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Title: Policy Innovation in Planning: An Examination of Climate Action Planning in US Cities

Abstract

Cities play a fundamental role in the production of greenhouse gases (GHGs) and, as such, are places where proactive mitigation and adaptation can occur. Over the past few years, an increasing number of municipalities have developed climate action plans-yet our understanding of the processes by which local governments are developing these plans, the types of new policies or policy innovations contained within them, and the effectiveness of these responses to the climate challenge is remarkably limited. The rapid increase in the number of cities developing climate change plans offers an exceptional opportunity to learn the factors that drive innovation in public policy and improve society's ability to adapt to the consequences of a changing climate.

Building off of previous research on the content of state and municipal level climate plans (Wheeler 2008), our research examines local level climate action plans to see to what extent these new types of plans constitute policy innovation. Briefly, the theoretical literature in the broader social sciences identifies two main models of why governments formulate new policies: the "internal determinants model" in which internal or local level factors like demographics affect policy-making and the "regional diffusion model" in which external (e.g., regional or state level) factors are seen as driving institutional change (e.g., Walker, 1969, Berry & Berry 1990, Wejnert 2002.) Our research paper is focused around three questions: (1) What types of policy innovation are taking place in local governments relative to climate change and how has innovation in climate planning changed over time? (2) Given the range of innovation we hypothesize exists, why are some cities more innovative than others? To what extent do internal versus external factors explain the difference in the quality of innovation taking place? (3) What are the chief drivers of and obstacles to policy innovation by cities?

Our paper employs a mixed method approach that combines qualitative analysis of plans with survey and archival research. Twenty five local climate action plans stratified by city size have been read and scored using plan content analysis procedures; these plans have, in turn, been compared to pre-existing local comprehensive and sustainability plans.

To be considered an "innovation" a particular strategy (e.g., conversion of vehicle fleet to biofuels) must not have been previously adopted in a prior plan. To further understand drivers and obstacles to innovation, we also report the findings of a national survey of planning directors, lead environmental planners, and community residents. While this research is on-going, our preliminary findings based upon plan evaluation show that climate action plans do represent policy innovation and contain significant new areas of activity for local government planners, in particular, and professional planners, in general.

References

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