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The University of Southern California Journal of Law and Society is a student-run, interdisciplinary Journal that promotes outstanding undergraduate scholarship. The Journal provides a print and online forum to publish exceptional undergraduate papers by students at the University of Southern California and around the world. The Journal seeks to publish papers from a wide range of disciplines that reflect diverse viewpoints. Guided by top faculty members at the University of Southern California, undergraduate students ensure that each paper undergoes a rigorous editing process and is of the highest quality. The USC Journal of Law and Society strives to promote greater awareness and understanding of the legal field and aims to become the preeminent journal of its kind.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Jerry Li
Managing Editor

The *USC Journal of Law and Society* is excited to announce the Spring 2025 Edition of the *Journal*.

I would like first to thank you—authors, editors, and supporters—for your patience and help during a challenging period for the *Journal*, as we navigated unforeseen circumstances in securing its status as a Registered Student Organization at USC.

I am honored and humbled to be the first managing editor of JLS. In my role, I am fortunate to be under the guidance of Sariah, who is now in law school, and to be in close contact with our lead editors—Jenn, Sabeeh, Olivia, and Braden—during this editing process. I have learned a great deal about myself and all of you. Thank you for your leadership, dedication, and companionship. We have had our ups and downs, but this edition is now out because of *you*.

Our authors are utterly brilliant. Paris, Stephanie, and Willem, the *Journal* appreciates your thoughtfulness and responsiveness. I have felt nothing but admiration and respect for your intelligence and integrity, as reflected in your work and our interactions throughout this process.

To our associate editors, you are the backbone of the *Journal*. Your eager curiosity and meticulous effort have enriched these papers and amplified the authors' voices. You should be proud of your contributions to the club so far; I know the future of JLS is secure with you taking the helm.

Thank you to our faculty advisor, Professor Shannon Gibson, for your support and guidance. Sariah and I deeply value your input. We would not be here without you.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this issue to Eric Bui. You were my editor-in-chief, my lead editor, and someone I continue to look up to. You possess an extraordinary talent in writing, editing, and leadership, yet these pale in comparison to your kindness and heart. Thank you for many indelible lessons and memories. I hope Sariah and I have made you proud.

BEHIND THE WAVE: CONSERVATIVE ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS, MODEL LEGISLATION, AND THE DIFFUSION OF STATE-LEVEL ANTI-LGBTQ+ LAWS

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Abstract

This study examines the rapid diffusion of anti-LGBTQ+ laws across the United States between 2020 and 2024, focusing on two types of laws: laws restricting transgender athletes' participation in sports, and laws banning gender-affirming care for minors. Using a stochastic actor-oriented model, a novel tool in this context that allows for a network analysis of legislative text, this paper analyzes the diffusion patterns of those laws. Contrary to popular perspectives, this study suggests that the influence of interest groups through supplying model legislation and lobbying is overstated. Instead, when states pass anti-LGBTQ+ laws, this paper finds that states are more likely to copy portions of legislative text from other states than from model legislation. The findings suggest that states seek to emulate earlier adopters and act on salient issues, conforming to a mechanism of policy diffusion known as imitation. By introducing the stochastic actor-oriented model to legislative text analysis, this paper questions the influence of model legislation and lobbying on the diffusion of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation.

Introduction

Since 2020, state legislators have introduced, debated, and enacted an unprecedented number of bills targeting LGBTQ+ individuals. Among the more than 500 anti-LGBTQ+ bills introduced in 2023, at least 75 became law.¹ At the same time that legislatures became overwhelmed with proposed anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, media and advocacy organizations began reporting on the involvement of a coalition of conservative advocacy groups in the diffusion process. Organized under an alliance known as the “Promise to America’s Children” (PTAC), dozens of groups, led by the Alliance Defending Freedom, Family Policy Alliance, and Heritage Foundation, are promoting anti-LGBTQ+ legislation.² In many cases, these organizations are believed to provide model legislation that state legislators subsequently copy directly. For example, the Human Rights Campaign reported that in 2022, ADF “authored at least 130 bills in 34 states; more than 30 were passed into law. Each one of these bills actively harms LGBTQ+ people.”³

The reported involvement of conservative advocacy organizations and their direct role in writing model legislation implies that the passage of anti-LGBTQ+ laws is the result of the efforts of those organizations.⁴ However, little is known about the underlying diffusion processes and the extent to which this coalition is a driving force in the enactment of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. This article investigates this phenomenon and uncovers details about the spread of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in state legislatures using a novel combination of document-based text and network

¹ Jo Yurcaba, “From Drag Bans to Sports Restrictions, 75 Anti-LGBTQ Bills Have Become Law in 2023,” NBC News (2023), <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/75-anti-lgbtq-bills-become-law-2023-rcna124250>.

² “Promise to America’s Children,” (2024), <https://promisetoamericaschildren.org/about-us/>.

³ “Alliance Defending Freedom: Staunch Enemy of Equality,” Human Rights Campaign (2024). <https://www.hrc.org/news/alliance-defending-freedom-staunch-enemy-of-equality>.

⁴ Ibid; Sydney Bauer, “Anti-LGBTQ Coalition Targets Equality Act in the Name of America’s Children,” NBC News (2021), <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/anti-lgbtq-coalition-targets-equality-act-name-america-s-children-n1258884>.

analysis methods. The article centers around two categories of legislation with widespread enactment relative to other anti-LGBTQ+ laws: legislation that restricts or bans transgender athletes from participating in public school athletics—of which 24 laws are in effect—and laws that restrict or ban gender-affirming care for minors— of which there are 23 laws. I hypothesize that the influence PTAC-aligned groups wield in the spread of this legislation is overestimated. Through a series of analyses of laws passed between 2020 and 2024, I find that while its member organizations are actively involved in advocating for the passage of these laws, states are more likely to copy legislation from other states with a similar law already in effect.

I argue that “policy imitation,” rather than influence by advocacy organizations, can better explain the rapid diffusion of this legislation. Shipan and Volden explain that policy imitation is best understood as an increased likelihood of adopting a policy when geographic, ideological, or otherwise “neighbors” adopt the same policy.⁵ States may imitate, or emulate, each other to be seen as innovative, to confer legitimacy, or because they respond too quickly in the face of an issue gaining salience.⁶ Parker, Horowitz, and Brown (2022) found that, in May 2022, about 85% of Republican voters supported laws restricting athletic participation for transgender athletes.⁷ Similarly, 72% of Republicans supported laws that restrict gender-affirming care. There is high support for these laws among Republicans, and Republican-majority legislatures appear to be responding to that support by rapidly passing laws copied from other states. I refer to this as an “innovator effect,”

⁵ Charles R. Shipan and Craig Volden, “The Mechanisms of Policy Diffusion,” *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 4 (September 29, 2008): 840–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2008.00346.x>.

⁶ Charles R. Shipan and Craig Volden, “Why Bad Policies Spread (and Good Ones Don’t),” Cambridge Elements, *Elements in American Politics* (2021); Cambridge University Press.

⁷ Kim Parker, Juliana Horowitz, and Anna Brown, “Americans’ Complex Views on Gender Identity and Transgender Issues,” Pew Research Center (May 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/06/28/americans-complex-views-on-gender-identity-and-transgender-issues/>.

whereby the early states that enact these laws impact later states' decisions to enact the same laws with copied text. These results follow from Shipan and Volden's hypothesis that later states may imitate earlier states to appear current with trending issues.⁸

In response to anti-LGBTQ+ issues gaining salience, states are responding rapidly.⁹ In doing so, they choose to emulate the actions and bill text of earlier adopters rather than consider original legislation. My results align with other studies of policy diffusion that find important factors independent of the actions of advocacy organizations in other issue areas, suggesting that, at least in this context, the influence of conservative organizations may be overstated.¹⁰ These results stand in contrast to some other related analyses that find states copy model bills in other legislative areas.¹¹

To investigate the underlying diffusion processes, I construct a stochastic actor-oriented model (SAOM) to represent the spread of legislation throughout the network, a novel method in this context. The use of this network model is common in other research, such as social contagion studies, but has not been applied to the study of state legislative bill text. I introduce it to this area and show how it provides a unique way to understand the actions of state lawmakers and explore how they operate in an interdependent network. Through this model, I investigate various

⁸ Shipan and Volden, "Why Bad Policies Spread (and good ones Don't)".

⁹ Ibid; Sydney Bauer, "Anti-LGBTQ Coalition Targets Equality Act in the Name of America's Children," NBC News (2021), <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/anti-lgbtq-coalition-targets-equality-act-name-america-s-children-n1258884>.

¹⁰ Timothy Callaghan, Andrew Karch, and Mary Kroeger, "Model State Legislation and Intergovernmental Tensions over the Affordable Care Act, Common Core, and the Second Amendment," *Publius* 50 no. 3 (2020): 518–39; Michael Gusmano, Edward Alan Miller, Pamela Nadash, and Elizabeth J. Simpson, "Partisanship in Initial State Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic," *World Medical and Health Policy* 12 no. 4 (2020): 380–89; Julianna Pacheco, "The Social Contagion Model: Exploring the Role of Public Opinion on the Diffusion of Antismoking Legislation Across the American States," *The Journal of Politics* 74 no. 1 (2012): 187–202.

¹¹ Kristin N. Garrett and Joshua M. Jansa, "Interest Group Influence in Policy Diffusion Networks," *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2015): 387–417, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532440015592776>; Stephanie L. DeMora, Loren Collingwood, and Adriana Ninci, "The Role of Super Interest Groups in Public Policy Diffusion," *Policy and Politics* 47, no.4 (2019): 513–41; Loren Collingwood, Stephen Omar El-Khatib, and Benjamin Gonzalez O'Brien, "Sustained Organizational Influence: American Legislative Exchange Council and the Diffusion of Anti-Sanctuary Policy," *Policy Studies Journal* 47 no. 3 (2019): 735–73. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12284>.

endogenous dependencies that can help explain how network ties form over time. I find that similar—although not identical—patterns exist in the diffusion of transgender sports participation and gender-affirming care laws.

I then conduct an additional test to isolate the effect of the model legislation on the diffusion of the gender-affirming care law network. I find no evidence that the model legislation is more likely to be copied by other states. To explore other ways advocacy organizations might influence diffusion patterns, I add as a covariate the number of signatories from each state to an anti-LGBTQ+ legislative pledge. I also add the number of active lobbyists from conservative organizations in each state. I find no evidence that either of these covariates is influential.

The article is organized as follows. First, I briefly discuss the common provisions of transgender athletics and gender-affirming care laws, as well as elaborate on the coalition of organizations aligned under PTAC. I then explore scholarly perspectives around drivers of policy imitation, model legislation, text analysis, and network analysis tools. Then, I explain the data collection procedures for the legislative bill text and other included covariates, before turning to a detailed explanation of my methodology and results. Finally, I conclude by emphasizing the significance of my results and their limitations, highlighting avenues for future research.

Transgender Athletics Participation Laws

There are slight variations in the provisions of transgender sports participation laws, but most follow common patterns. Many begin with a preamble that states legislative findings. These include statements such as that there are “‘inherent differences between men and women,’ and that these differences ‘remain cause for celebration, but not for denigration of the members of either sex

or for artificial constraints on an individual's opportunity.”¹² This statement, from Idaho's bill—the first state to pass a law under this category—frames the purpose of the law as protecting women's sports.

It then states that “athletic teams or sports designated for females, women, or girls shall not be open to students of the male sex.”¹³ The text then clarifies its definitions of “females, women, or girls” and the “male sex” as the sex a person is assigned at birth. These laws commonly refer to this as a person's biological sex. In the case of disputes over a person's sex, the law includes provisions for a student to “establish sex by presenting a signed physician's statement that shall indicate the student's sex based solely on: (a) The student's internal and external reproductive anatomy; (b) The student's normal endogenously produced levels of testosterone; and (c) An analysis of the student's genetic makeup.” The other 23 states with a transgender athletics participation law are similarly framed and contain almost identical provisions. The primary differences between states are which grade levels the law pertains to and whether it includes students at public universities.

Gender-Affirming Care Laws

Most of the 23 states with laws that restrict gender-affirming care also contain almost identical provisions. These laws commonly declare that the state has a “compelling interest” in protecting “the health and safety of its citizens, especially vulnerable children.”¹⁴ This text is from Arkansas, an early adopter of this type of law. Like most of the laws that followed, it frames gender-affirming care practices as dangerous to children's health and well-being. It then states that “a physician or other healthcare professional shall not provide gender transition procedures to any

¹² “Fairness in Women's Sports Act,” H.B. 500, 65th Leg., 2nd Reg. Sess. (Idaho 2020).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Save Adolescents from Experimentation Act,” H.B. 1570, 93rd Gen. Assem., Reg. Sess. (Ark. 2021).

individual under eighteen (18) years of age.”¹⁵ “Gender transition procedures” is defined in Arkansas’s law as any “medical or surgical service” that seeks to: (1) modify or remove anatomical features that are “typical” of a persons’ sex assigned at birth, (2) “instill or create physiological or anatomical characteristics” that resemble a sex other than the person’s assigned sex at birth. The law makes clear that this includes most known forms of gender-affirming care, such as puberty blockers, hormone therapy, and “genital or non-genital reassignment surgery.”¹⁶ In other words, the law bans almost all forms of gender-affirming care for transgender youth, including services such as surgery that are rarely offered to minors. The law only makes exceptions for a person who needs life-saving care or is born intersex.

Most states with these laws ban the same types of procedures, often written in the same language—which differs from the more inclusive and precise language used by medical professionals. Arizona is the only state with a more limited law that limits its ban to surgical care for youth.¹⁷ Even so, the stated justifications for this law mirror those of other states.

Organizational and Interest Group Influence

Media reports, pundits, politicians, and some researchers theorize that the prevalence of model legislation and its similarity to enacted state legislation is evidence of influence by the interest groups who disseminate model bills. Since 2010, at least 693 news articles have mentioned the phrase “model legislation.”¹⁸ Most of these articles state that advocacy organizations craft these bills and supply them to state lawmakers. In doing so, these articles almost universally imply that state lawmakers have ample opportunities to copy model legislation and that similar bill text across states

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “SB 1138,” S.B. 1138, 55th Leg., 2nd Reg. Sess. (Ariz. 2022).

¹⁸ Mark Davies, “NOW Corpus (News on the Web),” (2024), <https://www.english-corpora.org/now/>.

is a result of using model bills. Model legislation exists across a wide range of issues, from anti-LGBTQ+ legislation to restrictions on abortion access and gun control laws.

In the political science literature, researchers such as Collingwood, El-Khatib, and Gonzalez O'Brien find evidence of "sustained organizational influence" in some contexts.¹⁹ Under this theory, organizations exert influence across several issues in state legislatures over a long period. Other authors also find evidence of the influence of interest groups. For example, DeMora, Collingwood, and Ninci find that the American Legislative Exchange Council is a "super interest group" that has exerted sustained influence in the diffusion of Stand Your Ground laws by supplying model legislation.²⁰ Haider-Markel (2001) finds evidence that even in the absence of model legislation, the spread of same-sex marriage bans in the 1990s is at least partially attributable to the efforts of a coalition of advocacy groups. Shipan and Volden also argue that in some cases, "pandering" to interest groups is a significant factor in the diffusion of legislation.²¹

Yet, evidence for the influence of model legislation within the political science literature is insufficient at best. While some papers find evidence that organizations drive policy diffusion through the dissemination of model legislation, whether as part of a process of sustained organizational influence or more limited issue advocacy, others disagree.²² Kroeger, Karch, and Callaghan (2022) analyzed more than 2400 state bills and 1000 advocacy-organization-generated model bills and found that states are more likely to copy text from other states rather than outside organizations. Callaghan, Karch, and Kroeger (2020) argue that states "only occasionally rely on

¹⁹ Collingwood, El-Khatib, and O'Brien, "Sustained Organizational Influence: American Legislative Exchange Council and the Diffusion of Anti-Sanctuary Policy."

²⁰ DeMora, Collingwood, and Ninci, "The Role of Super Interest Groups in Public Policy Diffusion."

²¹ Shipan and Volden, "Why Bad Policies Spread (and good ones Don't)"

²² Garrett and Jansa, "Interest Group Influence in Policy Diffusion Networks"; Collingwood, El-Khatib, and O'Brien, "Sustained Organizational Influence: American Legislative Exchange Council and the Diffusion of Anti-Sanctuary Policy."

model legislation” across three issue areas: resistance to gun control, the Affordable Care Act, and the Common Core.

Despite the lack of rigorous evidence that influence groups exert influence through supplying model legislation, many media portrayals assume the truth of this phenomenon. For example, an Associated Press analysis found that many anti-transgender laws “are identical or very similar to” legislation supplied by advocacy organizations.²³ NBC News also published results from this analysis, suggesting the same organizations were responsible for the spread of this legislation.²⁴ Other organizations have conducted and reported on similar analyses.²⁵ This paper challenges the prevailing views in the mainstream media and argues that model legislation is not as influential as it is perceived to be. While its text might be copied by some states, other states rebuke this assumption and copy each other.

Document-based Text and Network Analysis

Document-based text analysis to systematically compare state legislative bill text is an increasingly popular method for understanding the degree of text overlap between different pieces of legislation. Many methods exist, each with its advantages. For example, Garrett and Jansa use cosine-similarity, a “bag of words” approach that finds the similarity between two texts using two vectors of word frequencies.²⁶ This approach is simple and easy to implement, but does not consider

²³ Kavish Harjai, Jeff McMillian, and Kimberlee Kruesi, “Transgender health: Comparing model bills to real proposals,” The Associated Press, May 23, 2023,

<https://apnews.com/article/transgender-health-model-legislation-bills-4eb5e34c72f8a0d91d00158586289ba3>.

²⁴ Associated Press, “Many trans health bills came from a handful of far-right interest groups, analysis finds,” NBC News, May 22, 2023,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/many-trans-health-bills-came-handful-far-right-interest-groups-analysis-rcna85599>.

²⁵ HRC Staff, “Alliance Defending Freedom: Staunch Enemy of Equality,” Human Rights Campaign, January 22, 2024, <https://www.hrc.org/news/alliance-defending-freedom-staunch-enemy-of-equality>.

²⁶ Kristin N. Garrett and Joshua M. Jansa, “Interest Group Influence in Policy Diffusion Networks,” *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2015): ___, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532440015592776>.

sentence structure or sequences of identical words. Jansa, Hansen, and Gray also use cosine-similarity to argue that “less professional legislatures” are more likely to copy legislation from others.²⁷

Linder et al. argue that cosine similarity is an insufficiently precise method of comparison to determine “text reuse.”²⁸ Instead, they advocate for the use of an algorithm that accounts for sequences of words. Many algorithms exist, often originally developed for plagiarism detection purposes. These “alignment algorithms,” when applied to legislative text, can be adjusted to allow for small errors and mismatches.²⁹ Another method to generate similarity scores is by using Jaccard similarity.³⁰ This approach uses sets of five-word strings from two texts and compares the number of strings that match between each text to generate a score between 0 and 100, for no matches and identical documents, respectively. Following Collingwood, El-Khatib, and Gonzalez O’Brien, this paper uses WCopyFind, a plagiarism detection program, to analyze the texts and find identical or almost identical passages.³¹ The program returns the percentage of similarity between the texts, ranging from 0% to 100%. This approach, as Collingwood, El-Khatib, and Gonzalez O’Brien explain, benefits from simplicity while still considering sentence structure, comparisons of sequences of texts, and an allowance for errors.³²

²⁷ Joshua M. Jansa, Eric R. Hansen, and Virginia H. Gray, “Copy and Paste Lawmaking: Legislative Professionalism and Policy Reinvention in the States,” *American Politics Research* 47, no. 4 (2019): ____, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X18776628>.

²⁸ Fridolin Linder et al. “Text as Policy: Measuring Policy Similarity through Bill Text Reuse,” *Policy Studies Journal* 48, no. 2 (2020): ____, <https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12257>.

²⁹ Fridolin Linder et al. “Text as Policy: Measuring Policy Similarity through Bill Text Reuse,” ____.

³⁰ Mary A. Kroeger, Andrew Karch, and Timothy Callaghan, “Model Bills, State Imitation, and the Political Safeguards of Federalism,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2022): ____, <https://doi.org/10.1111/lsq.12373>.

³¹ Loren Collingwood, Stephen Omar El-Khatib, and Benjamin Gonzalez O'Brien, “Sustained Organizational Influence: American Legislative Exchange Council and the Diffusion of Anti-Sanctuary Policy,” *Policy Studies Journal* 47, no. 3 (2019): ____, <https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12284>.

³² Collingwood, El-Khatib, and Gonzalez O'Brien, “Sustained Organizational Influence: American Legislative Exchange Council and the Diffusion of Anti-Sanctuary Policy,” ____.

After conducting the initial text analysis to generate similarity scores, Garrett and Jansa employ network analysis tools to bolster their understanding of the relationships between states and observe whether certain states or model legislation are more influential in the diffusion process.³³ Desmarais, Harden, and Boehmke also generate a network model, although they use data about dates when action was taken on various pieces of legislation rather than text similarity scores.³⁴ These researchers infer a latent diffusion model using machine learning tools.

While I introduce the model this paper employs to the policy diffusion and legislative text analysis contexts for the first time, its use is common in other areas. For example, Pink, Kretschmer, and Leszczensky use a SAOM to model the construction of social networks, modeling the choices of individuals.³⁵ The stochastic actor-oriented model (SAOM) allows for the study of state action and the effects of various behaviors on the diffusion of networks over time.³⁶ The SAOM has a major advantage in this case over another popular network model: the exponential random graph model (ERGM). The ERGM only allows for an observation of network structure at one time point, while the SAOM allows for a series of longitudinal observations.³⁷ Some researchers have employed an extension of the ERGM that allows for temporal modeling.³⁸ This model can be useful, but is formulated in such a way as to focus on dyadic relationships rather than individual behavior.³⁹

³³ Garrett and Jansa, "Interest Group Influence in Policy Diffusion Networks," ____.

³⁴ Bruce A. Desmarais, Jeffrey J. Harden, and Frederick J. Boehmke, "Persistent Policy Pathways: Inferring Diffusion Networks in the American States," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 2 (2015): ____, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055415000040>.

³⁵ Sebastian Pink, David Kretschmer, and Lars Leszczensky, "Choice modelling in social networks using stochastic actor-oriented models," *Journal of Choice Modelling* 34 (2020): ____.

³⁶ Yuval Kalish, "Stochastic Actor-Oriented Models for the Co-Evolution of Networks and Behavior: An Introduction and Tutorial," *Organizational Research Methods* 23, no. 3 (2020): ____.

³⁷ Olga Kornienko and Deborah Rivas-Drake, "Adolescent intergroup connections and their developmental benefits: Exploring contributions from social network analysis," *Social Development* 31, no. 1 (2022): ____, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.12572>.

³⁸ Loren Collingwood, Stephen Omar El-Khatib, and Benjamin Gonzalez O'Brien, "Sustained Organizational Influence: American Legislative Exchange Council and the Diffusion of Anti-Sanctuary Policy," *Policy Studies Journal* 47, no. 3 (2019): 735–73, <https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12284>.

³⁹ Ibid.

Therefore, it is less applicable to the research question of this article, which asks how actors in anti-LGBTQ+ law diffusion networks make individual choices given the behavior of other actors in the network. The SAOM also allows researchers to model changes in attributes associated with actors over time.⁴⁰ While dynamic covariates are not considered in this article, they allow for an extension of the model in this paper to test other covariates that could impact diffusion networks.

Researchers using an SAOM can include and exclude various effects—either endogenous behaviors or exogenous variables—to understand how those effects impact a network. Following Block, Stadtfeld, and Snijders (2019), an appropriate network model accurately represents the underlying assumptions in real-world data. This paper seeks to understand actor behavior. It assumes that each actor, or state, is a decision-maker with agency who makes choices using information about the actions taken by states that adopted a law prior. In this case, the “choice” that state legislatures make is to pass a bill that copies from other states or to use original text. Therefore, the SAOM is the most appropriate model because it focuses on the individual decision-making process, observes the network’s evolution over time, and allows for an exploration of the underlying social processes that I argue define actor behavior in these networks.

Policy Imitation and the Diffusion of Salient Policies

By combining methods of text analysis, network analysis, and an exploration of interest group influence in policy diffusion, this article suggests that, in the case of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, “policy imitation” is a better framework for understanding the spread of these laws rather than a process where states copy model legislation. Policy diffusion research focuses on four main pillars of diffusion that commonly help explain the spread of legislation: learning from those who

⁴⁰ Yuval Kalish, “Stochastic Actor-Oriented Models for the Co-Evolution of Networks and Behavior: An Introduction and Tutorial,” *Organizational Research Methods* 23, no. 3 (2020): 511–34.

adopted the policy already, economic competition, imitation of others, and coercion by higher-level governments.⁴¹

Of the four mechanisms, this article will focus on policy imitation as a driver of legislation adoption. Policy imitation, often ignored in the context of state politics, centers around the idea that states copy other states' actions to appear like them. As mentioned before, states may do this in the hopes of being perceived as innovators, for example.⁴² They also may do so to "confer legitimacy" on themselves, or show that they are in lockstep with policies that are popular among ideological peers.⁴³ In some cases, Shipan and Volden argue that states might lack the expertise and incentives to engage in crafting original legislation.⁴⁴ I argue that the most prominent driver of imitation behind the laws in this paper is the satisfaction of short-term electoral goals. Policymakers respond to broad support for these policies from voters within their party by rapidly enacting laws that mirror earlier adopters.

I hypothesize that the rapid response is a result of the high salience of the underlying issues. In the case of transgender athletics participation and gender-affirming care laws, they have become particularly salient in the past three years, as evidenced by their discussion in the media and by elected officials. Shipan and Volden find that states sometimes respond too quickly to a salient issue when constituents want to see fast action.⁴⁵ In other words, rather than learning how the policy impacted earlier adopters over time, states respond quickly by adopting similar legislation. Pacheco (2012) finds that residents of a state adjust their opinions on an issue when neighboring states adopt

⁴¹ Shipan and Volden, "The Mechanisms of Policy Diffusion."

⁴² Shipan and Volden, "Why Bad Policies Spread (and good ones Don't)"

⁴³ Gusmano, "Partisanship in Initial State Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic."

⁴⁴ Shipan and Volden, "The Mechanisms of Policy Diffusion."

⁴⁵ Shipan and Volden, "Why Bad Policies Spread (and good ones Don't)"

a certain policy. If constituents begin supporting a policy, state legislators are more likely to then adopt it in a phenomenon of “social contagion.”⁴⁶ Mallinson (2016) argues that highly salient issues are more likely to diffuse quicker than issues of low salience—often diffusing so quickly as to defy the possibility that states are taking the time to thoughtfully learn about the effects of a policy before implementing it.⁴⁷ Similarly, Garlick (2023) finds evidence that policies that become popular within state legislatures are more likely to be recognized by congresspeople who then introduce messaging bills promising similar policies. In this way, once several states adopt a piece of legislation, it becomes more salient nationally, increasing the chances that it diffuses swiftly.

I argue that this mechanism of policy imitation of salient issues is a strong framework through which to understand the diffusion of transgender athletics participation and gender-affirming care bills. Further, I argue for the presence of an “innovator effect,” where later states copy earlier states to keep current with popular legislative ideas. Through this process, the diffusion of these policies is accelerated. The remainder of this paper explores this hypothesis in depth, beginning with an explanation of the data and methods the paper employs.

Data and Methods

The primary source for this paper’s analyses is a unique data set I created with legislative text from the 24 states that have transgender athletics participation laws and the 23 states with gender-affirming care laws (as of March 1st, 2024). For each state, I downloaded the bill text and converted it into plain-text format. Where included, I kept preambles and statements of legislative findings or purpose because these were often copied as well. For the analyses of gender-affirming

⁴⁶ Julianna Pacheco and Elizabeth Maltby, “The Role of Public Opinion—Does It Influence the Diffusion of ACA Decisions?” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 42, no. 2 (2017): 309–40.

⁴⁷ Charles R. Shipan and Craig Volden, “The Mechanisms of Policy Diffusion,” 840–857

care laws, I included also the model gender-affirming care bill produced by the United States chapter of Women's Declaration International.⁴⁸ This model legislation is promoted by PTAC-aligned organizations. There is no known model legislation for transgender athletics participation laws. Instead, I compare the two resulting diffusion networks to explore potential differences in the pattern of spread that could be attributable to the presence or absence of model legislation. Following Garrett and Jansa(2015), I removed section numbering, references to the states' names, and all formatting.⁴⁹ Each state has distinct preferences in how it formats and numbers legislation, and removing these differences prevents artificial decreases in the similarity scores that do not reflect differences in the content of the bills.

Once each bill was cleaned and prepared, I used the program WCopyFind, a plagiarism detection algorithm, to calculate similarity scores between each pair of states.⁵⁰ The program was set to report the similarity scores for every pair of states, even when the similarity score was low. I also allowed for a small number of errors between passages. This helps ensure that slight changes in the text when a state adopts another state's legislation do not prevent the detection software from reporting a broad pattern of copying. Once complete, the resulting similarity scores were loaded into R using the package RCopyFind, a package that parses the HTML results from the WCopyFind output.⁵¹ I then sorted similarity scores into an adjacency matrix to represent the similarity between each pair of states.

After, I removed values in the adjacency matrix when they corresponded to the similarity

⁴⁸ Women's Declaration International USA, "WDI USA Introduces SAFE Act (Model Bill)," *WDI USA*, <https://wdiusa.org/safe-act/>.

⁴⁹ Garrett, "Interest Group Influence in Policy Diffusion Networks."

⁵⁰ Lou Bloomfield, "WCopypfind," 2016, <https://plagiarism.bloomfieldmedia.com/software/wcopyfind/>.

⁵¹ Stephanie L. DeMora and Loren Collingwood, RCopyFind: A Package to Compare HTML Output from WCopyFind (2018).

score of one state to another, where the “source” state enacted the legislation later than the state “copying.” For the network visualization and analysis, levels of similarity less than or equal to a threshold of 0.5 were set to 0. Following DeMora, Collingwood, and Ninci (2019), implementing a threshold cutoff emphasizes the relationship between states with a high level of text similarity. It also allows for the construction of binary networks and the use of an SAOM, as states below the threshold are understood as having no tie, while states above the threshold form a tie. Choosing 0.5 as a cutoff was a practical choice, as it maintains a large number of connections and patterns in the network but reduces the overall density to ease analysis. To test the robustness of this cutoff, I also constructed networks with a lower cutoff of 0.4 and higher thresholds of 0.6 and 0.7. I found that while the number of ties varied with each, the important patterns and most central states remained constant.

While the bill text is the foundational data for this paper, other data sources provided important context and covariate values. I collected legislation enactment dates for the construction of the adjacency matrices from Legiscan and state websites. The covariate measuring the number of signatories to the PTAC pledge was collected from the “Promise to America’s Children” website.⁵² I collected the lobbyist data using Follow the Money, a tool that aggregates state lobbying reports. I included the sum of active lobbyists in a state from any PTAC-aligned organization, a coalition of more than 20 interest groups. While the quality of lobbying reports varies across states, Follow the Money provides the most complete listing that is publicly accessible.

⁵² *Promise to America’s Children*, 2024, <https://promisetoamericaschildren.org/>.

Table 1: Mean Similarity Scores: Transgender Athletics Participation Laws

State	Similarity Score	State	Similarity Score
UT	0.30	IA	0.55
WY	0.30	SD	0.57
AR	0.38	TX	0.59
AZ	0.38	KS	0.60
MT	0.39	IN	0.62
LA	0.41	SC	0.62
MS	0.42	MO	0.64
ID	0.43	OK	0.64
AL	0.48	NC	0.66
KY	0.49	FL	0.67
WV	0.49	ND	0.74
TN	0.53	OH	NaN

Table 2: Mean Similarity Scores: Gender Affirming Care Laws

State	Similarity Score	State	Similarity Score
MS	0.22	ID	0.53
UT	0.25	GA	0.60
MO	0.26	TX	0.60
OK	0.39	WV	0.61
NE	0.42	MT	0.63
TN	0.46	IN	0.64
FL	0.47	IA	0.67
AZ	0.48	LA	0.68
KY	0.49	NC	0.73
ML	0.49	ND	0.77
AL	0.52	SD	0.77
AR	0.52	OH	NaN

Before turning to an explanation of my methodology for constructing and interpreting the model, a preliminary analysis of the data will help contextualize the results. In Tables 1 and 2, I present the mean similarity (on a scale from 0 to 1) between a state and any state that could have

plausibly copied the law later. This helps reveal the similarity of legislation between states. Table 1 shows the results of the transgender athletics participation laws. Table 2 shows the results for the gender-affirming care laws, including the model legislation (ML). The mean similarity for Ohio is “NaN” because it was the most recent state to enact these laws and thus cannot be a source for another state to copy from.

The mean similarity score across all states was 0.52 for transgender athletics participation laws and the median was 0.53. For gender-affirming care laws, the mean was 0.53 and the median was 0.52. The mean similarity for the model legislation was lower than the mean and median across the states as a whole, and some states individually. Further, the mean and median across states were almost identical between the two laws. These similarity scores form the basis for the analyses this paper employs.

Importantly, there was no discernible positive relationship between the length of time since enactment and similarity to model legislation. In other words, early adopters did not have higher similarity to model legislation than later adopters. If early adopters were influenced by model legislation, it could be influential to the diffusion patterns overall even if not in later states. However, this result suggests that model legislation did not influence the early or later adopters of these laws.

Next, I explain the methods I use to construct the models and calculate my results. I constructed the network visualizations using the *sna* and *igraph* packages in R.⁵³ After inputting the adjacency matrices—recoded to remove ties for states with less than 50% similarity and to code as 1 any value above this threshold—I plotted the graph with directed ties and node sizes weighted by degree. In this way, it is easy to see which states have a higher “in-degree,” or a higher number of ties

⁵³ Carter T. Butts, *Sna: Tools for Social Network Analysis* (2023); Gábor Csárdi et al., *igraph: Network Analysis and Visualization in r* (2024).

directed toward them. A larger size reflects states with bill text that was copied by others more.

High similarity is a strong basis for network connection because it reflects a high likelihood that a later-adopting state looked to the text of the early adopter when introducing its legislation. Following Garrett and Jansa (2015), these similarity scores are a useful way to form ties between states and understand the interconnectedness of the bill text across states.⁵⁴ Further, because the SAOM implies the states taking action, I view the “action” that forms a tie as the choice to enact legislation with a significant amount of text from one or more other states.

While these visualizations of the diffusion network for each law help situate the relations between state bill text and patterns of influence, they offer little beyond descriptive analysis. Therefore, I used a stochastic actor-oriented model to conduct inferential network analysis. This model allows for an analysis of internal and external factors that influence a set of actors who form a network of connections. Like other network analysis models, it is formulated differently than typical regression because not only does it allow for interdependence, but it assumes the presence of this phenomenon and seeks to understand its underlying patterns. An SAOM is a valuable tool, particularly for understanding actions taken or not taken by a group of actors. In this case, the SAOM allows for an exploration of state legislatures’ decisions to vote for a piece of legislation that was copied from an earlier adopter. While it cannot—at least in this paper—explain why or how a bill was introduced with reused text, it offers useful information about how particular bill text diffuses across states as legislators vote to approve these laws.

To construct the model, I first created a series of adjacency matrices for each law to represent the network in effect at a given period. Beginning from the month that the first state

⁵⁴ Garrett, “Interest Group Influence in Policy Diffusion Networks.”

enacted the law, I constructed an adjacency matrix corresponding to each subsequent month that only included ties for states with laws enacted at the time. All states without the law in effect for a given matrix were coded as a structural zero and do not “enter” the network until enacting the law.

The model forms ties over a predefined number of periods. The tie formations are random but with probabilities dependent on the measured effects of various endogenous, or internal, and exogenous, or external, variables. I began the model construction in the 10th period because SAOMs require a certain level of activity to generate accurate models, and there was little legislative activity in the early months between when the first state enacted these laws and when they began to spread rapidly.

Table 3: Description of Included Effects

Effect	Description
In-degree Popularity	An increased likelihood for nodes with a high number of ties to form more ties over time. The square root of this value can instead be used.
Out-degree Popularity	Tendency for actors with high outdegrees to attract more incoming ties.
Three-cycles effect	An increased tendency for network closure as observed by an increased likelihood for actor i to have a directed tie toward j when j has a tie toward h and h has a tie toward i .
gwdspFB	A measure of node centrality that uses weighted degrees to measure the increased likelihood of more central actors forming more ties.
In-Out Associativity	The preference for actors with high indegrees to be tied to actors with high outdegrees.
Transitive Triplets	When actor i has a directed tie towards both actor h and j , this effect measures the increased likelihood of actor h also having a directed tie toward j .
Shared Popularity	Measures the tendency for actors to form ties with actors who have similar levels of popularity or centrality within the network.
Outdegree More (2)	An extended version of an effect that measures the tendency for actors to send more ties than they receive. This extension captures the tendency for actors to send ties to already popular actors.
Covariate Ego	The tendency of actors with a higher covariate value to have a higher outdegree.
Covariate Alter	The complement of the ego effect. Measures the tendency of actors who are higher on a covariate value to attract more ties.
Covariate Similarity	The preference for actors to form ties with other actors who have a similar covariate value.

The final step in constructing the model was to include “effects,” both endogenous and exogenous, that I predicted would be important to explain the network’s evolution. The SAOM uses “effects” as an umbrella term to represent a series of behaviors that are present or absent in networks. The model estimates whether each included effect has a positive, negative, or no impact on the number of ties that a node forms throughout the network’s evolution. Therefore, they allow for a better understanding of whether certain behaviors are impactful to the network at statistically significant levels. Table 3 shows the effects I included and a brief explanation of the behavior they seek to uncover (Snijders et al. 2024).⁵⁵

The model returns estimated coefficients and standard errors for the included effects to understand whether those effects were statistically significant. Before interpreting the results, it was important to create goodness-of-fit plots of the in-degree and out-degree distribution to ensure that the model adequately matched the data. These plots report p-values, and sufficient model fit is understood as goodness-of-fit statistics with p-values higher than 0.05.⁵⁶ A p-value higher than 0.05 indicates a sufficiently strong chance that the structure of the distributions is unlikely to be a result of chance alone. I constructed this model several times, testing the presence of different effects, before I was able to construct a model that satisfied the goodness-of-fit conditions.

Importantly, following Kalish, I did not include covariates in the models until I achieved sufficiently well-fit models with only endogenous effects. Once the initial models adequately fit the data, I began to include covariates. First, I conducted a series of “dummy variable” tests to measure the influence of the model legislation on network behavior. Other researchers have found that a “dummy variable” is a useful way to measure the influence of outlying behavior not already captured

⁵⁵ Tom A. B. Snijders et al., *Manual for RSiena*. (Groningen, The Netherlands: University of Groningen, 2024).

⁵⁶ Yuval Kalish, “Stochastic Actor-Oriented Models for the Co-Evolution of Networks and Behavior: An Introduction and Tutorial,” *Organizational Research Methods* 23, no. 3 (2020): 52, 10.1177/1094428118825300

by the model.⁵⁷ As such, it attempts to capture factors that impact the influence of an actor that are not immediately obvious. While it will not explain what underlying factors are, it allows for an easy comparison between actors. The “dummy variable” test included a simple binary value corresponding to each state in each network as a covariate. I constructed each model 10 times, setting only one of the ten highest degree states to have a value of 1 while all other values were 0. The model legislation is considered a state for this analysis. For each test, I included “covariate alter” and “covariate ego” effects, explained in Table 3. The resulting estimates from the model help clarify the effects each actor had on the diffusion patterns of the network. A large magnitude indicates that other states were more likely to copy that state’s bill text or the model legislation.

This test measures the centrality of each particular node to the network. The distinction between more and less central nodes helps highlight the presence or absence of an innovator effect in these dynamic networks—where certain states are more influential and have text that is copied more often. By conducting this test on both the gender-affirming care and transgender sports law networks, I was able to use the second network as a rough control. Because there is no model legislation regarding transgender athletics participation laws, a comparison between these two networks helped explain how these laws diffused in the absence of a supplied model bill. In other words, because the impact of the model legislation cannot be entirely isolated within the network, the presence of a second network for a law targeting the same group of people added evidence about the way another anti-LGBTQ+ law diffused and allowed me to compare diffusion patterns between them.

After conducting these tests, I reconstructed both models with different covariates to

⁵⁷ Tom A.B. Snijders, Gerhard G. van de Bunt, Christian E.G. Steglich, “Introduction to stochastic actor-based models for network dynamics,” *Social Networks* 32, no. 1 (2010): 51, 10.1016/j.socnet.2009.02.004

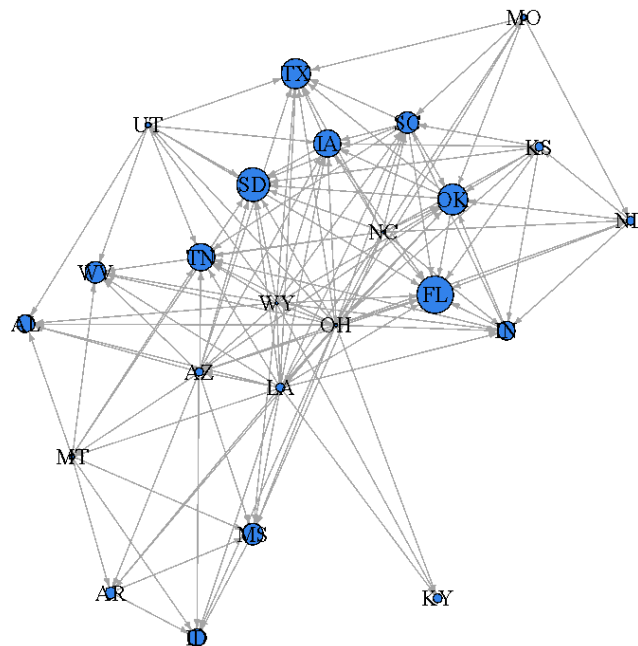
analyze the impact of different forms of advocacy by interest groups. Here, I also included a third effect for each covariate, “covariate similarity.” This effect reflects a preference for actors to form ties with actors who have a similar value covariate. In the first reconstructed model, I included the number of active lobbyists in a state who work for a “Promise to America’s Children”-aligned organization. Then, I re-specified the model to instead include the number of signatories to the “Promise to America’s Children” pledge from each state. I include these as covariates similar to before, with the primary difference being that they are not binary, and more than one state has a nonzero value. I use the resulting estimates and standard errors to understand the impact of differences in these values between states. The estimates generated by the models provide important information about whether a state with a high or low covariate value was more likely to be an innovator within the network. Broadly, the estimates were also helpful to understand the centrality of a certain state to the diffusion pattern of the network, given the number of lobbyists or PTAC signatories in the state. Below, I describe the results of these models, their estimated effects, and how those estimates are informative as to the influence of conservative advocacy organizations through lobbyists and the PTAC pledge.

Results and Analysis

Before analyzing the various model specifications that are helpful in understanding the characteristics of the diffusion network, a visualization of the networks for the two laws this article focuses on will help set the stage and clarify the rest of the findings. Figures 1 and 2 below show the complete diffusion networks that include all states with the particular type of law. Each blue node in the network corresponds to a state with the given law. Each tie from one state to another represents when a state’s legislation is more than 50% similar to the state its arrow points toward.

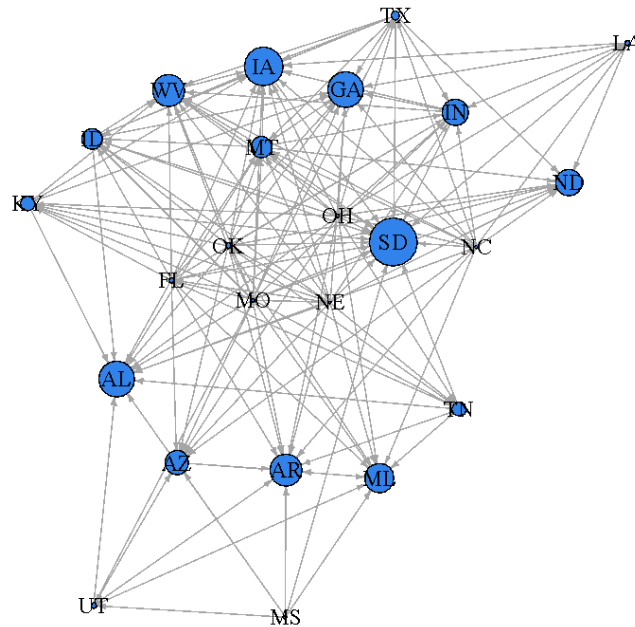
These visualizations are important for two reasons. First, the weighted size of the nodes depending on a state's in-degree reveals which states are the most central to the diffusion pattern of the network as a whole. Second, the stochastic actor-oriented model operates from the idea of trying to generate networks that would look similar to these by estimating probability-weighted simulations of the networks.⁵⁸ In each period specified in the model, a change randomly occurs in the network that changes the number of ties or nodes present. The visualizations in Figures 1 and 2 are useful in that they reveal how the networks generated by the SAOM will evolve and become more similar to these.

Figure 1: Diffusion Network of Transgender Athletics Participation Laws



⁵⁸ Kalish, "Stochastic Actor-Oriented Models," 531.

Figure 2: Diffusion Network of Gender-Affirming Care Laws



Both graphs show high levels of interconnectedness, reflecting the high average similarity between bill texts across states. They also show similarities in network diffusion patterns, with certain states more central than others. Central states are more likely to have adopted a law earlier than less central states, and their higher degrees—and therefore larger size—reflect the fact that more states seized on the opportunity to copy from them. Figure 2 has multiple actors with higher in-degrees than any actor in Figure 1. Most notably, South Dakota emerges as the largest node in Figure 2. This suggests that many states copied a substantial amount of text from South Dakota’s bill. The same is true of other smaller but still large nodes. Text copying appears to be a widespread practice, and later states seem to prefer copying text from early adopting states, who emerge as “innovators.” The highest in-degree nodes in Figure 1 are not as large as in Figure 2. However, each

state still has multiple ties to other states. Therefore, there is still widespread text reuse even if there is more variety in which states copy from when adopting their laws.

Figures 3-6: Goodness of Fit Plots

Gender Affirming Care Laws

Figure 3: Goodness of Fit: InDegree Distribution

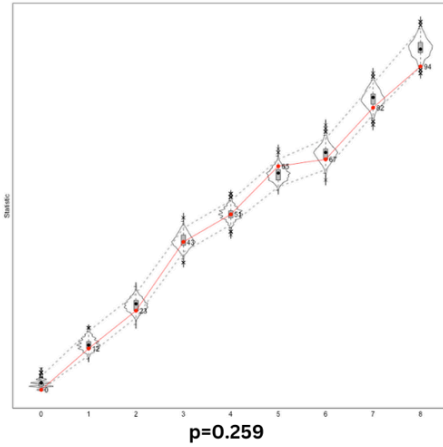
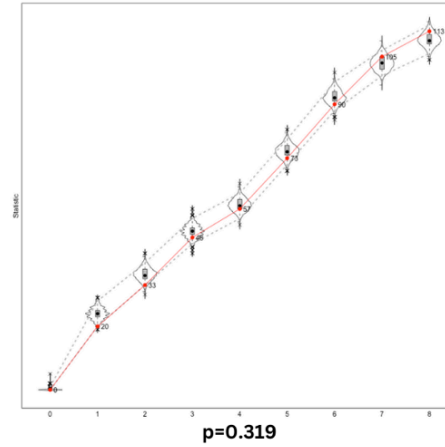


Figure 4: Goodness of Fit: OutDegree Distribution



Transgender Athletics Participation Laws

Figure 5: Goodness of Fit: InDegree Distribution

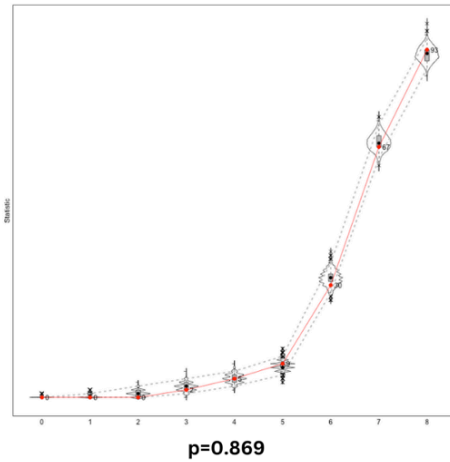
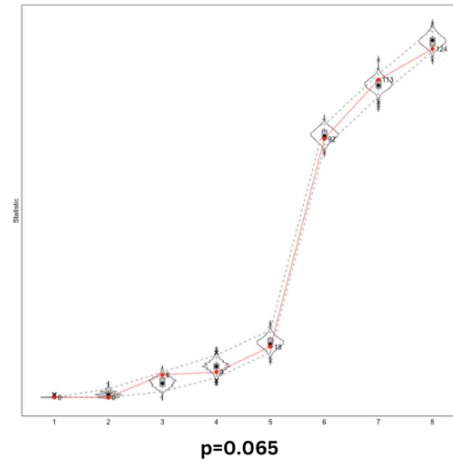


Figure 6: Goodness of Fit: OutDegree Distribution



Next, I define and present the initial formulation of the SAO model. This version of the model—for both networks—includes only endogenous effects, or those solely related to interactions between states that do not rely on outside variables. Defining the model involved a series of tests, including and excluding various effects that I believed to affect the diffusion pattern of the network.

For some networks, including those analyzed in this paper, this process can be difficult and lengthy. I include Figures 3 and 4 here, which show the goodness of fit plots for the specification of the gender-affirming care model I arrived at after a series of trial and error. Figures 5 and 6 show the same, but for transgender athletics participation laws.

Each figure has an associated p-value higher than 0.05. Therefore, the relationships found in the models are unlikely to have occurred due to chance alone, and these models are sufficiently well fit. As a result, I can move to interpreting the coefficients and standard errors of the included effects.

Table 4: Initial Model Results (Gender Affirming Care Laws)

Effect Name	Estimate	Standard.Error
Transitive Triplets	-0.185	0.044
Shared Popularity	0.037	0.008
Indegree Popularity (Sqrt)	0.361	0.864
Outdegree Popularity	0.083	0.045
Outdegree More (2)	-50.724	88.864

Table 5: Initial Model Results (Transgender Sport Laws)

Effect Name	Estimate	Standard.Error
GWDSFPB	3.233	6.874
Indegree Popularity	-0.151	0.646
Outdegree Popularity	6.510	10.858
In-out degree assortativity	-10.214	17.168

Table 4 shows the estimated coefficients and standard errors for the gender-affirming care law network. Importantly, not all included effects are statistically significant—though they all improved the overall fit of the model. The model has a small negative transitive triplets effect, which suggests a slight tendency for states not to form closed transitive triplet ties with other states. The model also has a small, positive coefficient for shared popularity, but its magnitude is such that its

effect is marginal. Even though there is a small positive coefficient for the square root of the in-degree popularity effect, its standard error is too large and not significant. There is small, significant evidence of an out-degree effect, which suggests a tendency for actors who have sent many ties to send more ties—or copy more pieces of legislation. Finally, perhaps most interestingly, the model has a large, negative magnitude for the out-degree more (2) effect, which would suggest that states tend to copy from a similar group of states. However, the standard error is also large. This suggests that some interactions or effects were not captured by the model.

The initial model formulations are important to show because the dummy variable and lobbying effect tests build on them. They define a baseline model to be utilized and modified to test the paper's main hypotheses. While outside the scope of this paper, future research could explore the initial model in more depth and test custom effects not available as pre-defined effects. For this paper's purposes, it is sufficient to include effects such that the initial model fits the data, because I am more interested in an investigation of the relevance of model legislation, the presence of an innovator effect, and the influence of interest groups. Therefore, the dummy variable and lobbying effect tests to be conducted next are most important to test the paper's hypotheses.

Table 5 shows the model results for the transgender sport participation law network; it has some similarities but also some notable differences in included effects and estimates from the gender-affirming care law network. However, all of the included effects have standard errors with larger magnitudes than the estimate itself. Nevertheless, the combination of effects generates a model that fits the data sufficiently well. Therefore, I can also build upon this model to examine the effects of most interest.

Table 6: Dummy Variable Test: Gender Affirming Care Laws

State	Alter.X	Ego.X
AL	0.638	-0.242
AR	0.482	-0.033
AZ	0.276	-0.077
GA	0.400	-0.371
IA	0.363	-0.481
IN	0.081	-0.361
ML	0.467	0.073
ND	0.150	-0.214
SD	1.048	-0.392
WV	0.194	-0.135

Table 7: Dummy Variable Test: Trans Sport Ban Laws

State	Alter.X	Ego.X
FL	1.663	-0.791
IA	-0.121	-0.321
IN	-0.844	-0.129
MS	0.524	-0.574
OK	-0.452	-0.186
SC	-0.958	0.209
SD	1.888	-0.457
TN	1.377	-0.412
TX	1.124	-0.692
WV	0.811	-0.769

The first test that directly seeks to understand the influence of interest groups uses a series of “dummy variables” to explore the importance of the model legislation to the diffusion pattern of the network. I included estimates for the two most commonly included covariate effects: “alter X” and “ego X.”⁵⁹ A positive value on the alter X effect reflects a preference for other states to form ties with a state that is higher on a covariate value. In this case, this effect measures the tendency of states to form ties with the particular actor whose value on the covariate is 1. A positive value will therefore indicate that other states prefer to copy from the identified state, providing evidence of the

⁵⁹ Kalish, “Stochastic Actor-Oriented Models,” 531.

innovator effect. The ego X effect measures the tendency of actors with the value 1 to form more ties with other actors.⁶⁰ A positive coefficient indicates that these states copy more often from others, and a negative estimate indicates the opposite. The results for both models are included in Tables 6 and 7.

The tables show that the results varied depending on which actor was assigned the covariate value of 1. Table 6 shows that AL, AR, and SD were higher than the model legislation for the alter effect. This suggests that states were more inclined to form ties with these states than they were with the model legislation. In other words, states were more likely to copy from these states than they were from the model bill. For the ego effect, all but two states had larger magnitude estimates than the model bill. The negative coefficients indicate that when a state was coded as the sole actor with a covariate equal to one, it was less likely to send out ties. These are significant findings that support my hypothesis—that states copy each other more than copy text from model bills. These results also strengthen my claim that the model bill is less central to the diffusion pattern of the network than in some states. The model bill is less likely to receive ties than other, more influential states. Importantly, though, the model bill is still one of the ten highest in-degree actors in the gender-affirming care law network. Therefore, even though these findings show that states are more likely to copy each other, the model legislation is not irrelevant.

Table 7 shows the results of the same test for the transgender athletics participation laws. Here, it is not possible to compare the values between states and model legislation because model legislation was not supplied by interest groups. However, these results offer a control test that shows that the dummy variable test returns similar results for a network mapping the spread of a law

⁶⁰ Kalish, “Stochastic Actor-Oriented Models,” 531.

without model legislation. Further, the results show that states prefer to form ties with certain states. These states are also less likely to send ties, just as in the other model.

This suggests that specific states—for both this network and the gender-affirming care network—can be viewed as innovators which other states look to when crafting these laws. As such, the results suggest that states are imitating each other in their preference to copy text from early adopters rapidly rather than engage in the time and effort needed to thoughtfully craft legislation.

Table 8: Lobby and PTAC Effects on Model Diffusion

Effect Name	Gender Affirming Care Laws	Trans Sport Ban Laws
Lobby Effect Alter X	-0.188	0.002
Lobby Effect Ego X	0.230	-13.974
Lobby Effect Sim X	-3.908	-0.793
PTAC Effect Alter X	0.034	0.178
PTAC Effect Ego X	0.558	4.327
PTAC Effect Sim X	0.102	2.397

Next, I constructed the models for the PTAC signatories and active lobbyist covariates. The resulting estimates of these models are shown in Table 8. For the gender-affirming care law network, all three estimates of the active lobbyist effect were statistically significant, and there is evidence that these behaviors were influential in the network's diffusion. For the PTAC effect, though, only the estimate for the ego effect was significant. The negative magnitude of the alter effect for the lobbyist variable—and the lack of significance for the PTAC alter effect—shows that states with more active lobbyists or more signatories to PTAC were not more “popular” within the networks. States did not view them as innovators and copied bill text from them despite more active lobbying efforts within those states. If interest groups were influencing the behaviors of many states, and thus the diffusion pattern of the network as a whole, the opposite of this effect would be expected. The same is true

for the alternative effect of these covariates in the transgender athletics participation law network.

The ego effect is significant and positive for both covariates for the gender-affirming care law network. This means that states with more active lobbyists or PTAC signatories were likely to send more ties than states lower on these values. Table 8 shows that states with more active lobbyists or PTAC signatories are more likely to copy and less likely to innovate than other states. For the transgender sports law network, however, the ego effect was insignificant, and we cannot conclude that these behaviors influenced the spread of the law. Finally, the similarity effect was insignificant and small for each network and effect except for the lobby covariate on the gender-affirming care network. The large, negative magnitude of this effect suggests that states with a higher number of active lobbyists prefer not to form ties with other states with a high number of active lobbyists.

These results support my hypothesis and show a pattern of copying text from other states within both of these law diffusion networks. While the model legislation was not entirely irrelevant to the gender-affirming care network's evolution, it was a less significant actor than some states. Further, similar patterns existed in both networks where certain states' legislation was replicated more often and, as a result, was more central to the network's diffusion. This follows the idea of policy imitation, whereby certain early adopters or innovators are emulated by later-adopting states. Finally, the lack of influence on network behaviors for both the PTAC signatories and active lobbyist covariates highlights another measure of interest group influence that fails to support prevailing arguments emphasizing the importance of the coalition of advocacy organizations in the diffusion of these laws. Where effects were present, they directly contradicted the idea that interest groups were influential.

Conclusion

My results find evidence that demonstrates an exaggeration of popular claims about the importance of model legislation in the diffusion of anti-LGBTQ+ laws. I showed that the diffusion patterns between two bill text networks, one that included model legislation and one that did not, were similar. For the network with the model bill, many states—especially South Dakota, Iowa, Arkansas, and Alabama—were more central to the diffusion process than the model legislation. These results align with the idea that policy imitation is a better mechanism for explaining the spread of these laws.⁶¹ Given the high level of similarity between state legislation and the consequent high connectedness of the network, it is almost certain that states copy or reuse text from earlier adopters. This finding aligns with those of other researchers who find high levels of text reuse in the context of other types of legislation (Linder et al. 2020; Kroeger, Karch, and Callaghan 2022; Garrett and Jansa 2015). Further, given the preference to form ties with certain early adopters, my results suggest the presence of an innovator effect, where later-adopting states copy the early adopters. While the model legislation is not disconnected from the network, it is less central and influential to the diffusion of these anti-LGBTQ+ laws than the “innovator” states. The innovator effect also appeared in the network without a model bill, operating as a sort of control test and demonstrating that the effect can be present without model legislation.

While the presence of an innovator effect and the preference to form ties with states rather than model legislation provide evidence of policy imitation, more research is necessary to understand exactly why these states imitate each other. Following Gusmano et al. (2020), I hypothesize that partisanship plays a role here. Every gender-affirming care and transgender athletics

⁶¹ Shipan and Volden, “The Mechanisms of Policy Diffusion.”

participation law was enacted by majority Republican legislatures and Republican governors (“Snapshot: LGBTQ Equality By State,” 2024). I believe that once the underlying issues became highly salient, more and more states rapidly adopted these laws. While proving this hypothesis is outside the scope of this paper, future research should explore in more depth the effect of the salience of these issues on the speed of diffusion and thus the presence of policy imitation in these diffusion patterns.

It is possible that the coalition of conservative advocacy organizations played an important role in influencing the earliest states by pushing issues onto the national agenda (“Promise to America’s Children” 2024). In that sense, they are still relevant to the diffusion of these laws. However, my results make clear that the impact of model legislation and direct lobbying is likely overstated as a driving force in the diffusion of these laws. Instead, states imitate each other by copying the text from earlier adopters of the law. The prevalence of text reuse, in the case of the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation studied here, calls into question the behavior of lawmakers. It suggests that states that copy legislation perhaps hope to stay current on popular types of laws targeting salient issues. State legislatures may, in some cases, adopt legislation not because it is proven effective or thought to be beneficial to constituents, but because other states have already adopted the same type of law.

The findings of this paper are limited in their inability to discern how advocacy groups may have played a role in the diffusion of these laws in unseen ways, even though I found little evidence of influence through two covariate measures. Future research can and should further explore these topics. Of particular interest would be an analysis, following methods employed by researchers like Mallinson (2016), that seeks to understand the importance of issue salience in explaining diffusion

patterns. Additionally, research could also explore the importance of partisanship to these diffusion processes or alternatively use other ways of measuring interest group influence to further understand their role in the diffusion of these laws. Another limitation is this paper's inability to measure and understand the motivations behind lawmakers who introduce and enact gender-affirming care or transgender athletics participation bans. While this paper presents a plausible framework whereby lawmakers follow the actions of innovators in enacting salient legislation, these claims cannot be definitively proven here.

Despite its limitations, this paper departs from other legislative text reuse literature and introduces new insights and a better understanding of underlying processes. The stochastic actor-oriented model is common in other research areas but unused in the context of legislative text analysis. Its introduction to policy diffusion and legislative text reuse offers an important opportunity for future research to better understand policy diffusion processes. Network models, particularly the SAOM, have advantages in this context as they allow for and encourage interdependence in a way that other, more standard statistical inference tools cannot handle. This allows for a greater understanding of the impact of endogenous behaviors, large numbers of connections, and correlated covariates. The SAOM also focuses on actor decisions over time, which closely matches the process of policy diffusion—where states decide whether or not to enact a law over time. Therefore, this model can be applied to other studies of policy diffusion and other issue areas to expand scholarly knowledge of diffusion processes.

Because of the unique methods and results, the findings of this paper have important implications both within the policy diffusion literature and a broader understanding of the influence of advocacy organizations. It should inform those who analyze, report on, or push back against the

spread of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. While a coalition of conservative organizations is involved in advocating for the enactment of these laws, it is important to recognize that the presence of these laws in other states may be more influential in a state's decision to pass an anti-LGBTQ+ law. Given the rapid spread of these laws and the high similarity between their text, it is critical to better understand how they are spreading. This paper offers a new way of analyzing anti-LGBTQ+ laws that opens many opportunities for more studies into these and related issues.

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THE FRAGILITY OF JUSTICE: MASS HYSTERIA AND THE FAILURE OF LEGAL PROTECTIONS

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I. Introduction

In 1692, Martha Corey stood before the Salem court, accused of witchcraft and bewildered by the absurdity of the charges that would ultimately seal her fate. “I am an innocent person,” she pleaded—yet her fate had already been sealed, not by evidence, but by mass hysteria.¹ The courtroom, filled with whispers and panic, was not in pursuit of the truth. It was searching for a scapegoat. Three centuries later, although courtroom procedures have evolved, the social instincts that fueled Corey’s execution remain chillingly familiar. Despite the progress of modern legal systems, the impulse toward fear-based justice continues to threaten due process. This paper explores how the core dynamics of the Salem Witch Trials—mass hysteria², institutional failure, and scapegoating—continue to resurface in American legal and political life. Though much has been written about the legal absurdities of Salem and the ideological excess of McCarthyism, fewer studies have traced the through line from historical witch hunts to modern-day equivalents in the digital age. By analyzing four distinct case studies, the Salem Witch Trials, the McCarthy-era hearings, the rise of QAnon, and the case of Marcellus Williams, this research investigates how mass panic can override legal procession across vastly different historical contexts. These examples are chosen not only for their cultural impacts but also for their legal resonance: each demonstrates how due process can collapse under the weight of public fear and political pressure. While past scholars have focused on the sociological or theological dimensions of mass hysteria, this paper approaches the issue through a legal lens, asking how the failure, or manipulation, of legal institutions enables hysteria to function as a tool of repression. In particular, I examine how courts, lawmakers, and public institutions respond (or fail to respond) to mass fear, and how this response shapes legal outcomes for marginalized or politicized individuals. By situating modern crises like QAnon and the

¹ Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive. “SWP No. 038: Martha Corey Executed,” University of Virginia. <https://salem.lib.virginia.edu/n38.html>.

² Merriam Webster Dictionary. *Hysteria* (Noun) “Behavior exhibiting overwhelming or unmanageable fear or emotional excess.” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hysteria>

criminalization of protest within the historical framework of witch hunts, this paper offers a new perspective on the enduring fragility of justice in the face of collective paranoia. Ultimately, this paper argues that while legal frameworks like due process and evidentiary standards are designed to prevent injustice, they are only as strong as the societal will to uphold them. The lesson from Salem, and every legal witch hunt since, is that vigilance is not just the responsibility of courts and lawmakers, but of the public itself. Without cultural and institutional safeguards against fear-driven justice, modern-day witch hunts are not only possible—they are already unfolding.

II. The Salem Witch Trials: Legal and Social Context

The Legal System of 1692

The legal system of 1692 combined biblical doctrine with colonial statutes in a deeply theocratic framework. As stated by the original royal charter of 1692 of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, criminal law was governed by the Governor, Deputy Governor, and a number of legal assistants. Lacking formal statutes or legal training, these officials interpreted English common law subjectively, often relying on personal judgment and religious doctrine to guide their rulings. The Witchcraft Act of 1604 classified witchcraft as a felony. A first-time offender could receive up to a year in prison, while a second conviction mandated execution.³ In 1641, the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony enacted a statute stating: “If any man or woman be a WITCH, that is, hath or consulteth with a familiar spirit, they shall be put to death. Exod. 22. 18. Levit. 20. 27. Deut. 18. 10. 11.”⁴ This statute incorporated scriptural references from Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. Salem's trials were held by the Court of Oyer and Terminer, a court made explicitly for the witch trials, instead of a formal legal body. At the time, the law did not use the principle of

³ George Smith, *“Witchcraft Law up to the Salem Witchcraft Trials of 1692.”* Mass Gov. (2017) <https://www.mass.gov/news/witchcraft-law-up-to-the-salem-witchcraft-trials-of-1692>

⁴ Michael W. Podiva, *“The Law of the Salem Witch Trials: Witchcraft Trials and Statutes in the American Colonies.”* Hynes Convention Center, Boston. (2012) http://www.cmcgc.com/Media/handouts/320723/C6_Klinefelter_A.pdf

“innocent until proven guilty.” If you made it to trial, the law presumed you guilty.⁵ Even more so, accused witches did not have access to lawyers; rather, they had to defend themselves, which made fair trials impossible.

In the case of Bridget Bishop, there is a clear example of how the absence of legal counsel left the accused with no means of defending themselves against unfounded accusations.⁶ Bishop had previously been accused of witchcraft in 1680; however, she was not convicted. During the height of the Salem Witch Trials, Bishop was targeted and brought to court again on June 2, 1692. When brought before the court, she was denied the opportunity to challenge the evidence and call for an expert witness to counter the claims against her. Instead, she had only two options: either to deny the accusations or confess to witchcraft, both of which would lead to conviction. Throughout the trial, Bishop's defense was limited to a denial of the charges, despite the fact that the evidence against her was based on dubious claims, like spectral evidence and the testimony of accusers who were in a state of hysteria. Her lack of legal counsel meant she was unable to mount an adequate defense against the sweeping and vague accusations, which led to her conviction and eventual execution on June 10th, marking her as the first person to be hanged as a result of the trials. It is clear that the Salem Witch Trials did not follow modern legal principles like the presumption of innocence or due process.

As shown in the case of Bridget Bishop, the most significant legal issue was the use of spectral evidence; testimony where a victim claimed a “witch’s spirit” harmed them in their dreams or visions. In the court of Oyer and Terminer, no physical proof was needed; judges accepted eyewitness testimony as substantial evidence. Those accused were often convicted not because of the “evidence” presented against them, but because they could not prove a negative (that their spirit

⁵ UChicago Library, “*The Salem Witch Trials- Legal Resources.*” *The University of Chicago Library* (2020) <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/salem-witch-trials-legal-resources/>

⁶ Sarah Neil Walsh, “*Courtroom Examination of Bridget Bishop.*” *Salem Witch Trials in History and Literature*, (2001) https://salem.lib.virginia.edu/people/bishop_court.html

wasn't harming anyone). The court's acceptance of spectral evidence faced some controversies as it differed from the accepted legal practice at the time. Following Bishop's death, the Governor asked the colonies' leading ministers for their opinion on the use of spectral evidence. To which they responded that they urged immense caution as "...the Devil could in fact assume the shape of an innocent person;" as their concerns lay within the killings of an innocent person.⁷ However, the court differentiated and convicted accused witches on the basis of spectral evidence.

We cannot discuss Salem's legal systems without discussing several flaws, such as accused witches often being threatened or tortured into confessing. The court encouraged confessions by offering leniency; those who confessed, or confessed and named other women, were spared the court's vengeance. For example, the court would spare some from execution, owing to the Puritan belief that they would receive their punishment from God. Alternatively, those who insisted upon their innocence met harsher, sometimes deadly, fates, becoming martyrs to their own sense of justice.⁸ Due to these actions, the Trials divided the community. Causing a mass hysteria of testimonies amongst families, partners, friends, and even the church. "Neighbors testified against neighbors, children against parents, husbands against wives, children died in prison, families were destroyed."⁹ In all, the Salem Witch Trials lacked proper legal standards and were based on fear, weak evidence, and forced confessions, leading to over 200 accusations and 20 executions.

⁷ Sarah Pruitt, "How the Salem Witch Trials Influenced the American Legal System." History.com (2024) <https://www.history.com/articles/salem-witch-trials-justice-legal-legacy>

⁸ Caylie McAree, *Confessions in the Salem Witch Trials* (Honors Thesis, University at Albany, State University of New York, May 2024), *Scholars*

Archive.https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1020&context=all_honors.

⁹ UChicago Library, "The Salem Witch Trials- Legal Resources." *The University of Chicago Library* (2020) <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/salem-witch-trials-legal-resources/>

Mass Hysteria and Fear-Based Justice

The Salem Witch Trials were not only about witches; they were about fear, power, and control, and did not happen at random. The trials were caused by several social, political, and religious factors, setting the perfect conditions for mass hysteria.

Religious fear played an influential role in the conflict that fueled the trials, with Puritans believing that the devil was actively working to corrupt them. Many saw witchcraft as God's punishment for sin; either allowing the Devil to convert so many witches, or by turning fearful people against their neighbors.¹⁰ Those saw it as a battle between Salem and the Devil. Another crucial factor in the trials was the deep-rooted social tensions between the different factions within the community. By 1692, Salem was broken into two parts: Salem Town and Salem Village. While the town flourished as a wealthy port city, the Village remained a rural farming community where families often struggled to make a living with the unforgiving land. This economic divide caused resentment across Salem, with even the Village having internal conflicts and divisions. Reverend Samuel Parris, a strict Puritan minister, played into these fears. Condemning commerce and affluence as signs of moral decay, implying that those with money and influence were aligned with the Devil. The court's rationale became entangled with this logic: if religious and economic deviance were linked, then identifying witches also meant punishing those seen as morally or socially threatening.¹¹ The trials shifted from a response to religious paranoia, to also a weapon in the larger legal struggle for power in Salem.

The court system itself lacked legitimacy and safeguards, and the colony's legal foundation has been unstable since the loss of its royal charter in 1684, and the recent Glorious Revolution

¹⁰ Malcolm Gaskill, *"The Salem Witch Trials: Colonial America, Puritanism, Mass Hysteria, Witchcraft, Religious Extremism, Legal Trails, 1692."* Bill of Rights Institute.

<https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/the-salem-witch-trials>

¹¹ Grant County Schools, *"Salem Witch Trials of 1692- Salem- Economic and Social Divisions."* Discoveryschools.com, <https://www.grant.kyschools.us/Downloads/Salem%20Map%20Article.pdf>

intensified this uncertainty. The legal vacuum left the resistance unsure of their rights and made them more susceptible to arbitrary authority. The newly established Court of Oyer and Terminer operated without oversight, used spectral evidence as valid testimony, and offered no real defense to the accused. This absence of legal restraint mirrored the collapse of institutional checks, allowing fear to take the place of reason.¹² The overall breakdown of legal norms served a deeper function: mass hysteria wasn't just a side effect; it was a political and social strategy. By creating a climate of fear, the ruling authorities were able to reassert control and solidify the Puritan social order. Hysteria allowed them to marginalize those who threatened the existing hierarchy, whether economically, religiously, or socially. Women who were outspoken or defied gender norms, landowners who crossed class boundaries, and dissenters of all kinds became targets. In this way, the trials reinforced gendered, economic, and religious hierarchies by turning fear into a mechanism for social discipline.¹³ The legal system represented a stage not for justice, but for reinforcing conformity and punishing deviation.

This scapegoating extended to young girls, whose performances became central to legitimizing the panic. While often seen as victims or instigators, many girls were used by the courts to justify decisions made in service of deeper social anxieties. Bridget Bishop's case expands on how these girls' testimonies fueled the hysteria. When Bishop entered the courtroom, her accusers (including Elizabeth Hubbard, Ann Putnam, Abigail Williams, Mercy Lewis, and Mary Walcott) immediately fell into chaos, claiming that she had bewitched them. Their synchronized convulsions and accusations reinforced the court's belief in her guilt. As the trial continued, the young girls intensified their performances, mirroring Bishop's actions, rolling their eyes upward in unison, and

¹² Malcolm Gaskill, *"The Salem Witch Trials: Colonial America, Puritanism, Mass Hysteria, Witchcraft, Religious Extremism, Legal Trails, 1692."* Bill of Rights Institute.

<https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/the-salem-witch-trials>

¹³ Giovanna Sbrissa, "Witchcraft, Scapegoats, and Social Crisis: Unraveling Religion, Gender, and Collective Fear in Salem, 1692," *Master's Thesis in Religion in Peace and Conflict* (Dept. of Theology, Spring Term 2025), <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1971799/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

stating that her mere gaze could strike them down. Their testimonies were further validated by “corroborating evidence,” such as the discovery of puppets in Bishop's home and accounts from previous accusers, even by her own late husband. Bishop's trial and execution set the precedent for the mass hysteria that followed, as Salem descended into chaos.¹⁴ Ultimately, mass hysteria was not irrational, and it was fictional. It allowed a fragmented society to realign itself around common enemies. It deflected attention from structural problems like class inequality, legal instability, and patriarchal control by offering a simple explanation: the Devil was among them. And in the name of rooting out evil, the community accepted injustice. Salem's trials serve as a cautionary tale about how fear can be wielded by institutions to suppress dissent, target the vulnerable, and uphold sites of power under the guise of moral or legal righteousness.

III. Modern Parallels: Could It Happen Again?

McCarthyism (1950s Red Scare) - The Witch Hunt for Communists

Just as Puritans in Salem feared witches as threats to their religion and social order, Cold War paranoia led Americans to view communists as internal threats working to undermine the country from within. The U.S. government, under the influence of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), sought to expose and eliminate communism in America, leading to widespread investigations that prioritized national security at the expense of individual rights.¹⁵ Although American communists had openly assisted the Soviet Union during World War II, the U.S. government and public had also collaborated with and supported the Soviet cause against Nazi Germany. Yet as Cold War tensions escalated, this alliance was rapidly recast as a threat, and fear of Soviet espionage spread swiftly, prompting America to abandon its earlier cooperation and sacrifice individual rights in the name of national security. Seizing on this anxiety,

¹⁴ Walsh, Sarah Nell. "Courtroom Examination of Bridget Bishop." *Salem Witch Trials in History and Literature*, https://salem.lib.virginia.edu/people/bishop_court.html.

¹⁵ Boston Public Library. "House Unamerican Activities Committee (HUAC, 1938-1975)." *Historic Congressional Committee Hearings and Reports*, 24 Jan. 2025, <https://guides.bpl.org/Congress/HUAC>.

McCarthy warned that the country was being “destroyed, not from enemies from without, but rather because of enemies from within.”¹⁶ His speech marked the beginning of the national witch hunt for suspected communists and their supporters, mirroring the hysteria seen in Salem. Investigations led by the HUAC and McCarthy disregarded constitutional protections, much like the Salem trial disregarded due process in favor of mass hysteria.¹⁷ These proceedings violated several key rights enshrined in the Constitution, including the First Amendment's guarantees of freedom of speech and association, and the Fifth Amendment's protection against self-incrimination. Individuals were often condemned for their political beliefs, associations, or refusal to testify — actions that should have been protected under the Bill of Rights. The lack of evidentiary standards, where rumor, association, or ideological leanings were treated as proof, further underscored the proceedings' injustice. In the case of the Hollywood Ten, for instance, ten screenwriters and directors were blacklisted and imprisoned for contempt of Congress after refusing to answer HUAC's questions about their political affiliations. When screenwriter Dalton Trumbo refused to answer HUAC's questions about his political beliefs, he was cited for contempt of Congress, sentenced to prison, and blacklisted from Hollywood under the so-called.¹⁸ These prosecutions were not based on tangible evidence of espionage but rather on suspicion and refusal to comply with ideological scrutiny. Suspects were pressured to name others, just as the accused witches in Salem were forced to confess and implicate fellow townspeople. Even when suspected communists were not formally imprisoned, association alone was often enough to destroy a person's career, reputation, and social standing. Public accusations, fueled by sensationalist media coverage, created an environment where being

¹⁶ Joseph McCarthy, “Enemies from Within,” University of Texas at Austin Core Texts, 9 Feb. 1950, <https://minio.la.utexas.edu/webeditor-files/coretexts/pdf/195020mccarthy20enemies.pdf>

¹⁷ HistoryHub. “The Witch Scare, the Red Scare, and the Dangers of Ideology.” *HistoryHub.info*, 27 Mar. 2018, <https://historyhub.info/the-witch-scare-the-red-scare-and-the-dangers-of-ideology/>.

¹⁸ HISTORY.com Editors, “Hollywood Ten Cited for Contempt of Congress,” *History*, 13 Nov. 2009, updated 27 May 2025, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/november-24/hollywood-10-cited-for-contempt-of-congress>

labeled a communist—or even sympathizing with leftist ideas—was tantamount to social death.¹⁹ In this way, McCarthyism enacted a form of "social execution," where accusations led not to literal death as in Salem, but to professional and personal ruin, isolating individuals and effectively exiling them from American public life. In Salem, accusations alone led to condemnation, and similarly, during McCarthyism, mere suspicion alone was enough to ruin careers and lives. Both events exemplify how fear, when left unchecked, can strip individuals of their freedoms in pursuit of an illusion of security.

As the U.S. government cracked down on suspected communists, civil liberties were sacrificed in the name of national security. The HUAC interrogations forced individuals to testify against themselves, and those who refused to cooperate faced severe consequences such as having their passports revoked, being blacklisted, or even jailed.²⁰ While many invoked the First or Fifth Amendment for constitutional protection, these rights were frequently disregarded, as the government prioritized rooting out perceived communist threats over upholding legal protections.²¹ This mirrors the Salem trial, where the accused were only given two choices: confess to a crime they did not commit, or face execution. As has been made apparent, fear has the power to override justice. Similarly, Cold War politicians were more focused on suppressing dissent than protecting the freedoms they claimed to defend. Guilt was determined not by one's actions, but by associations and beliefs. McCarthyism thrived on public panic, where accusations alone were enough to ruin lives, much like how unverified spectral evidence was used to convict suspected witches.

The Salem Witch Trials and McCarthyism demonstrate the dangers of allowing fear and ideological bias to override due process and individual freedoms. Both periods reveal the

¹⁹ McCarthyism and the Red Scare," Miller Center, University of Virginia, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/educational-resources/age-of-eisenhower/mccarthyism-red-scare>

²⁰ Boston Public Library. "House Unamerican Activities Committee (HUAC, 1938-1975)." *Historic Congressional Committee Hearings and Reports*, 24 Jan. 2025, <https://guides.bpl.org/Congress/HUAC>.

²¹ Hughes, Amanda. "A Comparison of the Salem Witch Trials and the Red Scare." *Virtual Commons @ Bridgewater State University*, 10 May 2016, https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1156&context=honors_proj.

consequences of mass hysteria when governments prioritize the protection of elite values over the protection of people. In Salem, the trials created widespread paranoia and social division, weakening the very community that the Puritans sought to preserve. Similarly, McCarthy's anti-communist crusade exacerbated national fear rather than strengthening democracy. Ultimately, history warns us that when societies use fear as a tool for control, they risk undermining the very principles they claim to protect.

QAnon and the Digital Witch Hunt (2017 to Present Day)

QAnon is a far-right conspiracy that emerged on 4chan in 2017, rooted in the belief that a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles controls global institutions, and that Donald Trump alone could expose and defeat them. Anonymous posts from the figure known as "Q" outline a coming reckoning, "the Storm," in which political elites would face mass arrests and executions. Although initially fringe, QAnon rapidly infiltrated mainstream conservative discourse, fueled by social media virtuality, algorithmic amplification, and partisan media coverage.²² While the Salem Witch trials and McCarthy-era hearings were instigated and legitimized by institutional authority, QAnon's early rise reflected a crisis of trust in institutions. Believers felt alienated from courts, Congress, and the press, turning instead to decentralized platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram, where cryptic messages and anonymous tips became substitutes for evidence. Yet, like the Salem judges who accepted spectral evidence, QAnon followers interpreted vague digital clues as irrefutable proof. The mass hysteria that gripped Salem was rooted in religion; today's is driven by algorithms. The legal system was initially slow to respond to QAnon-related threats. Even before high-profile events like the 2020 kidnapping plot against Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer and

²² Haimowitz, Ian. "No One Is Immune: The Spread of QAnon through Social Media and the Pandemic." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 17 Dec. 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/strategic-technologies-blog/no-one-immune-spread-q-anon-through-social-media-and-pandemic>; Gambini, Bert. "Study Explores How QAnon Went from Fringe to Mainstream on Twitter." *University at Buffalo News Center*, 4 Apr. 2023, <https://www.buffalo.edu/news/releases/2023/04/004.html>.

the January 6th insurrection, QAnon followers were already engaging in alarming actions that warranted legal scrutiny. In 2018, a QAnon supporter blocked the Hoover Dam bridge with an armored vehicle, demanding the release of a fictional government report cited in Q drops. That same year, individuals inspired by QAnon committed acts of violence, including a man in California who used an improvised incendiary device to start a wildfire, believing it would expose a hidden pedophile ring. Despite these early warning signs, widespread arrests and prosecutions did not begin until after QAnon's influence culminated in large-scale threats to public officials and democratic institutions. The FBI formally designated QAnon a domestic terrorist threat in 2019, but by then, the conspiracy had already metastasized across social media, priming believers for mass mobilization.²³ As in Salem, legal action often lagged behind public panic. Even when courts intervene, such as the sentencing of QAnon believer Douglas Jensen after the Capitol riot, the damage to public trust and democratic institutions had already been done.²⁴ The 2016 Pizzagate incident illustrated QAnon's early shift from online rumor to real-world threat. Pizzagate is a crucial event because it acted as a precursor that helped influence how aspects of QAnon developed. Edgar Welch, radicalized by online misinformation claiming that a D.C. pizza shop was a front for child trafficking, entered the building armed with an assault rifle. Though he found no evidence, his actions demonstrated the dangerous power of baseless accusation, echoing the Salem panic where suspicion alone led to imprisonment or execution.²⁵ Even when thoroughly debunked, such theories persist. In 2023, Elon Musk reignited Pizzagate by tweeting a meme implying its truth, falsely linking

²³ James Suber and Jacob Ware, "Examining Extremism: QAnon," Center for Strategic & International Studies Blog, 10 June 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-qanon>

²⁴ Whitehurst, Lindsay. "QAnon Follower Who Chased Capitol Officer on Jan. 6 Gets 5 Years." *PBS NewsHour*, 16 Dec. 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/qanon-follower-who-chased-capitol-officer-on-jan-6-gets-5-years>.

²⁵ Fisher, Marc, John Woodrow Cox, and Peter Hermann. "Pizzagate: From Rumor, to Hashtag, to Gunfire in D.C." *The Washington Post*, 6 Dec. 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20161220201405/https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/pizzagate-from-rumor-to-hashtag-to-gunfire-in-dc/2016/12/06/4c7def50-bbd4-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c_story.html.

a journalist who had covered the case to child pornography.²⁶ This illustrates a key insight: conspiracy theories never truly vanish, especially when revived by powerful voices. The comparison to Salem becomes even more striking when we examine the use of language and platforms. In both cases, people in high positions of power shaped belief systems. Social media posts operate as modern-day sermons, evangelizing fear, suspicion, and moral absolutism. When platforms began to disband QAnon groups in 2020, adherents simply adapted, using coded hashtags like “#SaveTheChildren” to disguise their content.²⁷ As in Salem, where witches were said to conceal themselves in plain sight, today’s digital conspiracists have evolved to evade detection.

The QAnon movement intensified after Trump lost the 2020 election, a period that functioned like the aftermath of a failed prophecy, as QAnon enthusiasts believed it was destiny for Trump to become President. Instead of collapsing, QAnon grew more apocalyptic. Believers claimed the election had been stolen; in their view, Trump remained the true president, and “the Storm” was imminent.²⁸ January 6th, 2021, marked the culmination of this radicalization. Dozens of self-identified QAnon followers joined the Capitol insurrection, driven by the belief that they were preventing a Deep State coup, with confirmation from Trump himself.²⁹ Trump had repeatedly amplified QAnon conspiracy theories by refusing to disavow the movement, praising its followers as “people who love our country,” and promoting false claims that the election had been stolen. Through speeches, tweets, and public statements, he encouraged the idea that the election was illegitimate and that his supporters had a patriotic duty to “stop the steal,” reinforcing QAnon's

²⁶ Marcelo, Philip. “Elon Musk and Others Spread Meme Reviving Unfounded ‘Pizzagate’ Conspiracy Theory.” *AP News*, 30 Nov. 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-pizzagate-conspiracy-elon-musk-abc-657657139374>.

²⁷ Haimowitz, Ian. “No One Is Immune: The Spread of QAnon through Social Media and the Pandemic.” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 17 Dec. 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/strategic-technologies-blog/no-one-immune-spread-q-anon-through-social-media-and-pandemic>.

²⁸ Anti-Defamation League. “QAnon.” *Anti-Defamation League*, 28 Oct. 2022, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/qanon>.

²⁹ Duignan, Brian. “Donald Trump.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 12 Mar. 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Donald-Trump>.

apocalyptic narrative.³⁰ One of the followers at the insurrection, Douglas Jensen, wearing a QAnon T-shirt, chased a Capitol Police officer through the halls of Congress. He was later convicted of multiple felonies.³¹ His trial highlighted not just individual culpability, but the broader issue of how legal systems contend with ideological extremism masquerading as patriotism. In Salem, executions were carried out on the basis of invisible crimes and spectral testimony. Today, digital witch hunts ruin reputations, incite violence, and challenge legal authority without ever setting foot in a courtroom. The courts have increasingly taken a reactive role, sentencing rioters and charging conspirators, but the underlying belief system remains resilient. When prominent figures like Trump, Musk, or far-right media personalities endorse conspiracies, they do more than spread misinformation; they imbue it with power. Their influence legitimizes fringe beliefs and fuels real-world action. As seen in Salem, when those in authority speak, their words shape reality. QAnon, like earlier moral panics, thrives on this symbiosis between fear and power. Ultimately, QAnon underscores a core lesson: when misinformation spreads unchecked, especially when validated by the powerful, it can corrode democratic systems from within. Just as Puritan leaders used fear to justify executions, today's conspiracy theorists use digital platforms to justify sedition. The tools to enact mass hysteria may have changed, but its logic remains chillingly similar.

IV. Legal Safeguards: What Has Changed?

Throughout history, societies have enacted legal safeguards to prevent the injustices of past witch hunts. In our modern democratic system, legal protections such as due process, the presumption of innocence, and the right to legal representation are meant to ensure that individuals cannot be arbitrarily accused or punished without proper evidence and a fair trial. However, as

³⁰ KP Powell, DONALD TRUMP, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND JANUARY 6TH: AN ANALYSIS OF THE "SAVE AMERICA" SPEECH AND USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CONNECTION WITH THE JANUARY 6TH INSURRECTION (New College of Florida, 2023), digitalcommons.ncf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7415&context=theses_etds.

³¹ Whitehurst, Lindsay. "QAnon Follower Who Chased Capitol Officer on Jan. 6 Gets 5 Years." *PBS NewsHour*, 16 Dec. 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/qanon-follower-who-chased-capitol-officer-on-jan-6-gets-5-years>.

history and current events have shown, these protections are not always enough to prevent miscarriages of justice, particularly when fear, misinformation, or political agendas override rational legal procedures.

How Modern Law is Meant to Prevent Witch Hunts

Unlike the arbitrary proceedings of Salem or the blacklists of McCarthyism, modern legal systems are designed to guard against mass hysteria by upholding constitutional protections, chief among them due process. Codified in both the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments, due process serves as a cornerstone of American law, guaranteeing that no individual can be deprived of life, liberty, or property without fair and established legal procedures.³² The Fourteenth Amendment, in particular, ensures that these rights extend not only federally but also through state and local systems. On paper, this framework is meant to shield the accused from prejudgment, media sensationalism, or ideological bias, yet in practice, its enforcement is far from consistent. One of the strongest legal defenses against unjust conviction is the evidentiary standard. While the Salem courts accepted spectral evidence, subjective, unverifiable claims, modern courts require that evidence be testable, empirical, and legally admissible under standards like those established in *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals* (1993). This ruling emphasized that expert testimony must be based on scientific reasoning and methodology, setting a precedent that helps filter out unreliable or pseudoscientific evidence in criminal trials. Yet, the reality is more complex. The case of Marcellus Williams, for instance, reveals the limits of these safeguards. Despite exculpatory DNA evidence, Williams remains on death row, revealing how due process alone can fail without systemic enforcement.³³ The rise of forensic science, DNA analysis, and other empirical tools has undeniably strengthened the objectivity of trials. However, without procedural reforms that address how evidence is interpreted,

³² Hudson, David. "How Due Process Ensures Fairness and Protects from Governmental Overreach." *The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression*, 1 Nov. 2022, <https://www.thefire.org/news/how-due-process-ensures-fairness-and-protects-governmental-overreach>.

³³ *Midwest Innocence Project*, "Marcellus Williams," *Midwest Innocence Project*, <https://themip.org/clients/marcellus-williams/>.

and without mechanisms like conviction integrity units or post-conviction relief programs, even strong evidence can be ignored or dismissed. In an era of viral misinformation and conspiracy-fueled outrage, ensuring due process requires not just procedural safeguards but institutional accountability. Strengthening these procedural protections, especially in politically charged or high-profile cases, remains essential to preventing modern witch hunts.

Why These Protections Aren't Always Enough

Despite these constitutional protections, public perception can play a crucial role in shaping legal outcomes. High-profile cases are often litigated in the media long before they reach the courtroom, influencing jury selections, judicial impartiality, and even the willingness of prosecutors to pursue or drop charges. The rise of social media has amplified the issue, allowing false or misleading narratives to spread rapidly. Viral outrage can pressure courts, employers, and lawmakers to act hastily, sometimes at the expense of fairness. Recent collegiate responses to students' involvement with pro-Palestinian activism offer a complex example of this dynamic. Although public opinion has largely pushed back against hard legal measures taken against student protestors, widespread media portrayal of campus protest as “violent” or “extremist” helped create an environment in which detentions, visa revocations, and legal investigations were politically normalized. In one documented case, a university student was detained by federal agents after participating in a non-violent campus protest, later learning their visa status had been flagged for alleged “disruptive activity” despite no formal charges being filed.³⁴ These incidents reveal how public narratives, even when inaccurate or sensationalized, can create political pressure that emboldens state action against dissenters. Thus, while legal safeguards exist, public perception can

³⁴ Leila Fadel, Arezou Rezvani, Taylor Haney, and Kyle Gallego-Mackie, “Freedom of Speech Is Shifting under the Trump Administration. We’re Exploring How,” *KERA News*, April 7, 2025, <https://www.keranews.org/2025-04-07/freedom-of-speech-is-shifting-under-the-trump-administration-were-exploring-how>.

still undermine these protections, echoing past movements like the Red Scare and the Salem Witch Trials, when fear-driven narratives overwhelmed legal principles.

Another reason why these legal protections are not enough is the shortcomings of forensic evidence. Forensic science has changed the criminal justice system, allowing for fairer trials and fewer wrongful convictions; however, its methods are not foolproof. Some forensic techniques, such as bite mark analysis and microscopic hair comparisons, have proven to be unreliable and have led to wrongful imprisonment. Misapplied forensics has contributed to nearly a quarter of all wrongful conviction cases since 1989.³⁵ Just as spectral evidence was accepted as fact in Salem, some forensic techniques have been treated as absolute truth despite lacking scientific validity. Even modern courts are not immune to flawed evidence. This is evident in cases like that of Marcellus Williams, a Black man who was wrongfully convicted of the 1998 murder of a white woman, Falcia Gayle, in Missouri. Williams was sentenced to death based largely on forensic evidence, hair comparison analysis, which was later proven to be inaccurate. Despite having an alibi and no physical evidence tying him to the crime scene, Williams was convicted in part because of eyewitness misidentification and the use of flawed forensic techniques. Williams has spent 24 years of his life on death row for a murder that DNA evidence proves someone else committed.³⁶ His case shared chilling parallels with the Salem Witch Trials and the Red Scare, both of which created a battle between fear and justice.

The Battle Between Fear and Justice

The case of Marcellus Williams exemplified how deeply embedded cultural fears, racial bias, and institutional negligence can compromise justice, even in an era of supposed legal safeguards. Despite significant advancements since the Salem Witch Trials and McCarthyism, William's wrongful conviction reveals that when public narratives, flawed science, and systemic prejudice take

³⁵ *Innocence Project*, "Misapplication of Forensic Science," *Innocence Project*, <https://innocenceproject.org/misapplication-forensic-science/>

³⁶ *Midwest Innocence Project*, "Marcellus Williams," *Midwest Innocence Project*, accessed [today's date if needed], <https://themip.org/clients/marcellus-williams/>

precedence over evidence, the legal process can be dangerously undermined. The initial willingness of the courts and the public to accept his guilt reflects a long-standing societal pattern: marginalized individuals are often presumed guilty in the absence of clear, objective proof. Studies consistently show racial disparities at every stage of the criminal justice process; for example, Black Americans are seven times more likely to be incarcerated than white Americans and are significantly more likely to be wrongfully convicted of crimes they didn't commit.³⁷ These systemic biases help explain how cases like Marcellus Williams' can unfold with public and legal presumption of guilt long before all evidence is fully considered. Williams's ordeal mirrors past injustices like the Salem Witch Trials and the Red Scare, where fear, scapegoating, and mass hysteria replaced reason and due process. Just as spectral evidence and anonymous accusations were accepted as fact in Salem and ideological paranoia fueled baseless projections in the McCarthy era, Williams' conviction was shaped by deeply flawed systems and cultural biases rather than clear, reliable evidence. His case raises critical questions about how public sentiment and systematic inequality influence legal outcomes, and whether true justice is possible when fear and prejudice are allowed to override fairness. It is a reminder that legal protections, no matter how robust they appear on paper, are only as effective as the society willing to uphold them. Without vigilance, the same forces that drove past witch hunts can, and do, persist in modern forms.

V. Could It Really Happen Again?

While legal safeguards against wrongful persecution have improved since the days of the Salem Witch Trials and McCarthyism, the underlying social forces that fueled these historical injustices—fear, misinformation, and public pressure—are still very much present. The recent college protests demonstrated how public opinion, fueled by media narratives, can shape

³⁷ *Death Penalty Information Center*, “Black People 7.5 Times More Likely to Be Wrongfully Convicted of Murder Than Whites,” *Death Penalty Information Center*, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/report-black-people-7-5-times-more-likely-to-be-wrongfully-convicted-of-murder-than-whites-risk-even-greater-if-victim-was-white>.

perspectives long before all the facts are known. More recently, movements like QAnon have revealed how mass hysteria can thrive in the digital age, with baseless conspiracy theories leading to real-world consequences. Despite advancements in due process, when misinformation spreads unchecked, society is still vulnerable to modern-day witch hunts. Social media has exacerbated this issue, allowing false narratives to gain traction at an unprecedented scale. Unlike in the past, when newspapers and television held more centralized control over public discourse, today's fragmented media landscape enables misinformation to spread rapidly, making it harder to discern fact from fiction. When fear-based rhetoric takes hold, even legal protections struggle to counteract the damage done to the reputations and lives of the accused.

To prevent history from repeating itself, society must prioritize critical thinking, due process, and legal education. First, fostering media literacy is essential. Media literacy is the ability to critically analyze, interpret, and create media content, ensuring individuals become active consumers rather than passive recipients of information. In a world where misinformation spreads rapidly, media literacy equips people with the skills to fact-check sources, recognize bias, and understand the intent behind media messages. With the rise of digital platforms, where anyone can create and share content, these skills are more crucial than ever in distinguishing credible news from misleading or manipulative narratives.³⁸ To apply media literacy, we need to integrate both formal education and everyday practices. In the classroom, teachers can incorporate media literacy by encouraging students to question the media they consume, explore multiple perspectives, and analyze the intent behind various media formats. Additionally, providing opportunities for students to create their media content helps them understand the power and responsibility that come with being media producers. By fostering inquiry and critical thinking, we empower individuals to become responsible

³⁸ Andrew M. Guess et al., "A Digital Media Literacy Intervention Increases Discernment Between Mainstream and False News in the United States and India," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 117, no. 27, 2020, pp. 15536–15545, <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1920498117>.

creators and consumers of media, better equipped to navigate the complexities of today's digital world. This not only supports academic learning but also strengthens democratic participation and civic engagement.³⁹ Secondly, due process must remain a non-negotiable principle—both in the courtroom and in the court of public opinion. The Marcellus Williams case, and more recently, false accusations driven by QAnon conspiracies, show how quickly people can be judged guilty in the public sphere before any real evidence is examined. While public scrutiny plays an important role in holding institutions accountable, it should never replace legal processes designed to protect both the accused and the accuser. Essential safeguards such as the presumption of innocence, access to competent and affordable legal counsel, rigorous evidentiary standards, and protection against prejudicial media coverage are essential to ensure that justice is pursued through facts, not fear or political agendas. Without these, the legal system becomes vulnerable to the same hysteria and mob mentality that have plagued our history.

Finally, legal education should be expanded to ensure that people understand their rights and the fundamental principles of justice. The decline of civic education in U.S. curricula has weakened the public's understanding of the justice system, influencing both jury decision-making and voter behavior. Jurors often lack the necessary civic knowledge to make informed, impartial decisions based on the law, while voters may struggle to make educated choices on justice-related policies and candidates. This erosion of civic knowledge contributes to biased decision-making and diminishes the effectiveness of democratic processes in shaping justice issues. A society that does not understand how the legal system functions is more likely to fall for fear-driven narratives.⁴⁰

Promoting legal literacy makes it harder for misinformation to trigger mass hysteria and wrongful persecution.

³⁹ Sustainability Directory, "How Can Media Literacy Impact Civic Engagement?" *Lifestyle – Sustainability Directory*, 13 Sept. 2025, <https://lifestyle.sustainability-directory.com/question/how-can-media-literacy-impact-civic-engagement/>.

⁴⁰ Ilana Fuchs, "Access to Justice Requires Changes from the Legal System," *American Public University*, March 12, 2025, <https://www.apu.apus.edu/area-of-study/security-and-global-studies/resources/access-to-justice-requires-changes-from-the-legal-system/#about-authors>.

The lesson from past and present legal witch hunts is clear: justice is not just a legal issue but a societal responsibility. Individuals must resist the temptation to jump to conclusions based on sensationalized media coverage or viral misinformation. Fear and hysteria have repeatedly led to wrongful accusations, whether during the Salem Witch Trials, the McCarthy era, or more recent conspiracy-driven frenzies like QAnon. However, preventing these miscarriages of justice also requires strengthening our legal infrastructure. Procedural reforms such as implementing structured evidentiary standards, expanding access to conviction integrity units, and improving safeguards against pretrial bias in media-heavy cases are vital. These tools work in tandem with societal efforts. By fostering rational discourse and improving media literacy, we can prevent fear from overpowering fairness. A well-informed society is the best safeguard against another legal witch hunt. This means encouraging critical thinking, questioning narratives that seem too convenient, and holding media outlets accountable for responsible reporting. Without these safeguards, history has shown that public opinion can become a weapon, capable of destroying lives before the truth even has a chance to emerge. Social media, in particular, has amplified the speed at which misinformation spreads, making it all the more important to cultivate a culture of skepticism rather than blind acceptance. The legal system can only protect against wrongful persecution if society remains vigilant against hysteria. By demanding critical thinking and legal reform over reactionary judgment, we help ensure that history does not repeat itself. Justice is not inevitable—it must be constantly defended against fear.

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<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/qanon-follower-who-chased-capitol-officer-on-jan-6-gets-5-years>.

CHINA'S GLOBAL FOOTPRINT OVER THE PAST 40 YEARS: EXPLORING THE COUNTRY'S GROWING INFLUENCE

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Abstract

This paper explores the calculus of China's ascent as a global superpower, arguing that its expanding global footprint is not merely a byproduct of growth but a deliberate effort to reshape power structures. It examines how China leveraged economic expansion, technological innovation, political influence, and military modernization to advance long-term goals. The paper begins by situating China's ascendance within its historical context, addressing moments such as the Tiananmen Square protests and the Hong Kong handover. It then traces critical milestones, including China's WTO membership, its space program, and the Beijing 2008 Olympics, as key moments of global integration. The study also explores China's response to the global financial crisis, military modernization, and technological advancements, illustrating how these elements contribute to its global strategy. Finally, the paper examines the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a major component of China's ongoing effort to project influence. Lastly, by analyzing implications, criticisms, and nuances, this study offers insights into the country's future trajectory and its potential to shape the global economy, politics, and culture.

Definitions

China's WTO Membership (beginning page 6)

1. Bilateral investment treaties (BITs): Agreements between two nations that define the rules and protections for private investments made by individuals and companies from one country in the territory of the other.¹
2. Preferential trade agreements (PTAs): A trade deal between two countries or groups that aims to make trade between them easier and more efficient. It offers certain advantages to businesses, such as reduced customs duties or simplified import and export procedures, helping them trade goods more smoothly and at a lower cost.²
3. State-owned enterprises (SOEs): An organization established by the government to carry out business or commercial operations.³
4. Countervailing duties (CVDs): Tariffs imposed on imported goods to counteract subsidies provided to producers in the exporting country.

¹ Cornell Law School, "Bilateral Investment Treaty," *Legal Information Institute*, accessed May 2, 2025, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/bilateral_investment_treaty.

² CEVA Logistics, "Preferential Trade Agreement," accessed May 2, 2025, <https://www.cevalogistics.com/en/glossary/preferential-trade-agreement>.

³ Investopedia, "State-Owned Enterprise (SOE)," accessed May 2, 2025, [https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/soe.asp#:~:text=A%20state%20Owned%20enterprise%20\(SOE\)%20is%20an%20entity%20formed,of%20engaging%20in%20commercial%20activities](https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/soe.asp#:~:text=A%20state%20Owned%20enterprise%20(SOE)%20is%20an%20entity%20formed,of%20engaging%20in%20commercial%20activities).

Introduction

Over the last 40 years, China has transformed unprecedentedly, emerging from a nation that was devastated by war to becoming a major player in the world. This transformation has been driven by multiple factors, including economic reforms and technological advancements. Specifically, China's rise has been marked by developments in industries such as astronautics and artificial intelligence. As a result, China has become one of the fastest-growing nations and is projected to surpass the United States as the largest economy in the coming decades.⁴

Modernization in China is not just a domestic transformation—it carries global implications as the country is taking on leadership roles in international institutions, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Health Organization (WHO), and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's rise poses challenges and opportunities for the US and other major powers. China's global footprint is driven by a strategic blend of economic expansion, technological innovation, political influence, and military modernization, each serving the ambition to reshape global power structures. As China's influence extends, it is vital to comprehend the dynamics driving its modernization.

Historical Context (1912-1977)

To understand China's current influence on the global stage, one must understand its history, which foreshadowed the country's gradual opening to the world signaled on December 18, 1978.⁵ In 1912, China was fractured into numerous states. This period of instability was followed by the invasion of the Imperial Japanese Army in 1932, which led to a devastating conflict with the second-highest casualties of World War II in 1937. The war was marked by brutality, including the

⁴ Nicholas D. Kristof, "The Rise of China," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 5 (1993): 59, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/fora72&div=93&id=&page=&collection=journals>.

⁵ DW News, "How China Became a Superpower: 40 Years of Economic Reform," *YouTube*, 6:08, December 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SBnK9XIIZE>.

Rape of Nanking, in which Japanese forces murdered over 300,000 Chinese people.⁶ The Japanese occupation of China lasted until 1945, when the Japanese began to leave, paving the way for the People's Republic of China in 1949.⁷

In 1977, Deng Xiaoping emerged. Under his guidance, China undertook economic reforms that propelled growth. Deng's focus was on rebuilding China after the devastating Cultural Revolution, a movement that led to the deaths of millions, with many others suffering from imprisonment or torture.⁸ His approach, reflected in his famous phrase "Black cat or white cat, if it can catch mice, it's a good cat," signaled his desire to bring China into the modern world through economic growth. Deng Xiaoping sought to adapt Socialism to China's socioeconomic conditions, resulting in the concept of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics." In 1978, China's economy officially opened up to the world, marking the beginning of rapid transformation.⁹

Tiananmen Square Protests (1989)

As China expanded into the global market, tensions emerged. Opening China's economy generated economic growth, but also exposed China's people to new aspirations for individual rights and freedom. The protests consisted predominantly of college students, and initially began as a mourning ceremony for Hu Yaobang, the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), who was admired for his liberal views.¹⁰ However, as the days passed, the mourners became protestors, demanding democracy, liberty, and freedom of the press.

As the discussion of reforms gained momentum, it agitated many within the CCP. The government's response was marked by an editorial in *The People's Day*, the official newspaper of the

⁶ Suibhne, "The Complete History of China," *YouTube*, 20:15, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d83eAANqXjk&t=892s>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ South China Morning Post, "Deng Xiaoping: Architect of Modern China," *YouTube*, 3:10, August 21, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3YXSvPnY1w>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ BBC News, "Tiananmen Square: What Happened in the Protests of 1989?" *YouTube*, 10:40, June 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3RzKKfNkTk>.

CCP, which warned that it would take a stance against anyone opposing the government, implying that such individuals are threats to social stability. This editorial became a defining moment in the protest, galvanizing opposition among many students, who filled campus walls with writings condemning the editorial. The protestors demanded that the government retract the editorial, but were refused. This led to an escalation of the protests, culminating in a massive demonstration in which over 100,000 college students marched across Beijing to commemorate a previous protest against the Treaty of Versailles. The students even embarked on a hunger strike, camping in Tiananmen Square, and many others joined in to show their support.¹¹

Chinese Premier Li Peng ultimately agreed to meet with the students at the Great Hall of the People, but the encounter was marked by animosity. The hunger strike leader publicly rebuked Li Peng, characterizing him as arrogant and demanding that the students' needs be met. Undeterred by the government, the students continued occupying Tiananmen Square, even with a new curfew. On June 3, authorities issued a warning, advising citizens to avoid Tiananmen Square for their safety. However, the public was unaware that hundreds of thousands of soldiers had been mobilized and were awaiting orders to clear the square forcibly. By night, 200,000 soldiers moved into the square, shooting at unarmed civilians, and the next morning, the soldiers dismantled the Goddess of Democracy statue, which symbolized the protests.¹²

The death toll from the protests is still unknown, but it has left a lasting impact on China's society. Some argue that the CCP lost the opportunity for political modernization by shooting at unarmed students. In contrast, others believe that the crackdown brought stability to China.

The Tiananmen Square protests were pivotal in China's modernization, sparking a national conversation about democratic reforms. Although the protests were suppressed, they drew

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

international attention, putting pressure on the Chinese government. The government's response to the protests revealed the limits of its tolerance for dissent and the importance the government placed on maintaining social stability. In the aftermath of the protests, the world saw a significant shift in China's economic policies, as the government sought to reorient the country's strategy and accelerate its integration into the global economy, rather than taking accountability for the protests. China's hopes for economic modernization and its authoritarian political system thus set the stage for ongoing debates about the country's trajectory.

These protests demonstrated the growing strength and organization of supporters for China's civil society. As the country's economic reforms created new opportunities for social mobilization, individuals began to demand greater participation in the political process and more accountability from the government. The emergence of independent organizations, such as Human Rights in China (HRIC), challenged the Communist Party's monopoly on power.

Hong Kong Handover (1997)

In 1997, China took another significant step with the Hong Kong handover, marking the end of over 150 years of British colonial rule and the beginning of a new era of "one country, two systems," which refers to a political framework that was designed to allow Hong Kong to maintain its autonomy while being a part of People's Republic of China.¹³ In an agreement signed at the Hall of the People in Beijing, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang formalized the terms of Hong Kong's return.¹⁴ China pledged to respect Hong Kong's autonomy and freedoms, thus creating a unique hybrid system that balanced national unity with regional distinctiveness.¹⁵ However, this arrangement has been subject to increasing strain, as

¹³ BBC News, "Hong Kong Marks 24 Years Since Handover to China," *YouTube*, 3:28, July 1, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NZFIALxZAE>.

¹⁴ History, "Britain Agrees to Return Hong Kong to China," last modified January 30, 2025, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/december-19/britain-agrees-to-return-hong-kong-to-china>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

China's growing assertiveness has led to concerns about the erosion of Hong Kong's long-standing traditions of freedoms of speech, press and assembly.

The strain on the "one country, two systems" arrangement intensified in 2014, when the Umbrella Movement protests, sparked by China's attempts to control Hong Kong's election rights, escalated. The movement acquired its name because Hong Kong residents had used umbrellas to protect themselves from tear gas. Subsequent protests, including those against the Extradition Bill in 2019 and the National Security Law in 2020, have further highlighted the rift between Hong Kong's desire for autonomy and China's preference for obedience.¹⁶ China's crackdown on dissent, including the imprisonment of lawyers, journalists, and activists like Nathan Law, who is now in Britain, has led to individuals fleeing Hong Kong.

The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong underscores the enduring tension between China's desire to project a stable global image and its insistence on rigid domestic control. These events did more than challenge local governance—they exposed the fault lines between authoritarian resilience and democratic aspiration. As images of umbrellas, tear gas, and mass marches circulated, they became symbolic of civil liberties, political autonomy, and the right to dissent. In this way, Hong Kong's struggles left a visible footprint in global discourses on democracy, challenging the narratives that authoritarian regimes strive to maintain.

¹⁶ Ibid.



Figure 1.: 1st Anniversary gathering for Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement.

The Hong Kong handover played a significant role in China's modernization. As a gateway for the free flow of ideas, technology, and cultural practices, Hong Kong has enabled China to tap into international expertise and innovation, driving its modernization. Furthermore, the handover marked the end of colonial rule and the return of a strategic territory to Chinese sovereignty, thereby bolstering national pride, unity, and China's status as a rising global power. Hong Kong highlights how China's actions on the global stage can conflict with international agreements, as seen in its failure to uphold the promises made under the handover deal.

China's WTO Membership (2001)

Following the 1997 handover of Hong Kong, the country continued its integration into the global system, culminating in China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 after years of negotiations.¹⁷ The eventual agreement on China's "Protocol of Accession" was significant. The joining of China to the WTO was initially met with optimism by some, who

¹⁷ Andre Sapir and Petros C. Mavroidis, "China and the WTO: Two Systems Meet," *VoxEU.org* (Centre for Economic Policy Research), April 28, 2021, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/china-and-wto-two-systems-meet>.

envisioned China's engagement into the global arena as a catalyst for China's economic liberalization and democratization. Meanwhile, skeptics cautioned against such simplistic assumptions. Most proponents of China's WTO membership nonetheless believed that China's accession would create a more level playing field, with the US maintaining its existing trade barriers. This expectation was fueled by China's market potential, with its rapidly growing economy and population. In short, many believed that accessing the Chinese market would benefit the world economy. However, this optimistic prognosis was rooted in an oversimplified understanding of trade dynamics, neglecting China's intricate political and economic landscape.

A condition of China's WTO accession was its acceptance of being designated as a "non-market economy" for 15 years, thereby enabling other countries to calculate dumping margins.¹⁸ This method uses prices from other free-market countries as a reference instead of China's prices, because the Chinese government is heavily involved in setting prices and managing the economy. As noted by Chatham House, "At the same time, China accepted being designated as a non-market economy for a stipulated period of 15 years. This has made it easier for other WTO members to successfully impose countervailing measures on Chinese exports." This agreement was set to expire in 2016. However, China's expectation of being granted market economy status has not since been realized, and other countries have continued to use dumping methodologies, prompting China to challenge this practice within the WTO. China has filed WTO disputes against the US and the EU over this issue, but without success.

The intersection of China's economic development and integration into a global system has created a paradox. Despite rapid economic growth, China's practice of government control in its

¹⁸ Jue Wang and Michael Sampson, *China's Approach to Global Economic Governance*, Chatham House Briefing Paper, December 6, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/2021-12-06-china-approach-global-economic-governance-wang-sampson.pdf>.

economy has created tensions with the WTO principles and norms.¹⁹ As noted by Vox EU CEPR, “what is different with China is that it has retained substantial state involvement in the working of its economy, which is in direct contradiction with the WTO’s implicit liberal understanding.” This characterization is echoed in a common description of China’s economic system as a socialist market economy, which contains both private initiative and state planning, and, unlike in Western economies, the state’s (or the Communist Party’s) role is paramount. This anomaly sparked debate about the compatibility of China’s economic model with the WTO’s free market assumptions, which prioritize minimal government interference.

Despite disagreements, China’s membership in the WTO has yielded significant economic benefits for the country, as evident in its emergence as the largest trader in goods and the second-largest trader in services globally.²⁰ Since 2021, China has surpassed the US as the largest trading partner with many countries in Latin America and Africa.²¹

Beyond its WTO membership, China has actively pursued bilateral investment treaties (BITs) and preferential trade agreements (PTAs) to expand its market access for Chinese goods, services, and capital, while also embarking on ambitious initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative.²² These initiatives’ success is partially due to China’s WTO membership, which established credibility and signals of openness to investment. However, these developments have also generated backlash against Chinese influence, including the ongoing trade war between the US

¹⁹ André Sapir and Petros C. Mavroidis, “China and the WTO: Two Systems Meet,” *VoxEU.org* (Centre for Economic Policy Research), April 28, 2021, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/china-and-wto-two-systems-meet>.

²⁰ Henry Gao, Damian Raess, and Ka Zeng, “China’s 20-Year Engagement with the WTO: Opportunities, Challenges, and Responses,” *Hinrich Foundation*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.hinrichfoundation.com/research/article/wto/china-20-year-engagement-with-the-wto/>.

²¹ U.S. Global Leadership Coalition. “China’s Growing Global Influence: What’s at Stake?” *U.S. Global Leadership Coalition*, April 2021. Accessed April 15, 2025. <https://www.usglc.org/chinas-growing-influence-is-america-getting-left-behind/>.

²² Ibid.

and China, which is in its fourth year as of 2022. This underscores the potential for long-term strategic rivalry between the world's two largest economies in the years to come.

Since 2001, China's status within the WTO remains a point of contention, with its self-identification as a developing country and its bid for market economy status being met with skepticism by WTO members.²³ China's accession agreement included commitments like reducing industrial tariffs beyond those undertaken by other developing countries, such as India and Brazil. Furthermore, China agreed to rules governing the behavior of its state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which prohibited the provision of subsidies that would pose an unfair competitive advantage.²⁴ Using this, countries could hold China accountable.

The role of SOEs in China's trade regime has been a complex issue. China initially adopted a largely observational approach to disputes such as this, but since 2006, it has become increasingly proactive, engaging in 69 cases. China has secured significant victories, including a 2011 ruling that clarified that SOEs are not automatically deemed providers of subsidies. This ruling is beneficial to China because it makes it more difficult for other countries to impose countervailing duties (CVDs) on Chinese exports. Furthermore, the US has expressed dissatisfaction with the WTO's dispute settlement process, culminating in its blockade of appointments to the appellate body since 2016, which has hindered the WTO's ability to resolve disputes. In response, China has supported a temporary solution, the multi-party interim appeal arrangement (MPIA), which is designed to replace the appellate body. However, the US is not part of this arrangement, and it's unclear how effective it will be.

The issue of SOEs in China has no resolution in sight. Chinese officials contend that SOEs are crucial for the country's domestic growth, pointing to their role in absorbing excess labor

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

during periods of social instability. With over 15,000 SOEs operating in China, their influence is substantial.²⁵ However, many have expressed concerns that China's approach to trade is inherently unfair and undermines the WTO's objectives. Specifically, they allege that Chinese SOEs engage in dumping exports in foreign markets at below-cost prices. In contrast, China maintains that its SOEs are essential for its development and should be accorded special treatment as a developing economy. The US, EU, and Japan are working together to address these concerns, but China is unlikely to give up its support for SOEs anytime soon.²⁶

Despite the challenges, China's accession to the WTO in 2001 marked a milestone. China signaled its commitment to the global economy by agreeing to WTO rules and norms. The terms of its joining, including its designation as a "non-market economy" for 15 years, imposed constraints but also facilitated China's rapid economic transformation into a major power by giving China greater access to international markets. The country's ability to navigate the WTO framework, including its participation in trade disputes and its efforts to address concerns around SOEs, has been critical. China's WTO membership enabled the country to leverage trade and investment to drive economic development and to exert its influence.

China's Space Program (2003)

As China continued to expand, it also began pursuing ambitious space exploration goals. China's pursuit of space exploration and development has been a hallmark of technological advancement and global aspirations in recent years. As President Xi Jinping stated, "To explore the vast cosmos, develop the space industry and build China into a space power is our eternal dream."²⁷ Since 2016, China's space industry has made remarkable progress, achieving milestones that

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. "Full Text: China's Space Program: A 2021 Perspective." White paper, January 28, 2022. Accessed April 15, 2025. https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202201/28/content_WS61f35b3dc6d09c94e48a467a.html.

garnered attention. Notably, the operation of projects such as the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System, which has played a vital role in supporting China's COVID-19 response efforts, offering precise positioning for the transportation of essential supplies, tracking individuals, and facilitating the construction of hospitals. Furthermore, the successful conclusion of the three-step lunar exploration program ("orbit, land, and return") and the initiation of the space station project demonstrate China's growing capacity for space exploration. As acknowledged by Chinese officials, these achievements have improved China's ability to engage in space exploration discoveries and participate in space governance.²⁸

Perhaps one of the most notable achievements of China's space exploration is the successful launch of its first astronaut, Yang Liwei, aboard the Shenzhou 5 spacecraft on October 15, 2003.²⁹ During his mission, Yang Liwei completed 16 orbits around the Earth and held miniature flags of both China and the United Nations, thus conveying a powerful message that echoed the UN's vision of space exploration "for the good of all mankind."³⁰

China's successful launch of its first astronaut allowed the country to forge new partnerships. This strategic intent was evident in a paper published by China on the eve of the launch, which identified the European Union (EU) as a superpower poised to surpass the United States and Japan as China's largest trade and investment partner. The EU, in turn, welcomed China's achievement, with the Director-General of the European Space Agency (ESA) extending warm congratulations and envisioning a "new era of wider cooperation in the world's space community." China's growing ties with Europe, particularly with countries like France and Germany, were motivated by the potential for lucrative markets and the strategic imperative of counterbalancing American power. As Yang Liwei soared into space, whose identity was not known

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Johnson- Freese, Joan. "SPACE WEI QI: The Launch of *Shenzhou V*." *JSTOR* vol. 57, no. 2 (2004): 121-145, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26394104>.

³⁰ Ibid.

until the launch, coverage and international attention picked up almost immediately. Following the triumphant return of Yang Liwei, the Chinese announced that a Shenzhou VI launch, carrying three taikonauts, would likely follow “within a year or two.”



Figure 2.: Yang Liwei's space suit from the Shenzhou 5 mission.

Between 2016 and 2021, China's space program completed 207 launch missions, with the Long March carrier rocket series accounting for 183 of these launches.³¹ As part of its efforts to upgrade its launch capabilities, China has been developing its carrier rockets to be more environmentally friendly and pollution-free, leveraging modular technology to enhance their intelligence and performance. Concurrently, China has expanded its satellite network for environmental disaster management, and several commercial remote-sensing satellites. Furthermore, the country has strengthened its mobile communications and broadcasting satellite network to provide enhanced voice, short message, and data services for users in China, its neighboring regions, and parts of the Asia-Pacific.

³¹ Ibid.

The capacity of satellite applications has benefited various sectors. Satellites protect natural resources and the eco-environment, prevent and mitigate disasters, manage emergencies, forecast weather patterns, and respond to climate change. Moreover, satellite applications have positively impacted social management, public services, urbanization, coordinated regional development, and poverty eradication efforts. Ultimately, the advancements in China's space industry have improved its citizens' quality of life. In addition to its domestic satellite programs, China has launched joint satellites with partner countries. Notable examples include the China-France Oceanography Satellite, China-Brazil Earth Resources Satellite 04A, the Ethiopian Remote-Sensing Satellite, and the Student Small Satellites (SSS) for APSCO.³²

By launching its space mission and developing satellites, China opened up new opportunities for partnerships that, in turn, further solidified China's position as a major player. As China continues to push the boundaries of space exploration, it also exerts more significant influence in international organizations and forums, advancing its interests on the world stage, while helping improve the lives of its citizens, thus contributing to its global footprint.

The Beijing Olympics (2008)

The country seized another opportunity to showcase its capabilities to the world: hosting the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the first time the country hosted the Olympic Games.³³ By doing so, China aimed to showcase its growing economic and political influence by proving it had the resources, technology, and organization to host a major international event. China had spent a record of \$43 billion hosting this event.

³² Ibid.

³³ James Griffiths, "The 2008 Olympics Was a Soft Power Victory for Beijing. A Successful Games in 2022 Could Validate Its Authoritarian System," *CNN*, last modified February 21, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/21/asia/beijing-olympics-2008-2022-soft-power-dst-intl-hnk/index.html>.

The Olympics provided an opportunity for China to share its rich cultural heritage with a global audience, as evidenced by the opening ceremony's display of thousands of Chinese drummers.³⁴ The drummers had repeatedly chanted “有朋自远方来，不亦乐乎” which translates to “it's such a joy to have friends come from far away.” As historian Zheng Wang writes, “Hosting the 2008 Summer Olympics was a symbol of China's rejuvenation. Through the extravagant opening ceremony, the Chinese government showcased China's historical glory and new achievements... unassailable evidence that China had finally ‘made it’.” Wang's use of the phrase “unassailable evidence” suggests that the event was not only symbolic, but strategically orchestrated to silence international skepticism about China's place on the world stage. Furthermore, the notion that China had “finally ‘made it’” implies a desire for recognition and legitimacy. The ceremony was thus more than a celebration; it was a carefully calculated declaration of national resurgence and a visual argument for China.

This positive impact of the Beijing Olympics is supported by Jeffrey Wasserstrom, a specialist in modern Chinese history, who argues that China's 2008 Olympic efforts were a deliberate attempt to rebrand the country.³⁵ Wasserstrom highlights three distinct narratives surrounding the Beijing Olympics: one that criticized China's human rights record, dubbing the event as the “Genocide Olympics”; another that framed the Olympics as a catalyst for China's emergence from authoritarianism; and a third that likened the 2008 Beijing Olympics to the

³⁴ Olympics. “The Sound of 2008 People Drumming to the Same Beat | Opening Ceremony Beijing 2008.” *YouTube* video, 3:37. Posted November 15, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TA0ZVxHRxCM>.

³⁵ Jeffrey Wasserstrom, “China's International Goals for the Olympics,” *YouTube*, 16:50. Posted July 26, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PFC9zQOwH8&list=PLCDC95E271B3A2EE6>.

1964 Tokyo Olympics, which marked Japan's reemergence after WWII, showcasing its recovery and modernization, thus marking a turning point in China's modernization. Ultimately, Wasserstrom argues that the 2008 Olympics represented China's attempt to present itself anew to the world. The event was an opportunity for China to reposition itself as a major global player with a distinct identity and values. The Olympics provided China with a platform to challenge prevailing narratives about the country around the world, offering instead a more nuanced portrayal of Chinese society and culture.

While the 2008 Beijing Olympics served as a platform for China to project its rising global status, the event also displayed contradictions between the image China sought to present and its reality, particularly regarding air pollution. Despite favorable weather and pollution control measures, Beijing's air quality remained dangerously poor throughout the games, especially for its athletes. Research conducted by scientists from Oregon State University and Peking University, funded by both the U.S. and Chinese National Science Foundations, found that coarse particulate matter levels exceeded World Health Organization safety standards by 81%. The pollution levels identified in this study were significantly higher than those reported by Chinese officials—a discrepancy attributed to differing measurement methods, reports say.³⁶ This difference in findings raises questions about the accuracy and consistency of data reporting, especially given the high profile of the Olympic Games. While the government's pollution control efforts were in place, the persistence of severe pollution suggests that even with these measures, Beijing faced significant challenges in improving air quality. This situation emphasizes the complexities of managing health issues in a rapidly industrializing city while hosting a global event with far-reaching visibility.

³⁶ Oregon State University. "Athletes, Spectators Faced Unprecedented Air Pollution at 2008 Olympic Games." Accessed May 2, 2025.
<https://news.oregonstate.edu/news/athletes-spectators-faced-unprecedented-air-pollution-2008-olympic-games>.

According to the International Campaign for Tibet, the Chinese government has also committed some of its most serious human rights violations in Tibet, beginning in 2008, among other similar abuses occurring in other regions. The report emphasizes the Chinese government's failure to fulfill promises made during the 2008 Beijing Olympics bidding process, when PRC Olympic bid chief Wang Wei claimed the Games would improve education, health, and human rights, and pledged full press freedom for foreign media. In reality, as the Olympics approached, Human Rights Watch and other organizations noted a rise in repressive policies, particularly targeting Tibetan culture and religion. This repression became especially visible during the March 2008 Tibetan Uprising, when peaceful protests calling for the return of the Dalai Lama were met with violent crackdowns, lethal force, and a media blackout. More than 600 Tibetan political prisoners were documented, though the true number is likely much higher. Writers and intellectuals like Gartse Jigme were arrested and imprisoned for peacefully expressing their beliefs.³⁷

In the years following the uprising, Chinese authorities escalated their efforts to silence dissent and assimilate Tibetan culture, most notably through aggressive language policies. Mandarin was imposed as the dominant language in 95% of Tibetan schools, and Tibetan was relegated to the status of a foreign language. Private schools teaching in Tibetan were shut down or forced to switch to Mandarin. The case of Tashi Wangchuk illustrates the government's hostility to even mild language advocacy: after seeking a way for his nieces to study Tibetan, and speaking to *The New York Times* about the issue, he was arrested, tortured, and sentenced to five years in prison. Though released in 2021, the broader denial of Tibetan language rights continues unabated.³⁸

³⁷ International Campaign for Tibet. "Olympic Descent: Repression in Tibet Since Beijing 2008." Accessed May 2, 2025. <https://savetibet.org/olympics2022/>

³⁸ Ibid.



Figure 3.: Tibetan monks detained by Chinese authorities during the 2008 Tibetan uprising.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics stand as a symbolic inflection point in China's modern history, an event where ambition and image converged. It was not only a celebration of athletic excellence, but a staged narrative of national renewal. Although the games drew criticism and controversy, they also showed just how central China had become in global conversations.

The Global Financial Crisis (2008)

A month after the Beijing Olympics, the global financial crisis of 2008 became topical. This global financial crisis culminated in events beginning in early 2007. The initial signs of distress of the global economic crisis emerged when subprime lenders, specializing in loans to individuals with poor credit, started filing for bankruptcy.³⁹ The 2008 financial crisis was an “epic financial and economic collapse that cost many ordinary people their jobs, their life savings, their homes, or all three.”⁴⁰ However, China was resilient, ranking #1 as the least affected country among the top 10

³⁹ Manoj Singh, “The 2008 Financial Crisis Explained,” *Investopedia*, last modified August 25, 2024, <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/economics/09/financial-crisis-review.asp>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

from September 2008 to May 2009.⁴¹ This resilience not only preserved China's economy but also enhanced its reputation as a stable economic power.

China's increasing integration into the global economy had posed challenges, including its dependence on exports, uncertainty in housing prices, and the potential rise of protectionist policies.⁴² China's reliance on trade renders it vulnerable to fluctuations in global demand.

To address these challenges, policymakers identified policy responses in a detailed report, focusing on construction, real estate, exchange rates, regulatory reform, management of financial reserves, and market-oriented development. They also anticipated contention over the purpose and objectives of these systems. China's strong banking system, substantial foreign reserves, and peripheral position in the crisis provide a stable foundation for its economy.

While China's growth rate did decline with the onset of the crisis, the contraction was less severe compared to other major economies. A closer examination of China's quarterly growth rates in 2008 reveals a gradual slowdown, from 10.6% in the first quarter to 6.8% in the fourth quarter. However, the growth rate plummeted to 6.1% in the first quarter of 2009.⁴³ In contrast to the United States, growth rates were 1.6% in the first quarter of 2008 and -8.5% in the fourth. By 2009, the US growth had declined further in the first quarter at -0.7%.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Uri Dadush, Lauren Falcao, and Shimelse Ali, "The Unequal Impact of the Economic Crisis," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 9, 2009,

<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2009/07/the-unequal-impact-of-the-economic-crisis?lang=en>.

⁴² John Whalley et al., *China and the Financial Crisis* (Waterloo, ON: Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2009), PDF, accessed April 15, 2025, https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/task_force_2.pdf.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Vitaliy Novik, "The Countries Most and Least Affected by the 2008 Financial Crisis," *Big Economics*. Accessed May 2, 2025. <https://bigeconomics.org/the-countries-most-and-least-affected-by-the-2008-financial-crisis>; Kimberly Amadeo, "2008 GDP, Growth, and Updates by Quarter," *The Balance*. Accessed May 7, 2005. <https://www.thebalancemoney.com/2008-gdp-growth-updates-by-quarter-3305542>.

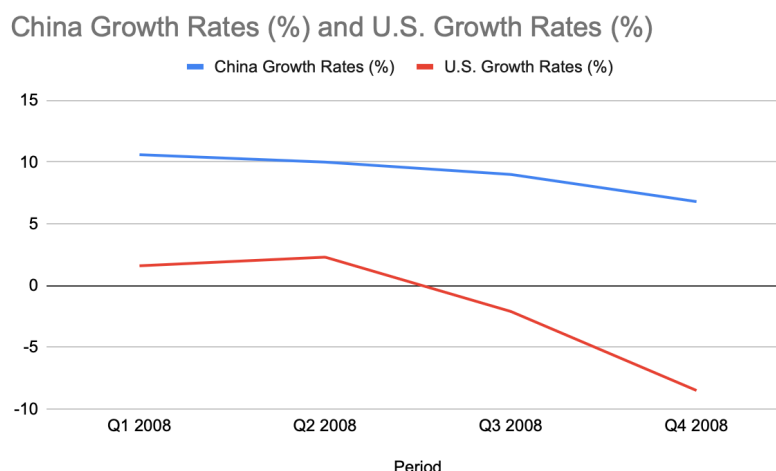


Figure 4.: *China Growth Rates Compared to the U.S. Growth Rates (2008)*

Specifically, the global financial crisis impacted China's trade sector, especially in manufacturing, with exports plummeting by 17.5% in January 2009 and 25.7% in February 2009 compared to previous years. This marked the worst export performance in a decade, with only a partial recovery in March and April, followed by a 27% year-on-year decline in May.

China's response to the crisis is exemplified by its comprehensive stimulus package, announced on November 5, 2008, which targeted offsetting the effects of the global economic slowdown. China was "shocked by the speed and depth of the economic downturn in 2008," which prompted the government to respond "vigorously with a very large stimulus package."⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Barry Naughton, "Understanding the Chinese Stimulus Package," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 28 (Spring 2009). PDF, accessed April 15, 2025. <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/CLM28BN.pdf>.

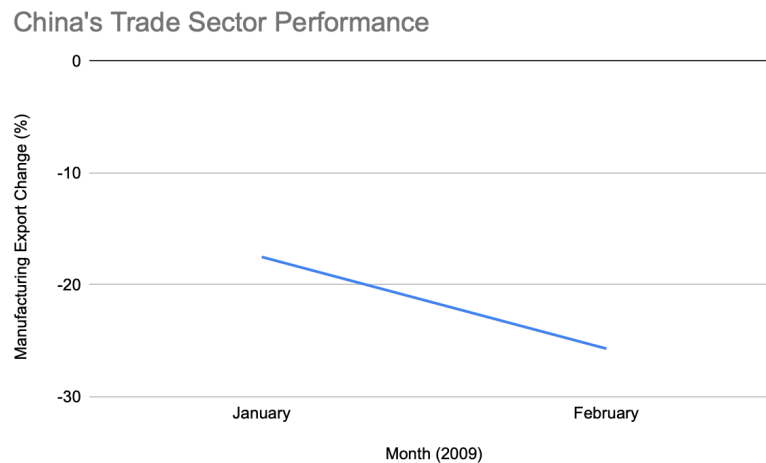


Figure 5.: China's Trade Sector Performance in 2009

The Chinese government provided stimulus and implemented relaxed credit policies to boost bank lending by over 27% in the first quarter of 2009, amid fears that rising unemployment could generate social unrest.⁴⁶ As a result, unemployment increased by only 4%.

To examine the stimulus program, it is essential to understand how its components influenced the country's economic trajectory. China's stimulus program can be dissected into three components: an investment plan, a set of funding mechanisms, and a series of industrial policies, described to "make up a large, activist intervention in the Chinese economy that will shape the trajectory of Chinese development for a decade or more."⁴⁷

The investment plan represented an augmentation of existing investments, while the funding mechanisms unleashed a flood of funding, primarily through the banking system. The industrial policies, meanwhile, comprised a range of investment and restructuring initiatives aimed at addressing the economic crisis and achieving long-standing objectives.

The Chinese stimulus effort was formally initiated following a State Council meeting that approved a 4 trillion RMB investment plan, equivalent to 12.5% of China's 2008 GDP. This

⁴⁶ Whalley et al., *China and the Financial Crisis*.

⁴⁷ Naughton, "Understanding the Chinese Stimulus Package."

substantial investment was slated for disbursement over 27 months, from the fourth quarter of 2008 to the end of 2010. While international press reports translated this amount to approximately \$586 billion USD, the central government committed to directly funding only 1.18 trillion RMB, accounting for roughly 30% of the overall program. The government then allocated block grants to provinces, rather than approving individual projects. This two-round process, completed by late February, resulted in a total allocation of 230 billion RMB (100 billion in the first round and 130 billion in the second round) to fund provincial projects.

The Chinese government's stimulus package proved effective in mitigating the impacts of the global financial crisis for several reasons. First, by investing in local projects, the government reduced China's reliance on exports and cushioned the economy from the sharp decline in international trade precipitated by the crisis.

Second, creating new job opportunities through investment in local projects helped absorb some of the labor market shock caused by the crisis, playing a crucial role in preventing a sharp decline in economic activity in China. The stimulus package thus enabled China to maintain a relatively high economic growth rate, significantly outpacing the growth rates of many other countries experiencing recessions or slow growth.

During the 2008 financial crisis, the government's series of aggressive and bold economic stimulus initiatives yielded tangible results. In doing so, the government assumed the potential risks of inflation and asset price bubbles in pursuit of its growth objectives. This "grow now, worry later" strategy, while prioritizing short-term economic expansion over long-term stability and sustainability, eventually helped mitigate the effects of the global financial crisis of 2008.

The Chinese government also decreed that news media should stay upbeat during this time to avoid panic and contribute to consumer confidence. This was part of a broader effort to

maintain social stability and promote economic recovery, as the government recognized the importance of public perception in shaping market sentiment.

China's response to the global financial crisis marked a significant turning point in its rise as a global power. The government's decisive action, including the implementation of a massive stimulus package, demonstrated its economic resilience and ability to navigate complex challenges. This reinforced perceptions of China as a stable and reliable economic partner, enhancing its global influence and attractiveness to foreign investors. As a result, China's global stature grew, setting the stage for its increasingly prominent role.

Military Modernization (2000s- present)

China's experiences have also contributed to its drive for military modernization. The country's past with Western powers and Japan in particular display a legacy of vulnerability for China, as evident in the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, where China attempted to intimidate Taiwan. China was thwarted by the US deployment of two carrier battle groups.⁴⁸ This event underscored the limitations of China's ability to deter external intervention, a gap that continues to shape its strategic emphasis on anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities.

Since then, China's subsequent economic rise, especially given its accession to the WTO, has allowed it to entrench itself at the center of many of the world's critical supply

⁴⁸ The Military Show. "How Has China Built Up Its Military So Fast (But Is It Any Good)." *YouTube*, 21:08. Posted February 8, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOezAO9yj6o>.

chains.⁴⁹ By becoming a vital link in these supply chains, China has become indispensable to many worldwide, which rely on it for components, manufacturing, or assembly of their products. As the world's largest trading and manufacturing nation, China has been able to allocate funds to develop its military capabilities.

China's military expenditure in particular has experienced rapid growth over the past two decades. Between 2000 and 2016, China's military budget increased at an average annual rate of 10%. Although the growth rate has slowed since then, the military budget has continued to rise by 5-7% per year. In 1995, at the beginning of the 3rd Taiwan Strait Crisis, China's military expenditure was relatively modest, ranking outside the top 10 global spenders. However, just a year after joining the WTO, China's military spending had surged to approximately \$30 billion in 2002, albeit still 10x lower than the United States' expenditure. Eighteen years later, however, by 2020, China's military spending had risen to around \$260 billion, an increase of over 750%, narrowing the gap with the US to a 3:1 ratio. However, some analysts have questioned the accuracy of China's reported military expenditure.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, this rapid expansion has allowed China to invest heavily in capabilities aligned with its strategic goals of regional dominance and deterrence. China's strategic advantage lies in its ability to concentrate its military spending specifically within the Indo-Pacific region.

According to US Major General Cameron Holt, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition, China's acquisition of advanced weaponry is proceeding at a pace "five to six times faster" than that of the United States, and this military buildup accelerated when Xi Jinping, the current president of China, took power in 2012. The acceleration of China's military buildup can be attributed to Xi's blend of personal and professional interests in military affairs. Unlike his predecessors, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, Xi Jinping holds the title of Commander-in-Chief of the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Joint Operations Command Center, granting him command at both levels. This distinction underscores Xi's hands-on approach to military affairs, which is further reinforced by his strong familial ties to the People's Liberation Army. Xi's father, Xi Zhongxun, was a military leader during World War II and the Civil War, while Xi's wife, Peng Liyuan, held a rank equivalent to major general as a civilian member of the People's Liberation Army.

Expansions in aircraft capabilities have marked China's military modernization, too. In 1998, China purchased the sister ship of Russia's Admiral Kuznetsov. After a prolonged process, the ship was commissioned as the Liaoning in 2012. This was followed by the launch of the Shandong, its first domestically produced carrier based on the Liaoning, in 2019.⁵¹ These carriers extend China's ability to project power beyond its immediate coastline, indicating a shift toward blue-water naval operations. Recognizing the limitations of these earlier carriers, however, China launched the Fujian in 2022, which utilizes a catapult system similar to those employed by the US. Currently, China is constructing the Type 004, which will be nuclear-powered, granting it enhanced capabilities.⁵² Together, these developments support China's broader goal of global power projection and securing maritime interests far from its shores.

In terms of China's submarine force, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) currently operates a fleet of 72 submarines, with 15 being nuclear-powered. The remaining are diesel-electric submarines with limited range and diving capabilities, and more detectable. To address these shortcomings, China is developing two new types of submarines: the Type 095 nuclear-powered cruise missile submarine and the Type 096 ballistic missile submarine. These vessels are expected to be quieter, thanks to advanced technology acquired from Russia.⁵³ The development of these

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

submarines plays a critical role in China's A2/AD strategy and enhances its second-strike nuclear capability.

In addition to its aircraft and submarine modernization efforts, China is also upgrading its air force. In 2000, the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) relied on obsolete second-generation jet fighters. These have been replaced by more advanced fourth-generation fighters, such as the Chengdu J-10 and Shenyang J-16, as well as the fifth-generation Chengdu J-20. Production rates for the J-16 and J-20 have doubled between 2020 and 2023, and at current rates, China could potentially field up to 1,000 J-20 planes by 2030, equipped with engines capable of supersonic flight.⁵⁴ These airpower advances support regional air superiority and serve as a deterrent against technologically advanced adversaries.

China has also made significant strides in modernizing its missile forces. The country now boasts over 1,000 ballistic and cruise missiles and has been testing hypersonic weapons. According to Mike Griffin, former Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering, China conducted more hypersonic weapons tests than the US over the preceding decade. In 2022, China conducted more ballistic missile tests than all other countries combined. Furthermore, between 2020 and 2022, China doubled its nuclear arsenal from approximately 200 to 400 warheads, underscoring its commitment to enhancing its military capabilities.⁵⁵

China's military buildup extends beyond its equipment advancements, significantly focusing on personnel development. China has implemented incentives to attract top talent, including a 40% increase in military salaries in 2023. Additionally, the Chinese government offers job security and preferential treatment to veterans, with many state-owned enterprises prioritizing hiring those with military experience. As a result, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has an impressive two million personnel, comprising the world's largest standing army. China's president has also emphasized the

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

importance of combat-ready training, prioritizing partnerships with Russia and other nations to enhance the PLA's military preparedness.⁵⁶ These reforms aim to build a modern, professional force capable of sustained, high-tempo joint operations—essential for fulfilling China's strategic ambitions.

Despite these efforts, the PLA has also faced significant challenges. Only 35% of soldiers who completed their service opted to stay, highlighting concerns regarding retention.⁵⁷ Furthermore, investigations into corruption within the PLA have led to the investigation of thousands of officers, including 82 generals, with 21 ultimately removed from their positions. In response, President Xi Jinping launched an anti-corruption drive in 2018 to ensure the integrity of training data and promote transparency within the PLA.⁵⁸ These internal reforms are seen as necessary to ensure the credibility and effectiveness of China's modern military apparatus.

China's military has come a long way, especially given that the PLA previously relied on Russian technology and lacked the knowledge to make modern weaponry. As China continues to advance its military modernization, it is essential for policymakers and scholars to understand the complexities and implications of this trend and to develop strategies for navigating the resulting shifts in the global landscape. Taken together, China's modernization efforts reflect a comprehensive strategy aimed at deterring foreign interference, asserting regional control, and gradually expanding its global military reach. China's military modernization has significantly expanded its global footprint, allowing China to challenge existing security arrangements and prompt a reevaluation of alliances and partnerships worldwide.

China's Technological Advancements (2010-present)

Over the past four decades, while military might has been a visible pillar of China's rise, its

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

resurgence has also been propelled by China's efforts to dominate the technologies of the future. This transformation has been anything but incidental; it reflects a state-coordinated strategy to secure self-reliance and project global influence. For example, this technological leap is evident in its status as the world's largest electricity producer—surpassing the United States by at least 70% in 2019, underscoring the vast energy base supporting its digital ecosystem.⁵⁹ From artificial intelligence and mobile apps to electric vehicles and renewable energy, China's approach to tech advancement is systematic and future-focused.

One of the clearest drivers of China's technological rise is long-term state planning. The *Made in China 2025* initiative, launched in 2015, was a pivotal strategy aimed at transforming China from a low-cost manufacturing hub into a high-tech industrial powerhouse. According to research conducted by the U.S. Congress, China allocated approximately \$1.5 trillion for research, development, and the strategic acquisition of foreign tech firms. By 2020, over \$627 billion had already been invested in pursuit of these goals. This planning has yielded visible results, as Chinese firms have taken the lead in key areas such as artificial intelligence and 5G. For instance, Huawei became a global leader in 5G equipment by 2019, maintaining a significant market share in mobile phones. Even under intense pressure from U.S. sanctions due to concerns over espionage, Huawei and other companies continued to innovate, accelerating domestic microchip development and prompting a broader push for technological self-sufficiency.

While DeepSeek is often cited as a symbol of China's growing AI capabilities, it has also become a subject of controversy due to concerns over user privacy and national security. In an interview with *ABC News*, cybersecurity expert Ivan Tsarynny of Feroot Security suggested that the app's code might allow for the collection of user data and its potential transmission to China Mobile,

⁵⁹ Tarun Chhabra et al., *Global China: Technology* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, April 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/global-china-technology/>.

a telecommunications company owned by the Chinese government. Although this claim has not been verified, it has intensified fears that Chinese-developed technologies could serve as tools for surveillance.⁶⁰

The controversy surrounding DeepSeek is not limited to Canada, where Feroot Security is located, and the United States, where Tsarynny's concerns were amplified by coverage from American News outlet *ABC News*. Countries including India, South Korea, and Australia have all taken steps to limit the use of DeepSeek. According to *The Economic Times*, the app has been reported to collect extensive personal information, including email addresses, phone numbers, chat history, device details, and even behavioral patterns and keystrokes. In India, the government has expressed concerns about the app's ability to track a wide range of user data without clear guidelines on how that data is used or stored. The country's cybersecurity agency, CERT-In, has launched an assessment of DeepSeek, while the Ministry of Finance has directed its officers to stop using DeepSeek altogether. South Korea's Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy imposed a temporary ban on the app for government employees, and the Australian government issued a formal directive mandating that DeepSeek be blocked across all government devices. These measures reflect a growing global skepticism toward Chinese digital platforms, especially those perceived to operate under governance practices.⁶¹

Aside from DeepSeek, in early January 2025, the US banned TikTok after the Supreme Court upheld legislation that had been passed over concerns related to national security.⁶² The Court's decision marked a culmination of months of debate over the app's potential risks,

⁶⁰ ABC News, "New Privacy Warning Issued About Chinese AI Company DeepSeek," *YouTube*, 3:27, February 5, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aq5LvOJ08l8>.

⁶¹ "Use DeepSeek with Caution: What Has Triggered Global Concerns About the Chinese Rival to ChatGBT?" *The Economic Times*, February 2025. Accessed May 2, 2025. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/global-trends/use-deepseek-with-caution-what-has-triggered-global-concerns-about-the-chinese-rival-to-chatgpt/articleshow/118134085.cms?from=mdr>.

⁶² Aaron Pellish and Brian Stelter, "TikTok Ban: App Shuts Down in the United States Hours Ahead of a Ban." Accessed May 2, 2025. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/01/18/business/trump-tiktok-ban>.

particularly the concern that TikTok could be used not only to collect personal data on American citizens, but also to influence public opinion by amplifying or suppressing specific types of content. Republican Senator Josh Hawley of Missouri stated, “If the Chinese government gets its hands on that information, it's not just a national security threat, it's a personal security threat.” During arguments before the Supreme Court on January 10, TikTok’s legal team did not explicitly deny the possibility of national security risks, further fueling concerns that the platform could function as a tool for surveillance or soft-power influence within the US.⁶³

Sorry, TikTok isn't available right now

A law banning TikTok has been enacted in the U.S. Unfortunately, that means you can't use TikTok for now.

We are fortunate that President Trump has indicated that he will work with us on a solution to reinstate TikTok once he takes office. Please stay tuned!

In the meantime, you can still [log in](#) to download your data.

Figure 6.: The message on TikTok following its ban in the United States.

While concerns over surveillance and data confidentiality continue to shape international reactions to Chinese technology, these controversies have not slowed the country’s broader momentum in technological competitiveness. The government also created a regulatory environment conducive to digital finance. By enabling mobile platforms to compete with traditional banks, China facilitated the explosive growth of digital payment systems like WeChat Pay and Alipay, transitioning towards a system centered on mobile phones. This shift has diminished the role of traditional banks, as digital payment systems like WeChat Pay and Alipay have become the primary modes of transaction. In 2018, WeChat Pay was processing 1.2 billion daily transactions, far surpassing Apple Pay’s monthly volume, and by 2019, China’s mobile app-based expenditure reached a staggering 347

⁶³ Caitlin Yilek, “Why is TikTok Banned? What’s Behind the Law that Shuttered the App?” Accessed May 2, 2025. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/why-is-tiktok-being-banned-supreme-court-congress/>.

trillion yuan (approximately \$54 trillion), more than 500 times that of the U.S, which stood at \$98 billion.

China's dominance in electric vehicles (EV) also reflects this drive for next-generation technologies. With control over the global battery supply chain and a rapidly growing EV market, China has secured its position as a leader in this sector. More broadly, the country is expected to supply 80–95% of the global solar panel supply chain by 2028 and produce nearly 60% of the world's renewable energy.

China's technological modernization is not confined within its borders. Chinese-made platforms, aside from DeepSeek and TikTok, such as CapCut, Shein, and Temu have achieved dominant positions in international markets. These companies exemplify China's capacity to not only innovate at home but to export technologies that influence consumer behavior and media trends worldwide.⁶⁴ Similarly, China's leadership in drones, with three of the top ten global drone companies, and its rise in academic output in quantum research further reflect its global ambitions. China now produces more quantum science papers than any other country. These developments demonstrate that China's rise in tech is not merely about catching up—it is about setting the standards and shaping the rules of tomorrow's digital order.

China's technological modernization is a defining feature of its growing global footprint. Fueled by state planning and a relentless push for self-reliance, China has transformed into a global technology leader. Its influence now spans from AI and EVs to mobile payments and renewable energy—sectors that will define the global economy in decades to come. As it continues to shape both domestic life and international norms through its technologies, China's modernization reveals itself as a multidimensional project with far-reaching global implications.

⁶⁴ BBC World Service, "DeepSeek, TikTok, Temu: How China is Taking the Lead in Tech," *YouTube*, 7:06, Feb 6, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7do1hbb6fE>

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (2013-present)

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the latest addition to China's expanding global footprint. China's BRI is an ambitious project, touching three continents and over 60% of the world's population. It is designed to reroute global trade and reconnect the world with China.⁶⁵ The BRI is sometimes called the new Silk Road. With an estimated few trillion in investment, the BRI consists of two components: the Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road. The Economic Belt focuses on establishing new routes to facilitate trade in and out of China. The Maritime Silk Road involves the development of seaports from the South China Sea to Africa, directing trade to and from China. The BRI encompasses many infrastructure development projects, including oil refineries, industrial parks, power plants, mines, and fiber-optic networks.⁶⁶

Over 60 countries have reportedly already signed agreements to participate in the initiative, including Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, and Laos, and it is likely to attract more participants.⁶⁷ The project has yielded significant benefits for Pakistan. For instance, constructing a new port in the small fishing town of Gwadar has transformed the town into a \$62 billion corridor, boosting Pakistan's GDP growth and providing China with a new alternative route for goods, especially oil and gas from the Middle East. Pakistan saw its highest GDP growth in 8 years.⁶⁸

The BRI is driven by three primary motivations. First, and most discussed, is China's competition with the United States. A significant portion of China's international trade passes through the Malacca Strait near Singapore, a key US ally. As a result, the initiative plays a crucial role in China's strategy to secure alternative trade routes. The second motivation stems from the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. In response to the crisis, China's government launched a

⁶⁵ Vox, "China's Trillion Dollar Plan to Dominate Global Trade," *YouTube*, 5:58, Apr 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvXROXiIpvQ>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

massive global stimulus package funding the construction of railways, bridges, and airports, but this led to oversaturation of the domestic market. The BRI offers Chinese SOEs an opportunity to expand beyond China. Lastly, the BRI is central to China's efforts to boost the economies of its central provinces, which have lagged behind the wealthier coastal regions. The government leverages the initiative to stimulate business in these inland areas by providing substantial funding and encouraging local businesses to compete for BRI-related contracts.⁶⁹

The BRI further benefits China, as Chinese construction companies experienced a huge boost from BRI contracts. As a result, three of the ten biggest construction firms in the world are Chinese as of 2025.⁷⁰ The fact that three of the ten largest construction firms in the world are now Chinese indicates China's significant global dominance in the construction industry. The BRI benefits China as it is linked to China's strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean, with some analysts positing that China is seeking to establish a "string of pearls" – a series of naval bases and ports that will enable China to project its military power and safeguard its trade routes.⁷¹

The initiative is widely viewed with skepticism by the United States and its key allies, often portrayed as a form of debt-trap diplomacy—predatory, lacking transparency, and posing a challenge to Western strategic and economic interests.⁷² Critics argue that China's more flexible approach to ethical standards has allowed the BRI to gain traction in less-democratic countries.⁷³ Unlike the US, which imposes strict conditions on foreign investments, China has been willing to provide loans to countries with questionable creditworthiness. This has led to concerns about debt sustainability and the potential for China to acquire assets in the event of default. The case of Sri Lanka, which could

⁶⁹ Yu Jie and Jon Wallace, "What is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?," *Chatham House*.

⁷⁰ DATAVERSE "The 10 Biggest Construction Companies in the World," Accessed May 2, 2025. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/10-biggest-construction-companies-world-2025-update-dtvrs-pfdlf/>

⁷¹ Vox, "China's Trillion Dollar Plan to Dominate Global Trade," *YouTube*, 5:59, April 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvXROXiIpvQ>.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

not repay a \$1.5 billion loan from China and was forced to cede control of a key port to China for 99 years, has raised alarms about China's intentions and the potential risks associated with participating in the BRI.

The Belt and Road Initiative is a testament to China's influence worldwide. By investing in infrastructure across multiple continents, China is expanding its economic opportunities and reshaping global trade patterns and supply chains. This initiative has enabled China to strengthen its relationships with participating countries, fostering greater economic interdependence and cooperation. As a result, China's global footprint is becoming increasingly prominent, with the country's financial and diplomatic influence extending into new regions and markets.

The implications of China's expanding global footprint as a result of the Belt and Road are far-reaching and multifaceted. China's rising prominence may also lead to shifts in global economic patterns, as the country's growing middle class and increasing consumer demand drive changes in international trade and investment flows. China's expanding global footprint, primarily through the BRI, may also have significant cultural and social implications, as the country's values, ideas, and beliefs become more widely disseminated and influential worldwide.

Implications, Challenges, Criticisms, and Nuances

China's economy has grown faster than that of any other major country, surpassing the growth rates of other major economies like the US and the EU.⁷⁴ In the last 40 years, China's GDP grew from around \$150 billion to over \$12 trillion.⁷⁵ This expansion has lifted 700 million people out of poverty.⁷⁶ Today, China accounts for just under 18% of global GDP, with a growing middle class.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Zak Dychtwald, "China's New Innovation Advantage," *Harvard Business Review*, May–June 2021, <https://hbr.org/2021/05/chinas-new-innovation-advantage>.

⁷⁷ Uri Dadush, Lauren Falcão, and Shimelse Ali. "The Unequal Impact of the Economic Crisis." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 9, 2009. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2009/07/09/unequal-impact-of-economic-crisis-pub-23385>.

Yet, the country's development has come with trade-offs, including human rights concerns, religious suppression, and other growing social inequalities.

Looking ahead, China faces significant demographic and structural challenges. The aging population, as its Baby Boomer generation is being replaced by Millennials and Gen Z individuals born under the country's one-child policy,⁷⁸ is creating a shrinking labor force. According to projections from the National Bureau of Statistics, China's working-age population is expected to decline by 81 million between 2015 and 2030, with an average annual decline of 7.6 million thereafter. This change necessitates a strategic shift towards innovation, as China will need to find ways to compensate for lost productivity.⁷⁹

China's economic model of mixed socialism and capitalism economy remains a powerful but complex force. Whether this model proves adaptable in the face of mounting internal and external pressures will be central to the next phase of China's story. China's rise poses challenges and opportunities for the US and other major powers, as its global footprint is driven by a strategic blend of economic expansion, technological innovation, political influence, and military modernization, each serving the ambition to reshape global power structures. As China's influence extends, it is vital to comprehend the dynamics driving its modernization. Potential future scenarios range from a smooth transition to a high-tech, innovation-driven economy, to economic stagnation if demographic and political constraints are not effectively managed. As the world watches China's next moves, one thing is clear: the country's trajectory will have sweeping implications for global trade, governance, and the future of economic development.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Conclusions

China's demographic is a key factor driving the global ascendance of China's advantages. China boasts a population that has experienced unprecedented transformative change—war, famine, revolution, state reform, global reintegration, and technological upheaval—all within the span of a few generations, thus fostering capacities for adapting at an unmatched speed and scale. In other words, China has fostered psychological resilience that translates into a unique capacity to absorb disruption, embrace innovation, and pursue long-term goals with endurance. Unlike populations in more static societies, China's people have internalized change as a norm, not an exception—making them uniquely equipped to navigate and thrive in a rapidly shifting global economy. This adaptive mindset, forged through hardship and transformation, confers a competitive edge in productivity and the global marketplace.

As China continues to leverage its demographic advantage, technological innovations, and strategic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, it is poised to shape the contours of the 21st-century global landscape. The country's remarkable progress in recent decades, marked by milestones such as WTO membership, the Beijing Olympics, and a burgeoning space program, has demonstrated its rapid transformation and growth capacity. While ongoing projects like military modernization and global economic fluctuations will continue to influence China's trajectory, its commitment to innovation, infrastructure development, and strategic cooperation positions it for sustained success in an increasingly interconnected world. Ultimately, China's remarkable ascendance reflects its unwavering pursuit of greatness.

Timeline

- **1912:** China is fractured into numerous competing states.
- **1932 - 1937:** The Imperial Japanese Army invades China, leading to the broader conflict of World War II.
- **1949:** The People's Republic of China is established under Communist Party leadership.
- **1977:** Deng Xiaoping emerges as China's leader.
- **1978:** China officially begins opening its economy to the world.
- **1989:** Pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square are met with a violent crackdown from the Chinese government.
- **1997:** Hong Kong is handed over from British to Chinese control.
- **2001:** China joins the World Trade Organization (WTO). During the early 2000s, it also began major military development.
- **2003:** China successfully launches its first astronaut, Yang Liwei, into space.
- **2008:** Beijing hosts the Olympics. The same year, Tibetan protests are brutally suppressed by the Chinese government, and the global financial crisis hits.
- **2010:** China starts investing heavily in technological development.
- **2013:** The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is launched.

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