . . . that links residents and small businesses with affordable health insurance.” [72] Importantly, the very existence of the Health Connector in Massachusetts legitimized a decentralized approach to exchanges embedded in the Senate version of the federal health reform bill that ultimately became the ACA. As Brandon and Carnes put it, “Allowing a wide range of configurations for exchanges at the state level is a direct extension of the Massachusetts success from both political and policy standpoint.” [73] This is yet another example of how Massachusetts's 2006 health insurance reform paved the way for the ACA.

These remarks should not hide the massive difference in scale between the ACA and the 2006 Massachusetts reform. As Burdett notes, “The Massachusetts law applies to the 6.5 million residents of the commonwealth. The ACA covers more than 300 million people spread across 50 diverse states. Massachusetts began its reform with a rate of uninsured that was half that of the nation as a whole, and it was written to meet the unique needs of state residents.” [74] It is this difference in context that allowed former governor and 2012 Republican hopeful Romney to publicly oppose the ACA, claiming that even if his state's 2006 “health reform is working in Massachusetts, . . . one model cannot meet the needs of all 50 states.” [75] Nevertheless, what is clear from this discussion of the Massachusetts reform is that it largely served as a template for the ACA. In this context, it is possible to use this case as a clear and well-documented example of bottom-up vertical policy diffusion in which a substate policy had a direct influence on federal-level policymaking.

### Noncontributory Universal Pensions in Mexico

In 2001, a substate government, Mexico City, introduced the first universal noncontributory pension program in Mexico. This reform was especially meaningful because the Mexican social policy system has traditionally excluded citizens working in rural areas and in the informal economy. Mexico's high level of labor market informality, among other things, has contributed to the persistence of a dual, fragmented, and highly unequal social policy system [76] featuring limited social security coverage. In particular, the design of the security system is highly segmented, as several public and private organizations provide health services and pensions to the insured population. Furthermore, until the 2000s, the pension system did not include any noncontributory scheme, as is common in other industrialized countries. As a consequence, most elderly people had lacked access to pensions for decades. In 2000, for instance, less than 40 percent of elderly people had access to a pension. [77]

Until the 1990s, the universal provision of social benefits was an aspiration, at least in official discourse; however, this issue lost policy traction as a neoliberal approach to social policy began to prevail at the national level in the middle of the decade. [78] Hence, the inclusion of a nationwide noncontributory pension program was definitely not on the federal agenda. However, this rather adverse scenario for social reform started to change in the 2000s. In 2000, in a context of increasing multiparty electoral competitiveness, federal and local elections took place. Leftist Andrés Manuel López Obrador (referred to as AMLO), representing a coalition of left-wing political parties, including the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD; Party of the Democratic Revolution), won Mexico City's mayoral race by a narrow margin and became Mexico City's mayor, a position he held for six years (2000–2006). [79] Social policy was central to AMLO's agenda. In 2001, he implemented a noncontributory and non-means-tested universal pension program (Pensión Alimentaria Ciudadana para Adultos Mayores) directed at city residents aged 70 or older. In 2003, Mexico City's legislative body, the Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal (ALDF), approved a law that established the right to a universal pension for residents of Mexico City aged 70 and older. The establishment of this universal pension and the universal provision of health care services that became effective in 2003 and 2006, respectively, were considered to be the first steps in building a modern local welfare system in Mexico City. [80]

This local initiative triggered the bottom-up diffusion of Mexico City's universal noncontributory pension. However, the interplay among the factors that made this result possible evolved over a decade, resulting in a long and tortuous path to bottom-up policy diffusion that spanned three consecutive presidential administrations: Vicente Fox (2000–2006), Felipe Calderón (2006–2012), and Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018). During these three administrations, the policy diffusion process manifested itself at different levels of intensity in both the agenda-setting and policy formulation stages. As will be explained, during the first three years (2001–2003) of the period under consideration, policy diffusion first affected the agenda-setting dimension while gradually impacting policy formulation at the federal level in subsequent years (mainly 2003 to 2011); it also became more central on the federal policy agenda over the years. In other words, unlike its manifestation in the agenda-setting stage, policy diffusion in federal policy formulation was a slow, incremental process that started with the federal government's disdain for universal pensions. However, in 2003, the federal government began to implement different programs to provide economic support to the elderly population, which gradually started to look like a (near) universal noncontributory pension.

Four factors shaped the winding path to the bottom-up diffusion of Mexico City's universal noncontributory pension. Two of these factors—shared competence in the domain (social pensions) and divided government—certainly functioned as enabling factors. However, the dynamics of the other two relevant factors—policy networks and particularly ideological congruence—shaped the pace and the conflictual character of bottom-up policy diffusion in Mexico. The dynamics of this interplay are explained next.

First, the federal government clearly had policy competence in this domain. Nevertheless, the Mexican federal government had never implemented a noncontributory pension scheme. Despite the fact that the vast majority of elderly people lacked access to a pension, the Mexican federal government had failed to tackle this problem. Hence, the shared competence in this domain also meant that local governments had a latent opportunity to fill this social policy gap, as was the case in Mexico City. AMLO and his social policy team even envisioned that such a system could be a feasible alternative to the neoliberal social policy that then prevailed at the national level.[ [81](#)]

Second, the separation of powers enabled social policy change. As mentioned earlier, Mexico's political system was highly centralized in the hands of the executive. Among other consequences, this hypercentralization had eclipsed the division of powers for several decades. In 2000, the victory of President Fox and his right-wing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN; National Action Party) unseated the formerly hegemonic Partido de la Revolución Institucional (PRI; Institutional Revolutionary Party), a situation that revitalized the division of powers, which, in turn, increased the odds of reform. Moreover, this revitalization of the division of powers was also possible because of the increasing number of seats that left-leaning parties won in the federal Congress between 2000 and 2012. In fact, in 2006, the main leftist party (PRD) had its best results in federal elections since its creation in 1989.

Third, while the institutional structure of the Mexican government may have created legal opportunities for bottom-up policy diffusion, the absence of strong intergovernmental policy networks between the PAN (particularly the executive) and Mexico City stalled social policy change. Intergovernmental networks were rather weak, mainly because of the political and ideological antagonism that prevailed between the leftist Mexico City government and the right-wing federal administration during those years. Additionally, in the 2000 federal election, the PRD won only 18.2 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies (lower house) of the federal Congress, compared with 38.2 percent for the PRI and 36.9 percent for the PAN.[ [82](#)] These electoral results reduced the chances of a leftist coalition from 2000 to 2006 that could have advanced universalistic policy ideas such as universal noncontributory pensions at the federal level. Nevertheless, in 2003, members of the leftist parties started to present different bills related to the introduction of a universal (or near-universal)

social pension in Mexico.[ 83] This meant that the universal pension idea also moved onto the legislative agenda in 2003, although it did not obtain enough support to become law.

Under the Fox administration, conditionality and targeting remained the trademarks of federal social policy, a trend that had begun in the 1990s.[ 84] During the Fox years, Mexico City and the federal government took opposite ideological stances on social policy. In fact, from 2000 to 2006, intergovernmental relationship between the capital city and the federal government was particularly contentious. While there was support for AMLO's universal pension among the local population and within PRD policy networks, it elicited negative reactions from PAN members at both the local and national levels, including President Fox.[ 85] AMLO's political adversaries labeled the universal pension a fiscally irresponsible and unfair policy approach directed at creating a political clientele, and they openly rejected the pension's universal and unconditional characteristics.

Fourth, ideational factors clearly mattered here. The universal pension was ideationally incongruent with the PAN's goals, yet it maintained support among other actors in national politics. Within a short time, it became the best-known social program in Mexico City and beyond; most importantly, noncontributory universal pensions reached the national policy agenda. In 2003, the federal government introduced a cash transfer program for poor elderly people living in rural areas in which cash benefits were conditional on regular visits to the local health clinic. It is not difficult to deduce that this program was a federal reaction to the substate innovation and, since it was introduced right before the 2003 midterm elections, that it had a political rationale. Similarly, in Mexico City, AMLO's government was also conscious of the positive political effects of the implementation of its universal pension. The PRD won 45 percent of the vote in the 2003 local elections, "(around 10% more than in the previous election), and an absolute majority in the ALDF." [ 86] As stated earlier, this majority allowed for the enactment of the 2003 law that established the right to a universal pension in Mexico City.

Conflicting pressures made for a complicated path toward a noncontributory pension at the national level. Before the establishment of the universal pension in Mexico City, there was scarcely any discussion about the universalization of social security benefits and pensions.[ 87] However, between 2003 and 2006, members of Congress of different political parties proposed bills to create a federal pension or to reform the existing legal framework to implement such a measure and allocate new funds, as well as revising existing funds, in order to provide economic support for the elderly.[ 88] In particular, as mentioned earlier, PRD members in the federal Congress introduced bills to establish a national universal noncontributory pension plan, while other legislative proposals favored other policy designs.[ 89] Not only did the introduction of those proposals mean that the universal pension had reached the federal legislative agenda, but also it was a sign of the formation of a network of actors in the federal Congress (mainly members of the PRD) linked to Mexico City's leftist government that advocated for the introduction of a universal federal social pension. Moreover, between 2004 and 2013, horizontal policy diffusion took place among the states. Soon, 17 of Mexico's 31 states had implemented their own versions of the policy.[ 90] Between 2006 and 2012, the existence of several legislative proposals in the federal Congress, as well as those state programs, seemed to push the executive to increasingly update its initial policy programs to support the elderly to approximate a social pension program (without adopting the same universal character of Mexico City's scheme). In other words, as discussed later, bottom-up policy diffusion in policy formulation was markedly incremental and rather elusive at the beginning.

The increasing nationwide popularity of the noncontributory pensions triggered the incremental adoption of a federal noncontributory pension scheme. In 2003, as mentioned before, the federal government implemented a program to provide a cash transfer for the elderly in rural areas. In 2006, President Calderón escalated this initiative and announced the introduction of a social program that eventually evolved into a (near) universal noncontributory federal pension. In that year, presidential elections took place, and the universal noncontributory pension was a central topic in the electoral debate. Predictably, AMLO's political platform in the presidential elections included the establishment of a federal noncontributory universal pension.[ 91] But

AMLO, the candidate of the leftist coalition, lost the election, though by an extremely narrow margin (less than 0.6 percent), and the PAN candidate, Calderón, became president. The leftist coalition won 28.9 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies,[ [92](#)] which translated into more political support for the universal noncontributory pension proposals in that arena. Hence, although the federal government had opposed the bill to establish a universal noncontributory pension, it implemented a similar program to provide a noncontributory pension to people aged 70 and older, known as 70 y más. An analysis of the operation rules of this program during the administration of President Calderón showed its transformation from a rather limited noncontributory pension scheme to a universal one.[ [93](#)]

In a six-year period, the federal government changed the eligibility rules and coverage of this program, so that in 2012 it became a universal (for all insured people aged 70 and older) noncontributory pension. Unlike Mexico City's universal noncontributory pension, which had been granted by law since 2003, all federal noncontributory pension schemes must be implemented by executive decree, which means that the executive enacts the operation rules of this program and can change them at any time. In 2007, according to the operation rules of this program, the noncontributory scheme stipulated a monthly pension that was fixed at 500 Mexican pesos (about US\$45 at the time), with no adjustment to inflation.[ [94](#)] There was, however, a geographic targeting of benefits: pensions were only available to residents of rural areas. Initially, the government restricted pensions to residents of communities with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants. In 2008, the population limit was increased to 10,000, and in 2009, to 30,000 inhabitants. In January 2012, before the start of the electoral campaign, President Calderón decided to end territorial targeting. Instead, he added a pension test so that only those without a contributory pension would qualify for the 70 y más program.[ [95](#)] However, this federal scheme was considered to be universal because it was directed to all insured people aged 70 and older.[ [96](#)] The number of beneficiaries increased from 968,750 in 2007 to 4,426,982 in 2013.[ [97](#)]

During those years, the debate around the universal pension was ideologically charged, even though there was hard evidence of its fiscal viability and, above all, of the current pension system's failure to provide benefits to most elderly citizens. However, the noncontributory pension scheme gained support at the federal and state levels; as mentioned earlier, several states implemented their own noncontributory schemes during those years.[ [98](#)] The acceptance of the noncontributory pension was clear in 2012, when the presidential election took place in Mexico.

During the 2012 presidential campaign, the universalization of both pensions and health care services was again at the center of debate, and the three candidates of the main political parties had proposals about this matter. The PAN lost the presidential election, and the PRI's candidate, Enrique Peña Nieto, became president. Peña Nieto continued the 70 y más program, which was renamed the “universal pension.” Pension coverage was extended by reducing the age requirement to 65 and removing geographic constraints, though the existing pension test remained unchanged (beneficiaries should not currently receive any other kind of pension, no matter the amount). In 2013, Peña Nieto presented Congress with draft legislation for a universal pension. His proposal was similar to the previous federal noncontributory program, but it included a less restrictive pension test. Under Peña Nieto's scheme, income from a social security pension should not exceed 1,092 pesos a month (roughly US\$70)—the equivalent of Mexico's income poverty line as of July 2013. In addition, according to his proposal, the amount of the flat pension was set at 1,092 pesos a month, which more than doubled the amount offered by the program it replaced. However, for an unspecified number of years, the pension would remain at 525 pesos, which is half of the poverty level. Moreover, the proposal stated that there would be a transition period of “no greater than 15 years” during which the pension would gradually reach 1,092 pesos (adjusted for inflation). The speed of the transition would depend on the ability of the federal government to fund the pension. The draft bill also stated that once the transition period was completed, local governments would not be allowed to provide noncontributory pensions—even small top-ups—or other assistance to seniors.[ [99](#)]

In 2014, the Chamber of Deputies approved a revised version of the president's draft legislation, but as of early June 2018, the bill still needed to be ratified by the Senate. Nevertheless, the federal government has continued to implement the noncontributory pension scheme. Beyond the fact that the universal character of the program can be controversial, the federal government has extended coverage and imposed less stringent rules of eligibility over the years. So, in spite of all the initial negative critique, mainly from right-wing actors, the federal government finally introduced a near-universal noncontributory pension scheme that has become an important pillar of Mexico's patchy social security system.

This pension was directly inspired by the program adopted in Mexico City more than a decade before, a program that triggered a national debate that made it harder for federal politicians to maintain the status quo in pension reform. Clearly, the universal pension is a case of bottom-up policy diffusion because the introduction of Mexico City's universal pension had a direct impact on the national agenda, forcing both presidents and presidential candidates to take a stance on the topic and eventually propose their own noncontributory pension schemes. In addition, although the federal government initially scorned the principle of universal pension as a right, as advanced by the Mexico City government, ideational support for the policy at the national level, as well as intergovernmental policy networks within the out party, kept the policy idea on the table and indirectly influenced the design of subsequent federal noncontributory schemes. In sum, the federal government's initial strong campaign against AMLO's universal pension, a campaign that was mostly inspired by ideological factors, impeded the early adoption of this social policy at the national level. However, this initial opposition faded away with time due to a mixture of political calculus and the acceptance of the financial viability of the implementation of the noncontributory pension as a valid solution to increasing social security coverage in Mexico.

## Child Care in Canada

In some circumstances, a policy enacted at the substate level may generate debate at the national level without leading to any direct bottom-up vertical diffusion.[ [100](#)] A good example is the publicly subsidized child care system adopted in 1997 in Quebec, a French-speaking province where social policy has been closely linked to substate nationalism since the 1960s.[ [101](#)] In the context of a competitive state-building relationship between the province and the federal government, Quebec has developed distinct social programs aimed at increasing the role of provincial policies in the lives of ordinary Quebecers.[ [102](#)] The social democratic emphasis of social policies in Quebec also stems from the fact that labor unions and feminist groups have long played a key role within the nationalist Parti Québécois (PQ) coalition. Family policy is especially important in Quebec because encouraging both fertility and high levels of labor market participation among women have long been priorities as a way to reproduce the only majority French-speaking substate entity in North America while also promoting gender equality in a province where a strong feminist movement and egalitarian discourse about gender relations are prevalent.[ [103](#)]

It is in this context that we can understand the 1997 adoption of a publicly subsidized child care system in Quebec. Explicitly aimed at improving the balance between work and family life in society, this child care system—introduced alongside extended parental leaves and other family-friendly policies—is based on a flat daily rate (initially C\$5 per child, currently C\$8.05 plus a recently introduced “additional contribution” for higher-income families).[ [104](#)]

Since its inception, Quebec's child care system has been widely debated across Canada, in the provinces as well as at the federal level. This is true in part because this public, universal system remains unique in Canada, where more expensive private child care is the norm.[ [105](#)] Considering this, child care advocates in other provinces and at the national level, in coordination with feminist groups, labor unions, and antipoverty coalitions, have promoted the adoption of a Quebec-style, publicly subsidized child care system across Canada.[ [106](#)]

Simultaneously, conservative experts and politicians have strongly criticized the Quebec system, which they see as a waste of taxpayer money and a perverse way to subsidize middle-class families who could otherwise afford private child care.[ [107](#)]

At the national level, intergovernmental policy networks helped advance the Quebec model within the Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) in the mid-2000s. For instance, “in 2004, Prime Minister [Paul] Martin attempted to establish the foundations for a national day care system by negotiating individual child care agreements with the provinces to fund programs based on four principles: universal, inclusion, accessibility and development.”[ [108](#)] Although the LPC had endorsed the idea of a national child care plan since 1993,[ [109](#)] the universal approach that Prime Minister Martin embraced was borrowed from the Quebec model, something the Liberals openly stated during the 2004 federal campaign.[ [110](#)] For instance, the LPC claimed in a campaign document that Quebec “is the North American leader in early learning and care. In Quebec's system, community-based organizations provide child care at a moderate fee. This is a standard to which early learning and care across Canada should be lifted. Learning from each other and embracing what has worked elsewhere in Canada, makes us stronger as a nation and as a people. That's what our federation is all about.”[ [111](#)] Although this statement may have been partly aimed at flattering voters from the province, what we have here is an explicit attempt at bottom-up vertical diffusion from a substate entity (the province of Quebec) to the central government and, indirectly, to the other nine provinces.

Despite the LPC's support for these policy ideas, several factors mitigated against vertical policy diffusion. First, the weak social policy competence of the federal government greatly slowed the diffusion process. While the federal government can use its spending power to enter fields of provincial jurisdiction through the provision of cash benefits, constitutional protections required Prime Minister Martin to engage directly with the provinces in complicated fiscal negotiations in order to gain their consent on child care agreements. Unlike federal legislation, this meant that any vertical policy diffusion would creep at a slow pace. Second, the existence of a parliamentary system in Canada meant that a turnover in government could stop an already slow process. Premier Minister Martin began signing child care agreements with the provinces after the Liberals formed a minority government after the June 2004 federal election, but the election of a Conservative minority government in January 2006 spelled the end of the Liberal national child care framework, as newly elected Prime Minister Stephen Harper terminated the child care agreements with the provinces.[ [112](#)] Instead, the Harper government drew on the federal government's policy competence for cash diffusions to create a child allowance scheme that offered “a monthly cheque of \$100 for each child under six, for the families to spend as they saw fit.”[ [113](#)] Paradoxically, the program was called Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB), although it was not about child care in the strict sense of the term; parents could do what they wanted with the money, and checks would be available to all families, whether they used child care services or not. For the Harper government, framing the program as child care was a way to claim that the issue had been addressed and that the program was indeed universal, though those who did not use child care services and adopt traditional gender roles and the stay-at-home model that many conservatives still supported also received benefits.

Despite the policy reversal engineered by the first Harper government, the Quebec model is ideationally congruent with the left-of-center national political orientation and its influence remains present in the federal political arena to this day. For example, in September 2014, federal New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Thomas Mulcair announced that “his party will create a national child care program if it forms government after next year's federal election” and that the program would be “based on the Quebec system.”[ [114](#)] Although the NDP did not win the October 2015 federal election, the fact that this left-leaning party publicly embraced the Quebec child care model and pledged to spread it across the country through a federal system is yet another example of its tremendous potential in terms of bottom-up vertical diffusion within Canada. The Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau replaced the UCCB with an income-tested Canada Child Benefit targeting less

well-off families. Like the UCCB, this program only offered cash allowances instead of subsidizing child care spaces. At the same time, the 2016 federal budget provided some new child care money and, a year later, the 2017 budget featured a commitment to spend a total of \$7 billion on child care over the next decade, an effort child care advocates criticized as inadequate. [ 115]

## DISCUSSION

As Table suggests, several institutional and political factors help us understand variation among our three cases. First, and most important, shared policy competence increased the likelihood of bottom-up diffusion. While the United States had never before administered a nationwide system like the one Massachusetts had adopted, it had nearly a half-century of experience in administering major programs such as Medicare and Medicaid. Similarly, in the Mexican case, the federal government was capable of implementing a universal pension system. This meant that national systems of health insurance and universal pensions, however controversial, were politically possible. In contrast, in the Canadian case, the federal government's limited policy competence greatly slowed the process of diffusion under the Martin government, which was forced to bargain with individual provinces in order to diffuse the Quebec model.

Second, in both the U.S. and Mexican cases, presidential leadership added significant momentum to bottom-up policy diffusion, even though the policies in question were the subject of intense contestation. By learning from past presidential policy blunders, President Obama was able to maintain the adoption of the Massachusetts model as a key policy priority without alienating key interest groups. In the Mexican case, conservative presidents who opposed universalizing pensions could easily become a focal point for popular criticism. Thus, by the 2012 presidential elections, universal social security had become a topline issue. As universality reached the national stage, it became possible to seriously discuss the pros and cons of the introduction of a universal noncontributory pension in Mexico, including its financial viability. While both these cases involved presidents acting as independent focal points for policy action, no such possibility existed in the Canadian case. There, the parliamentary system meant that efforts to diffuse that model stalled entirely after the election of the Harper minority government in 2006.

The difference in the length of the temporal gap in bottom-up policy diffusion in Mexico and the United States is directly related to variations in intergovernmental policy networks and the ideational congruity of substate policies. On one hand, in Mexico, the contentious relationship between Mexico City's leftist government and right-wing federal administrations, which reached a peak between 2000 and 2006, was the scenario for the slow introduction of a noncontributory pension scheme at the national level. There was an evident ideological clash between AMLO and right-wing federal administrations. While AMLO dreamed of creating a Mexican welfare state, the federal government supported a more limited safety net. Nevertheless, Mexico City's 2001 universal pension ignited a long process of diffusion that eventually led to the creation of a federal noncontributory pension. Both conservative presidents (Fox and Calderón) initially opposed AMLO's universal pension but in the context of midterm and presidential elections, the provision of universal social security, in particular pensions, moved onto the national agenda, forcing the federal government to implement its own noncontributory pension scheme. Between 2003 and 2012, the coverage of this federal scheme was increased by progressively eliminating targeting rules so that the program eventually got closer to being a truly universal pension scheme. By moving away from their fierce resistance to AMLO's social policy ideas, especially universality, the two conservative presidents seemed to make a calculated election-year gamble to attract voters and try to reduce the appeal of AMLO's political platform. Apparently, the ideational and partisan factor was slowly overridden by other political variables. Over time, the ideological resistance to universality has faded away at the national level, making the advent of a near universal noncontributory pension possible.

On the other hand, in the United States, the election of Barack Obama as president in November 2008 pushed health care reform to the center of the federal policy agenda. At the same time, there was a clear ideological affinity between the market-oriented approach embedded in Obamacare and the approach associated with Romneycare, which had support from intergovernmental policy networks, as well as the ideological and political advantage of being labeled as a bipartisan and, therefore, moderate approach. Although this perception was not shared by federal Republicans who ended up opposing Obamacare, it is clear that the bipartisan nature of the Massachusetts plan made it especially appealing for the White House. More importantly, by 2010, the idea of extending health care coverage in the United States had been debated for decades; Romneycare only provided a template for how to achieve this goal, which had long been shared by Democrats at the national level. This contrasts with the situation in Mexico, where universal pension coverage was a new idea in the country when it emerged at the substate level in the early 2000s, something that may have exacerbated ideological resistance against it.

Another significant finding is that in all three cases, the controversy over bottom-up diffusion concerned different dimensions of public policy. Particularly the universal or, in the case of the United States, comprehensive character of the proposed policies proved controversial and conservatives questioned its necessity. Over time in Mexico, conservatives came to embrace universal pensions, in part because of their popularity; the same cannot be said about Obamacare in the United States. The situation in Canada was different from that in the two other cases in part because universal social programs had long existed in that country. Thus, what the Harper government did in 2006 was push aside, for ideological and political reasons, the issue of publicly subsidized child care in the strict sense of the term (having subsidized day care available to all) by cleverly displacing it with a program of universal child allowances framed as a child care initiative.

Finally, as the example of conditional cash diffusions in Brazil suggests, policies like Bolsa Familia first developed at the subnational level can make their way to the national level before becoming policy models adopted in other countries around the world.[ [116](#)] In such a global context, over time, policy innovation taking place at the substate level may even become the source of transnational policy diffusion. This is yet another reason why social policy scholars, including progressives, need to pay closer, more systematic attention to what we call bottom-up social policy diffusion.

## CONCLUSION

This article suggests that bottom-up diffusion is a significant yet understudied aspect of social policy change. As argued, this type of diffusion takes place across the policy cycle, sometimes relatively slowly, which underscores the importance of adopting a longer-term time frame to explore bottom-up policy diffusion. Evidence from case studies suggests the relevance of several hypotheses about institutional, political, and ideational factors that typically shape the politics of bottom-up policy diffusion. In particular, bottom-up diffusion may be more likely in federal systems in which policy competence is shared between national and subnational governments. Moreover, while presidential systems are often seen as a barrier to the enactment of social policy, they may create additional opportunities for the diffusion of ideas from subnational governments to the national level. Finally, the timing and speed of bottom-up diffusion appear to depend on the availability of strong, intergovernmental policy networks and ideological congruity between the substate policy and the national political environment. In the future, scholars interested in policy change should pay closer attention to bottom-up diffusion processes while taking the political and ideational factors we have identified in our comparative study into account.[ [117](#)]

## Notes

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- [10](#) Beth A. Simmons, Frank Dobbin, and Geoffrey Garrett, "Introduction: The International Diffusion of Liberalism," *International Organization* 60 (October 2006): 781–810, at 787, quoted in Fabrizio Gilardi, "Four Ways We Can Improve Policy Diffusion Research," *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 16 (March 2016): 8–21, at 9.
- [11](#) Gilardi, "Four Ways," 9.
- [12](#) Andrew Karch and Aaron Rosenthal, "Vertical Diffusion and the Drifting Politics of Electronic Commerce," *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 16 (March 2016): 22–43.
- [13](#) Peck and Theodore, "Mobilizing Policy."

- [14](#) Clarke, "Urban Policy Mobility"; McCann and Ward, "Policy Assemblages"; Peck, "Global Policy Models"; and Prince, "Policy Transfer."
- [15](#) Peck and Theodore, "Mobilizing Policy."
- [16](#) Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, "Who Passes Business's 'Model Bills'? Policy Capacity and Corporate Influence in U.S. State Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 12 (September 2014): 582–602.
- [17](#) Karch, *Democratic Laboratories*.
- [18](#) Pamela J. Clouser McCann, Charles R. Shipan, and Craig Volden, "Top-Down Federalism: State Policy Responses to National Government Discussions," *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 45 (October 2015): 495–525; Claudio M. Radaelli, "Policy Transfer in the European Union: Institutional Isomorphism as a Source of Legitimacy," *Governance* 13 (January 2000): 25–43; and Shipan and Volden, "Bottom-Up Federalism."
- [19](#) At a more general level, there are three broad types of diffusion mechanisms: learning ("a process where policies in one unit are influenced by the consequences of similar policies in other units"), emulation or mimicking (which is similar to learning but "is not related to the objective consequences of a policy"; instead, "the symbolic and socially constructed characteristics of policies are crucial here"), and competition (which is commonly economic in nature and "occurs when units react to or anticipate one another in the attempt of attracting or retaining resources"). See Gilardi, "Four Ways," 2.
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