zation of local control over the political and administrative decision-makers whose actions affect the lives of every citizen in ever-increasing ways.

As the population of the nation increases, the states become increasingly able to manage major governmental activities with the competence and expertise demanded by the metropolitan-technological frontier. At the same time, the federal government becomes further removed from popular pressures simply by virtue of the increased size of the population it must serve. The states may well be on their way to becoming the most "manageable" civil societies in the nation. Their size and scale remain comprehensible to people even as they are enabled to do more things better.

In sum, the virtue of the federal system lies in its ability to develop and maintain mechanisms to the perpetuation of the unique combination of governmental strength, political flexibility, and individual liberty, which has been the central concern of American politics. The American people are known to appreciate their political tradition and the Constitution. Most important, they seem to appreciate the partnership, too, in some unreasoned way, and have learned to use all its elements to reasonably satisfy their claims on government.

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ANDREW KARCH

From Democratic Laboratories

The title of Andrew Karch's book is taken from Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis's use of the phrase in a 1932 dissent. The state governments provide a place to try out new policy ideas that may later be used in other states or in the whole country; the states are "laboratories of democracy." Ideas that come from one state, Karch explains, can become policy in another state through the process of diffusion. The author discusses the importance of state governments, especially since the 1994 Republican congressional victory. "Devolution," as it has been termed, allowed the states a more prominent role in shaping policy and fitting it to the needs of each state. Karch mentions welfare reform as a prime example of devolution. Currently, state experiments with charter schools and with health care reform have provided critical information on the workability of these new programs. The author stresses the significance of the Internet in allowing states to share information efficiently. It's not clear whether the "devolution revolution" that Karch describes will continue in a time of economic problems, increased federal spending, and reliance on the national government for solutions to what ails the nation, but we can be quite sure that ideas developed in Washington, D.C., will have had their start in the states.

HOW DO NEW IDEAS SPREAD? What turns a little-known product or behavior into something with widespread popularity? These straightforward questions have captured the popular imagination. Malcolm Gladwell recently wrote a national best seller devoted to the notion that "ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do." He argued that the best way to understand the emergence of such phenomena as fashion and crime waves was to think of them as epidemics. Like an epidemic, modern change tends to occur in one dramatic moment. Rather than building slowly and steadily, change happens in a hurry, with small causes having large effects.

Gladwell's observations resonate with a long-standing scholarly literature on the emergence and diffusion of innovations. In fields ranging from anthropology and rural sociology to marketing and public health, analysts have examined the processes through which new ideas, practices, and objects spread. These innovations need not be new in an objective
From *Democratic Laboratories*

Graum. If the innovation is unsuccessful, it will not be adopted elsewhere. Thus, the laboratories metaphor describes a systematic and rational process of trial and error.

Recent developments have catapulted the fifty states to a more prominent place in the American political system. For the past two decades, the states have served as a main locus of policy-making. As a result, now is a timely occasion to examine diffusion in this setting. From abortion and capital punishment to education and the environment, several important policy decisions are being made in state houses across the country, in addition to in the nation’s capital. Two main factors contributed to this state resurgence. National political developments, especially the emergence of a Republican congressional majority [from the 1994 elections until the 2006 elections], were one important factor. The second factor was a set of reforms at the state level that strengthened state political institutions.

National developments shifted significant policy-making prerogatives from the national government to the fifty states, with changes in party politics playing a critical role. Republican politicians long considered intergovernmental reform to be a central element of their domestic political agenda. In the early 1970s, President Richard Nixon advanced a proposal called the New Federalism, which emphasized an administrative rationale for devolving policy-making authority to the states. Nixon wanted to restructure the roles and responsibilities of government at all levels in an effort to make the system function more efficiently. Ronald Reagan and Newt Gingrich married these administrative concerns to a larger debate over the legitimate scope and definition of the public sector. For Reagan, Gingrich, and other Republicans, devolution was a way to solve administrative problems and to cut back the reach of government programs.

When the 1994 midterm elections produced a Republican majority in both houses of Congress for the first time in decades, this shift sparked a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between the states and the national government. While many Republican initiatives stalled, others devolved additional policy-making prerogatives to state officials. Perhaps the most prominent example occurred in 1996, when national lawmakers endorsed landmark welfare reform legislation. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act placed a time limit on welfare receipt and incorporated stringent work requirements on beneficiaries. It also granted state policymakers unprecedented discretion over the provisions of their welfare programs. Since 1996, state lawmakers have used this discretion to create diverse approaches to welfare policy. Welfare reform is one of many instances in which the states have taken the lead in the making of public policy in response to national legislation.
The partisan shift in Congress was crucial, but other national developments also facilitated the resurgence of the states. Sometimes congressional stalemates, caused by divided government or party polarization, prompted state lawmakers to act in the absence of a national mandate. When national lawmakers could not agree on legislation or did not address specific topics, state officials sometimes developed innovative policy solutions on their own. This dynamic was fairly common in health care policy. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, many states implemented innovative health care programs, such as MinnesotaCare (Minnesota), MassCare (Massachusetts), and the State Health Insurance Program (Hawaii). When legislation for comprehensive national health care reform failed in 1994, state officials attempted to address this vacuum by proposing their own solutions. Over the past two decades, in health care and in other policy arenas, state officials have regularly taken independent action.

In part, state officials' ability to take action grew out of institutional changes that better equipped the states to serve as laboratories of democracy. Reforms of legislatures and executive branches are the second factor that contributed to the resurgence of the states. In institutional terms, the fifty states are stronger than they were a generation ago. In the 1960s, state governments were not professional operations, and many reformers believed that state governments lacked the resources they needed to be effective. Today this is a less pressing concern. James Morone explains: "Once upon a time, good old boys ran the states with winks and backslaps. No more." The institutional capabilities of state governments increased dramatically between the 1960s and the 1980s, thanks to a series of constitutional and institutional reforms. These reforms made state legislatures more professional and enhanced the administrative capacities of the executive branch. As a result, state officials can make a credible claim that they are well equipped to design innovative public policies.

If the fifty states serve as laboratories, they currently are better equipped to take on this task. Institutional changes transformed them from weak backwaters into a strong counterpart to the national government. Around the same time that these state-level changes occurred, developments at the national level granted the states a more prominent place in the American political system. This combination of institutional reforms and national developments contributed to the resurgence of the states and encouraged state officials to design and enact many policy innovations. These laboratories of democracy have been particularly busy in recent years, and the range of recent state activity is quite impressive. In education policy, dozens of states followed suit after the Minnesota state legislature became the first to approve charter school legislation. In health care policy, at least thirty-eight states adopted each of the following policies: small business insurance reforms, high-risk insurance pools, preexisting condition legislation, certificate of need, health care commissions, guaranteed renewal legislation, portability, and guaranteed issue. These and other recent innovations illustrate why the American states are a good setting in which to examine the phenomenon of policy diffusion.

State officials typically have access to libraries and other reference centers whose main job is to collect and distribute information that will be useful during the formulation of public policy. In Virginia, for example, the Legislative Reference Center in Richmond serves the information needs of the Virginia General Assembly. Its collection includes state legislation, legal publications, and topical information to support the research needs of representatives and legislative staff. A shelf near the entrance of the reference center provides introductory materials that describe the information available in the collection. These materials include a bookmark that describes the functions of the center. It states: "We compile state comparative data on a variety of issues. One of our most frequently asked questions is: 'What are other states doing in the area of...?' The notion of policy diffusion presumes that lawmakers have access to and are sometimes influenced by this type of comparative information. One could reasonably argue that an awareness of and interest in developments elsewhere is the essence of policy diffusion, and this bookmark suggests that such a dynamic is at least a semiregular occurrence."

Public officials currently operate in an information-rich environment. Compared to their predecessors, they generally have more resources at their disposal. These varied resources provide access to a wider range of policy-relevant information. Several recent institutional, technological, and organizational changes facilitate the generation and the collection of policy-relevant information.

In recent decades, institutional changes augmented state officials' ability to gather policy-relevant information. These changes... made an especially profound impact on the legislative branch. As late as the mid-1960s, reformers argued that these bodies were ill equipped to process information and to study emerging policy problems. One response to the reformers' complaints was a dramatic increase in the number and the quality of legislative staff. Today, a larger and more qualified staff can gather information for state legislators, although there remain important disparities across states. Legislative staffs are now such an important part of state government, in fact, that a common complaint about the recent imposition of term limits in some states has been that term limits increase
The power of unelected legislative staffers. Larger and more professional staffs also serve the executive branch of many state governments.

Technological advancements seem to make more information resources available for state officials. The emergence of new information technologies, such as the Internet, has increased the ease and speed with which many organizations can provide policy-relevant information. The representative of one professional association explains: "The advances are enormous. Compared with what is going on now, we were asleep fifteen years ago." Technological shifts also increased the ease and speed with which state officials can consult policy-relevant information. State officials can examine model legislation and statutory language online without contacting an organization directly. In addition, they can mark up legislation and send it to a professional association for comment. Electronic exchange is significantly easier than relying on a telephone, a fax machine, or snail mail. In the past, finding information sometimes involved phone calls and waiting for the mail. Today, similar information is often only a click of the mouse away.

Additional technological changes also make it easier for officials to consult their colleagues in other states. Travel is less onerous than it was in the past, facilitating attendance at regional and national meetings of professional organizations that bring together lawmakers and staff from across the country. Alan Rosenthal argues that "legislation tends to spread like wildfire" because of these conferences. Public officials frequently discuss programs with one another at these meetings, learning about the substantive impact and political feasibility of policy innovations. When state lawmakers and their staff travel to these out-of-state meetings, they often look for bills to introduce when they return to their own states. Attendees also forge long-lasting bonds at these meetings, and they can use these connections to develop legislation once they return to their own states. A legislative staffer in Massachusetts explains the significance of such connections: "If someone called me and asked me to send information on our laws on managed care or HMOs I would know exactly what chapter to go to whereas someone from another state wouldn't. People do the same thing for me when I know exactly what I'm looking for." Communications technologies, such as e-mail and relatively inexpensive long-distance phone calls, facilitate quick correspondence. It is not much of a stretch to imagine that these connections facilitate the dissemination of policy-relevant information. In sum, technological changes suggest that state officials are more closely connected than they were in the past and are therefore better able to exchange ideas and information.

In the foreword to a book on state-level economic policy during the 1980s, Bill Clinton, then governor of Arkansas, used the "laboratories of democracy" metaphor to describe how officials in the states "learn from one another, borrowing, adapting, and improving on each other's best efforts." This quotation alludes to one of the complexities of policy diffusion, because it implies that lawmakers amend the policy templates that they import. Although officials sometimes copy programs that exist elsewhere, it is more common for them to "adapt" and "improve" these examples. In other words, they customize a policy innovation to "fit" their state in the same way that an individual tailors a suit after buying it off the rack. Policy innovations, as a result, take on various forms in the jurisdictions in which they are enacted. Programs that purport to be the same sometimes vary quite significantly across states.

...The political forces that affect state lawmaking and the spread of innovative policy ideas are topics of great contemporary significance. The states recently emerged from their worst financial crisis since the Second World War. Constrained by balanced budget requirements that prevented them from running large deficits, state officials responded to this situation in several different ways. Extensive service cuts were one common strategy. Ironically, the scope and magnitude of the cuts testify to the expansive role of state governments. They affected everything from nursing home care and community colleges to homeland security and health care for the poor. It is no exaggeration to claim that state governments reach into almost every corner of American citizens' lives.

In recent years, many officials at the national level have proposed to grant state lawmakers additional policy-making discretion in several areas where the national and state governments currently share responsibility. For example, some of these proposals would provide state governments with lump sum payments to run social programs, such as Medicaid. Currently national regulations affect the operation of these programs, but some individuals want state officials to have the power to structure these policies as they see fit. Rather than attaching strings to national grants, they want state policymakers to operate free of any regulations. Proponents of this "devolution revolution" argue that removing these structures will allow state lawmakers to develop innovative policy ideas and to adapt existing programs to specific conditions within their states. The debate over devolution resonates... with the notion that the fifty states can serve as laboratories of democracy.