

# Book Review

***Following in Footsteps or Marching Alone? How Institutional Differences Influence Renewable Energy Policy***, by Srinivas C. Parinandi. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023. 296 pp. \$70 hardback. Open access at <https://www.press.umich.edu>.

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Srinivas C. Parinandi's *Following in Footsteps or Marching Alone?* is an important contribution to political science literatures on state-level policy diffusion, climate, and renewable energy policymaking, and of course, American federalism. Unsatisfied with studies of state-level policy diffusion that do not distinguish between the creation of completely novel policy and the adoption of a policy that already exists in a different state, Parinandi proposes a key conceptual distinction between policy "invention" and "borrowing." He then asks whether there are systematic characteristics of state governments—both state legislatures and just as important, *executive branch* policymakers—that make either invention or borrowing more or less likely.

Parinandi's primary empirical case is state-level renewable portfolio standards (RPS) policies, which are the most prevalent and significant state-level policy instrument to combat climate change, as they increase the share of renewable sources of electricity generation. However, in one of the later chapters, Parinandi also tests his theory on an entirely different area of state-level policy: anti-abortion policy. Since the author relies on others' data for the anti-abortion policy chapter, he analyzes only policy change in the legislative branch rather than in both the legislative and executive branches. Not only is this a completely reasonable choice, but I would have found the book just as compelling even in the absence of the chapter on anti-abortion policy, as important and timely a policy issue as it is. The original data collection and analysis effort on the RPS policies is impeccable; and so, while the analysis of anti-abortion policy is interesting (though it may raise more questions than it answers), I see it as very much "icing on the cake." In what follows, I will first summarize Parinandi's key findings regarding RPS policies, then offer my commentary on the strengths of his novel approach, before concluding with some of my thoughts on opportunities to build further on this excellent work.

After describing his unit of analysis, the "sub-policy" or "policy feature" level (which I will return to later, because I think this is among the book's greatest strengths), Parinandi describes the impressive original dataset he constructed of 642 instances of RPS policy feature or regime adoption across all thirty-seven RPS-adopting states during the period of 1983–2011 (when the vast majority of RPS policymaking took place). He then expertly explains how jurisdiction over RPS policymaking is shared between state legislatures and

state public utility commissions (PUCs), despite the relative balance of policymaking activity between the two venues differing by state. Then, in Chapter 5, Parinandi conducts an analysis of legislative RPS policymaking. He finds that legislative ideology is strongly associated with RPS *invention* but not with RPS *borrowing*. That is, the more liberal the state legislature is, the more likely it is to invent an RPS policy feature or regime as opposed to borrowing it. He also finds that legislators' electoral vulnerability is associated with *borrowing* but not *invention*—the more electorally vulnerable legislators are, the more likely their legislature will borrow a RPS policy feature or regime from a different state rather than invent something brand new themselves.

Turning in Chapter 6 to executive branch policymaking, and specifically PUCs, Parinandi shows the importance of electric sector deregulation in increasing the likelihood that PUCs will *invent* novel RPS policy features or regimes. Nonetheless, he does not find a similar, statistically significant effect of electric sector deregulation when it comes to *borrowing* from other states. Interestingly, he also finds that elected (as opposed to appointed) PUC commissioners are associated with increased likelihood of *both* invention *and* adoption, though he does not dwell on this finding, spending just one paragraph discussing it. I would suspect that as social science research finally begins to attend to the critical role of PUCs and their commissioners in energy and climate policymaking (see, e.g., Heern 2023), others will pick up where Parinandi leaves off in terms of exploring the broader significance of this institutional distinction between elected versus appointed PUC decision-makers.

For any readers who may not be persuaded by the broader theoretical implications of his quantitative analyses, Parinandi offers two paired case studies: (1) Illinois and Indiana, which created their RPS policy regimes primarily through legislative adoption, and (2) Arizona and New York, both of which did so primarily through executive branch, or regulatory, adoption. He shows using qualitative data sources that, consistent with his theory, invention dominated in Illinois, where legislative ideology was more liberal, whereas heavy borrowing from other jurisdictions best characterized the Indiana case, where the state legislature was far more conservative. Also consistent with his theory, he shows that New York, with its deregulated electric sector, has been a major RPS policy inventor compared to Arizona, which has been more of a borrower and where utilities are more traditionally regulated.

As with any study, I found some of this book's arguments more convincing than others, but rather than get into that here, I want to instead use the remaining space to point out three innovative conceptual and/or methodological aspects of Parinandi's study that I hope will serve as a model for future research. One takeaway point is that executive branch regulatory agencies (such as the PUCs, in Parinandi's case) are not merely passive "enforcers" of the laws the legislature creates. Despite what we may have learned in high school civics classes that "The legislature creates the law, the executive branch enforces it, and the judicial branch interprets it," executive branch agencies, too, are active in *policymaking* through the rulemaking proceedings they engage in when implementing statutes. By giving equal attention to both branches of government, Parinandi shows us just how important PUCs are.

Second, a huge asset of Parinandi's work is that he analyzes policy diffusion at the "sub-policy" or "policy feature" level of analysis. As Parinandi correctly writes, "Most policy diffusion scholars have analyzed policy adoption at a level— that of adopting an entire law or regulation— that is too broad to determine the components of that law or regulation that are novel or original in character as opposed to being borrowed from other states' laws or regulations" (p. 37). I wholeheartedly agree, and would go even further and note that it is not *just* policy diffusion scholars, but also social scientists who study U.S. public policy *in*

*general* that tend to examine policy at the level of an entire bill/law or regulation. As a consequence, they miss so much of the nuance, and sometimes even the provisions at cross-purposes with one another, that one finds when reading actual legislative and regulatory text. This point is especially relevant when we consider increases in omnibus legislation, which occur more and more not only in statehouses but also in Congress (e.g., [Drutman 2015](#)). The consequences of researchers “simplifying” complex policies into dichotomous outcomes (often understood as adoption of the overall policy, or not) are far wider than just limiting the policy diffusion literature; they also have implications for what we know about interest group influence and political representation, for instance. Parinandi’s focus on *policy design* rather than mere adoption, enabled by his focus at the sub-policy level, invites us all to explore policy in a more substantively meaningful way than we have in the past.

Third, and related to the second point, Parinandi’s data sources, which he uses to construct his database of RPS policy feature and regime adoption, include what he calls “official documentation,” which are actual legislative and regulatory texts. He helpfully lists them all in an appendix. He uses these materials to “time-stamp” the policy features which he gets from the DSIRE database compiled by researchers at North Carolina State University. What I love about this analytical step is that once again it shows his appreciation for how much more nuanced, complex, and multi-dimensional these state-level policies really are. We are social scientists, but in order to ensure we are operationalizing our variables in a way that maps on to their real-world, applied significance, it is sometimes necessary to think more like lawyers, and Parinandi’s effort is a bold step in this direction.

Concluding with a couple of thoughts about opportunities to build on and/or clarify what Parinandi’s book establishes, I offer two closing provocations. First, while the operationalization of the RPS policy features is careful and nuanced, the same attention is, quite understandably, not given to the state laws that first “deregulated” the electric utility industry. This would be a whole other book (perhaps related to the one I am currently writing), but many analysts believe “deregulation” to be a misnomer, preferring instead the term “restructuring” ([Isser 2015](#)), since PUCs still regulate the transmission and distribution functions of electric utilities, even in so-called deregulated states. Furthermore, these restructuring laws each have their own “policy features” that could impact Parinandi’s theorized mechanism explaining his finding about the relationship between it and PUCs’ propensity to invent versus borrow. Another question the book raised for me is whether we might expect this same variable about utility deregulation to affect the legislative side of the ledger; Parinandi does not test this, but this matter could be worth exploring in the future.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/publius/pjad028>

## References

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