

Research Idea

The Theory of Policy Diffusion in Sister City Relationships

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Abstract: Sister cities are two different cities, towns, regions that have entered into a formal social agreement to promote cultural and economic ties with one another. While the idea has been around since the end of World War II, it has not heartily breached the realm of academia specifically in the context of policymaking. This paper applies a theoretical framework to discern whether the presence of sister city relationships influences the phenomenon of policy dissemination within varying municipalities. The research question this paper addresses is: what role does policy diffusion play between sister cities? The goal is to confirm if policy diffusion is taking place between these partnerships, how often it might be, and what its role can play moving forward by conducting a content analysis of “Member Stories.” Overall, this study finds that policy diffusion of any degree is rare and does not occur frequently between sister cities.

Context of Policy Problem

Sister Cities International (SCI) is a nonpartisan non-profit organization that fosters legal or social agreements between towns, cities, prefectures, provinces, regions, states, etc., to promote cultural

and economic ties (Our Mission, 2018). True to SCI’s mission statement of “thinking globally, acting locally,” each sister organization is independent and pursues the activities and thematic areas that are important to them (Our Mission, 2018). Exchanges and projects may be municipal, business, trade, educational, or culturally oriented. Since its inception, more than 15,000 pairs of sister cities in over 159 countries have entered into agreements, and there are many more partnerships that exist but are not officially recognized yet (Kaltenbrunner et al., 2013).

Opportunity in Literature

Recent growing emphasis on globalization has brought the analysis of global cities into sharp focus. However, when viewed through a policy diffusion perspective, literature regarding the concept of Sister Cities remains scant and relatively embryonic. While the idea has been around since the end of World War II, it has not heartily breached the realm of academia specifically in the context of policymaking. Many sister city partnerships are examined and assessed based on their economic benefits and cultural peace-building capability, but virtually nothing scholastic has been published that clearly deduces a relationship between sister cities and policy adoption techniques.

This opportunity in literature is what this research aims to fill. This paper applies a theoretical framework to discern whether the presence of sister city relationships influences the phenomenon of policy dissemination within varying municipalities. This begs the question: what role does policy diffusion play between sister cities? The goal is to confirm if policy diffusion is taking place between these partnerships, how often it might be, and what its role can play moving forward.

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Theoretical Framework

A common definition of policy diffusion is a process through which policy choices in one country affect those made in a second country (Simmons and Elkins, 2004). Innovations elsewhere provide information on policy consequences that may be relevant in a particular case. Governments are assumed here to use available information in a rational fashion to maximize the chances of their own policy success. Foreign models can encourage or expedite adoption by inserting a policy innovation on a legislature's agenda (Simmons and Elkins, 2004). Therefore, sister city relationships are an appropriate medium for analyzing the existence of this phenomenon. Policies tend to evolve and be reinvented as they spread, and successful cases are more likely to be implemented than failures. It is within policymaker's best interest to pay close attention to the actions of other governments, either due to direct effects (economic/budgetary spillovers) or indirect effects (knowledge gained from another's policy experiment).

Data and Analytic Methods

This research utilizes published articles from the Sister Cities International website that detail the exchange of information or talent between two given communities. Any sister city, country, or state organization that hosted a recent event or exchange is encouraged to contact SCI to share the work the program did. The story, once written, is featured in Sister City International's weekly newsletter, website, and social media channels accessible to the public. These "Member Stories" are short summary articles about specific interactions and serve as the primary data set to shed light on the relationship between sister cities and policy diffusion techniques.

The method of content analysis is defined as the summarizing, systematic, and objective analysis of message characteristics (Neuendorf, 2016). This technique is appropriate when studying news releases, which is the main medium of data this research focuses on. A strength of content analysis is that it can study latent content, which is unobserved concepts that cannot be measured directly, but represented or measured by one or more indicators. While it is highly unlikely any Member Story will explicitly state that policy diffusion is taking place, it can be deduced if the sensation is happening by identifying characteristics of the theory. The variables that information will be collected on include city, country, and continent of the sister city pairs in the article, the date it was published, the title of the article, the type of exchange that took place between the two cities, the number of years the two cities have been paired together, and two dichotomous indicators that can be considered prerequisites to the theory of policy diffusion.

Findings

A sample size of 50 sister city interactions were analyzed via a content analysis of "Member Stories" found on the Sister Cities International official website. Member Stories are self-identified by involved citizens or members of an organized Sister City Committee. For the 2019-2020 year, a special series was piloted named "Wunderbar (Wonderful) Together," which highlighted features of US-German sister city relationships. It is important to note that this series is reflected in the data as there is a statistically disproportionate number of stories that entail German cities.

The publishing dates of the stories analyzed range from November 21, 2017 to March 13, 2020. No articles were published about sister city interactions after COVID-19 was declared a global

pandemic or after much of the United States enforced shelter-in-place protocols.

The mean and median number of years of sisterhood (the number of years two cities have been paired together) are 24.5 years and 23 years, respectively. The longest relationship observed was 70 years old, one that preceded the formal inception of SCI, as the two cities were unofficially paired together throughout World War II. The shortest friendship recorded was three years.

Table 1: Years of Sisterhood Descriptive Statistics

Upper Limit	Lower Limit	Range	Mean	Median
70	3	67	24.5	23

Below is a frequency table of the nominal variables, with the modes highlighted and in bold. For international country, the top two modes are highlighted/bolded as that parameter is skewed in Germany's favor due to the "Wunderbar Together" series.

Table 2: State, Country, and Continent Frequency Tables

State	Frequency	%
Alabama	1	2%
Alaska	1	2%
Arkansas	1	2%
California	1	2%
Colorado	3	6%
Florida	2	4%
Illinois	7	14%
Maryland	2	4%
Minnesota	1	2%
Missouri	3	6%

New York	1	2%
North Carolina	1	2%
Ohio	1	2%
South Carolina	2	4%
Tennessee	5	10%
Texas	2	4%
Utah	1	2%
Virginia	5	10%
Washington	9	18%
Wisconsin	1	2%
Country	Frequency	%
Australia	1	2%
Austria	1	2%
Cameroon	1	2%
Canada	1	1%
China	5	10%
Egypt	1	2%
France	4	8%
Germany	13*	26%
Greece	1	2%
India	2	4%
Ireland	2	4%
Israel	1	2%
Japan	1	2%
Mexico	2	4%

Norway	5	10%
Panama	1	2%
Philippines	1	2%
Russia	1	2%
South Africa	1	2%
South Korea	2	4%
Sweden	1	2%
Ukraine	2	4%
Continent	Frequency	%
Africa	3	6%
Asia	13	26%
Europe	29	58%
North America	4	8%
Oceania	1	2%

* due to special marketing

The US State with the most debuts in the dataset was Washington, with nine times. Germany led for the foreign countries with 13, however because that was due to marketing and not natural causes, Norway and China are also highlighted as the second-most active countries, each with five stories. Europe had the most amount of action with more than twice as many than the second leading continent, Asia.

The variable that captures the type of exchange that occurred between two cities stems from the mission of Sister Cities International, which states that “each sister city organization is independent

and pursues the activities and thematic areas that are important to them and their community including municipal, business, trade, educational, and cultural exchanges and projects with their sister city” (What is, 2020). Original coding was conducted according to these themes, however after a pilot set of stories were analyzed, the principal investigator made the decision to adjust the categories to more narrowly define and better describe certain actions. For example, the “cultural” exchange was made more distinguishable by including an “arts” category; “business” and “trade” were considered one grouping; and “municipal” was munged into two separate categories – “ambassadorial,” which implies an official Sister Cities representative had traveled to engage in professional work in the role of a formal delegation visit, and “diplomatic,” which entails more symbolic actions. The outcome “educational” was left as is.

Examples of an arts type of exchange in this dataset includes gala concerts and music festivals put on in honor of a sister city, virtual poetry exchanges, or exporting a large bronze-cast statue created by local artists. A few cultural examples include cities competing against each other in baseball games, museum openings, or traditional festivals. Educational interactions typically entailed sending and hosting students between two countries, similar employee exchanges, or instances where one partner provided life-saving information, such as medical training or reproductive health education. Business interactions were when countries discussed economic development opportunities, collaborated on future business ideas, or deliberated trade missions and investments. As previously mentioned, diplomatic observations included peace-making actions such as lighting a torch, recognizing liberation anniversaries, or stories of citizen diplomacy. Lastly, a report was considered

ambassadorial if an official delegation visit occurred.

Eleven times, at the coder's discretion, a Member Story was coded as simultaneously two different types of exchanges, as they equally represented the descriptions of said categories. Because of that, the frequency table shown below will equal a total greater than the number of observations (50). The spread was rather equal. The most commonly occurring type of exchange was educational.

Table 3: Exchange Type Frequency Table

Ambassadorial	Arts	Business	Cultural	Diplomatic	Educational
8	11	7	12	7	16

While descriptive statistics and frequency tables are helpful to get to know the data, the primary purpose of this research is to observe instances where policy diffusion may take place. Sister cities have the unique opportunity to serve as policy laboratories – members can adopt novel policies to address needs, abandon unsuccessful attempts, and learn from the successes of their partnered municipalities. Policy diffusion is no longer limited to a geographic clustering of similar policies. A concept that was once defined by learning only from the experiences of nearby neighbors has since transformed into a greater capacity to look far and wide for useful solutions to policy problems, making the field of policy diffusion research more significant than ever before.

A common distinction is made between governments that learn from one another, and those that imitate. The nature of imitation can be understood in contrast to learning. Sometimes referred to as emulation, imitation involves copying the actions of another in order to look like that other. In learning, policymakers focus on the policy itself, and question its effectiveness and

potential consequences. Imitation, on the other hand, hones in on the governing body – what did the government do, and how can it be replicated? (Shipan and Volden, 2008) In this content analysis, examples of learning and evidence of emulation are treated as two separate dichotomous variables.

Out of the 50 sister city interactions analyzed, eight of them demonstrated ideas being effectively spread from one government to another, representing 16% of the data. Of these instances, there was no common denominator regarding the type of exchange the story was coded as; each of the six categories had a least one example of policy learning. This promotes the idea that diffusion can happen in a widespread number of domains. Due to multiple stories being coded with two exchange types, the total frequency exceeds eight.

Table 4: Policy Learning Frequency by Exchange Type

Ambassadorial	Arts	Business	Cultural	Diplomatic	Educational
1	1	2	2	2	2

As the frequency table depicts, an exchange of ideas manifests over a variety of topics. For example, when a native Seattleite took a tour of Bergen, Norway to learn about their programs and services offered for their shared problem of heroin addicts, she stated:

“My meetings with officials and clients at these facilities in Norway made a strong impression on me, and I knew I had to share what I learned back home. On the afternoon of May 3, leading experts from Seattle and Bergen will come together for a symposium at the Seattle Municipal Tower to

share their experiences and best practices on dealing with heroin addiction as a public health issue.”

In this Member Story, it is definitively clear that information was passed along between municipalities and learning took place. The city’s respective mayors convened and discussed policies surrounding reform in addiction treatment, and vowed to work across borders to tackle the heroine crisis. This is evidence of the beginning phase of a diffused policy. Another case appears when Nashville and Magdeburg, Germany vowed to strengthen their partnership, especially as it relates to their mutual interest in civil rights veterans:

“In terms of future opportunities to address global challenges, I hope that the Magdeburg-Nashville partnership can grow to include regular policy-focused conversations between city officials. A member of the Metro Nashville Council attended a conference in Magdeburg last year, loved the experience, and has commented since about the extent to which the two cities face similar issues. I would like to see genuine educational and professional development opportunities for local government officials become a part of the partnership.”

Multiple other cities cited how sharing perspectives, ideas, and best practices with each other proved to be a valuable experience,

especially when they are similarly sized cities or are facing comparable challenges.

Emulation, where a new policy is adopted, is much rarer, occurring about 4% of the time, or two out of the 50 stories assessed. An example of policy imitation can be understood in the Mooresville-Hockenheim partnership, where the North Carolinian city adopted waste water treatment plant technology that Hockenheim, Germany uses, to convert the wet waste products that are taken out of the water into a dry product that is used as fertilizer by farmers. Although this is more largely an example of technology diffusion versus policy, it is considered an emulation in the sample size due to its overarching goal of strengthening climate resiliency.

Previous analysis on policy diffusion intuitively reveals that municipalities with successful policies are more likely to be emulated than those with failing policies – but that is not to say that a failure does not constitute as a diffusion attempt. The other example of policy adoption within the dataset once again stems from Seattle’s ties with cities Bergen, Norway, but this time also includes Vancouver, Canada. A Member Story that describes Bergen’s Mayor’s trip to Seattle states that:

“The three cities have taken different approaches to the opioid crisis. Both Vancouver and Bergen have opened safe injection sites as a measure to decrease overdose deaths and increase public health and safety, but in Seattle proposals to do the same have generated a controversial debate.”

This demonstrates how Seattle attempted to adopt the same policy as its sister cities (open a safe injection site as a response to the opioid crisis) but was met with pushback due to a cultural disparity. Shipan and Volden (2012) describe how sometimes this may happen: competition may produce a race to the bottom in certain redistributive programs, and wrong lessons can often be drawn from others' experiences. Therefore, while it is important to recognize the favorable aspects of policy diffusion, it would be erroneous to declare interrelated policy decisions across governments always beneficial. Nonetheless, this is an explicit example of a diffused policy that failed in Seattle – which is evidence that the phenomenon is occurring in the first place.

Implications and Conclusion

Overall, it is evident that policy diffusion of any degree is rare and does not occur frequently between sister cities. At best, the policy learning phenomena can be observed 16% of the time, with emulation trailing behind at 4% of the time. A better marriage between this research and practice could yield a multitude of benefits. It could allow governments to make more efficient policies and not reinvent the wheel or waste resources. Connecting theory and action could be as simple as training volunteers to ask policy-related questions when they are traveling on trips or interacting with other municipalities. In the end, it seems promising that policy diffusion is on the rise. An area of future research could be to study how policy diffusion evolves in a post COVID-19 world, when sharing ideas and best practices would be more important than ever.

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