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The evolving politics of the Common Core

By Ashley Jochim and Lesley Lavery

INTRODUCTION¹

In 2009, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers launched an effort to develop common standards in English and mathematics to ensure that “all students, regardless of where they live, are graduating high-school prepared for college, career, and life.”² By 2011, one year after the standards had officially been released, 45 states plus the District of Columbia had adopted the standards. With the support of policymakers on both sides of the political aisle and many prominent advocacy organizations, the Common Core had an air of inevitability that few reforms can tout in the contemporary political environment.

By 2015, just as most states were poised to fully implement the standards, the policy that began with such broad support and so little controversy appears under siege. Five states have rescinded the standards, and dozens more have introduced legislation to reconsider, delay, or limit participation. What can account for the rapid shift in perceptions of and reactions to this policy?

To understand shifting support for Common Core, we consider the political dynamics that have unfolded in state legislatures over the last four years of implementation. Our analysis reveals that opposition to the standards shifted considerably over time, engaging Republicans early on but expanding to include Democratic policymakers and their allies as implementation proceeded. A range of issues that were largely ignored when the initiative was adopted, including concerns over

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¹ This paper is based on a forthcoming article. See Ashley Jochim and Lesley Lavery, forthcoming in 2015, “The Evolving Politics of the Common Core: Implementation and Conflict Expansion,” *Publius: A Journal of Federalism*.

² See Common Core State Standards Initiative (2015). Available at: <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/development-process/>

costs, teacher evaluation, accountability, and student privacy were brought to the fore as the policy had to be reconciled with existing systems and institutions. Our analysis reveals the centrality of implementation to understanding how political conflict evolves over time and suggests the use of politically insulated bodies for adopting policies is at best a temporary solution for avoiding conflicts that are bound to emerge during the implementation stage.

In the next section we trace the movement toward common standards, noting the link between the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) and other federal education reform initiatives. We then begin to trace the evolution of conflict, first focusing on partisan explanations and then adding nuance to popular accounts by exploring the issues tied to resistance. We close with a discussion of lessons for education reformers.

THE SEEDS OF DEBATE: FROM NATIONAL TO COMMON STANDARDS

In the decentralized system of education governance in the United States, proposals for a unifying framework of national standards are not new. In 1989, following a national education summit that would inform federal education policy for more than a decade, George H.W. Bush made a call “to establish national performance goals.” As a result of this call, the U.S. Department of Education awarded grants to groups of professionals, teachers, and scholars

to develop more rigorous, voluntary national standards in English, economics, science, civics, history, foreign language, geography, the arts, and physical education.³ By 1994, when Lynne Cheney of the National Endowment for the Humanities launched an attack on the not-yet-released history standards, this process began to unravel. In 1995, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution nearly unanimously condemning the standards, and the call for common benchmarks was largely abandoned.

In 2000, George W. Bush was elected president and standards-based accountability once again became a national priority. Two years later, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was ushered in with bipartisan support. The act required states to set standards and assess student progress toward these objectives and as a result, opponents viewed it as a dramatic federal intrusion. However,

NCLB left the content of these standards and assessments to states’ discretion, thereby largely side-stepping the question of national standards.⁴

As recounted by Frederick Hess and Michael McShane,⁵ by the mid-2000s, unwilling to accept many states’ decisions to “lower the bar” rather than “invest the time and resources” required to improve their schools, state leaders, national education organizations, and policy entrepreneurs with deep pockets began to work toward a set of common standards to reverse a race to the bottom. However, rather than relive the trials of their predecessors, these designers narrowed their focus (only proposing standards for Mathematics and English Language Arts). They

Less than two months after the release of the standards in August 2010, 39 states had adopted them. The rapid diffusion of the standards was driven in no small part by the Obama administration’s Race to the Top competition, which all but required states to adopt the standards to be eligible for a share of the \$4.3 billion available to support education programs.

³ See Ravitch, Diane. 2010. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*. New York: Basic Books.

⁴ See p. 6 in Hess, Frederick and Michael McShane. 2013. *Common Core Meets Reform Agenda*. New York: Teachers College Press.

⁵ See Hess and McShane 2013, p. 7.

also very strategically continued the legacy of the “opt-in” strategy. That is, the designers worked together to create standards for the subjects that form the “backbone” of primary and secondary education content and lack the political charge that sometimes accompanies debates over science or social studies curricula.

The effort to de-politicize the move towards common standards was largely successful. CCSSI was launched in 2009 with an unprecedented collaboration among states, involving the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The initiative drew bipartisan support, including backing from prominent Republicans, such as former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, former Kentucky Governor Paul Patton, and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, in addition to support from key Democratic and Republican interest groups, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Federation of Teachers, and the National Education Association.

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Dozens of states have introduced legislation to delay, pause, or revoke implementation of the standards. Five of these states – Indiana, Oklahoma, Missouri, North Carolina, and South Carolina – have officially moved to replace the standards.

Initially political conflict over the standards was muted. In the vast majority of states, the standards passed through State Boards of Education, which tend to be less partisan and more insulated from electoral politics than legislative bodies.⁷ State legislatures approved the standards in only seven states.⁸

While implementation plans were still being crafted, larger political changes were afoot. The 2010 elections brought many conservative members of the Republican Party into state legislatures around the country, invigorating the debate in the Republican Party over the appropriate role for the federal government in education reform.

⁶ A 46th state, Minnesota, adopted the English language arts standards but not the mathematics standards.

⁷ In 36 states, a majority of state board members are appointed (typically, by the governor). Six states have non-partisan elections for a majority of board members while another six have partisan elections. Two states (Minnesota and Wisconsin) do not have state boards of education. See “Governance at a Glance,” 2014, *Education Week*, Accessed January 21, 2015 <http://www.edweek.org/media/wallace-statesc2.pdf>.

⁸ The standards were legislative directed, reviewed or approved in Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, Nevada, Oklahoma, and Washington. In four states, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Dakota, and Wisconsin, the Chief State Education Officer adopted the standards. In all other states, the standards went through the State Board of Education. See the National Council of State Legislatures, 2014 “Common Core Standards,” Accessed January 20, 2015: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/common-core-state-standards.aspx#2>

Utah, traditionally a GOP stronghold, and one of the most aggressive states in pushing back against No Child Left Behind requirements in the early 2000s, was one of the first states where conflict over CCSSI emerged. In a speech at a meeting of the Education Interim Committee in the Utah State Legislature, Republican Senator Howard Stephenson, co-chair of the committee, emphasized the ideological nature of the disagreement in observing, “The federal government may be trying to do good in education, but many of us believe that they have no business doing anything.”⁹

Since these early rumblings, dozens of states have introduced legislation to delay, pause, or revoke implementation of the standards. Five of these states – Indiana, Oklahoma, Missouri, North Carolina, and South Carolina – have officially moved to replace the standards. The status of another, Louisiana, remains in serious question after a yearlong battle between Governor Bobby Jindal and State Superintendent John White.

In the remainder of this paper we consider how the debate over CCSSI has evolved in state legislatures. In tracing the evolution of debate and its partisan contours, we highlight several factors that have served to fuel further controversy.

THE EVOLUTION OF CONFLICT

To systematically understand how the debate over Common Core has evolved, we rely on data collected by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). The NCSL’s data dashboard includes bill titles and summaries, sponsors, and current bill status for each piece of legislation addressing CCSSI in each state over the period of study. We use this information as a baseline to create a number of additional variables – number of sponsors, percent of sponsors belonging to the Republican party, issue focus – which allow us to examine the relationship between the ideas and interests on the losing side of the Common Core debate and concrete efforts to roll back common standards.¹⁰

Between 2011 and September 2014,¹¹ 785 CCSSI-related bills were introduced in state legislatures. We coded each bill for tone – positive or negative – where positive bills support implementation or declare legislative support while negative bills are those that aim to slow or stop implementation, review the standards, or declare legislative opposition. We identified 238 bills that were negative in tone.

To understand the motivations for legislative pushback on the standards, each negative-CCSSI bill was coded based on the inclusion of the following issues: local control, privacy, accountability, testing, parents, oversight, costs, and technology infrastructure.¹² Each bill was assigned one or more issue codes based on a review of the full text. Bills received between one and seven codes. In addition, we also tracked the number of bills that included non-specific opposition – e.g., symbolic statements against the standards.

⁹ Barker, G. 2012. “Common Core Debate Reaches Lawmakers: Utah Legislators Hear From Education Office, Opposition On Issue. *Park Record* August 21st.

¹⁰ For years 2011-2013, we draw upon data collected by Ashley Napier. Mariya Yoshovka collected 2014 data.

¹¹ The last month of available data via NCSL. Because of the 2014 elections, little additional legislation was introduced in the last three months of 2015 (Personal Communication, NCSL, 2015).

¹² We developed issue codes by reviewing a small sample of bill summaries for common themes.

COMMON CORE RISING ON THE AGENDA OF STATE LEGISLATURES

We know for certain, given five states' successful moves to block implementation, that state legislators have assumed jurisdiction of education standards. Figure 1 illustrates the scope and tone of the legislative responses to CCSS from 2011-2014. While just 45 pieces of legislation touched on the standards in the first year post-adoption, 385 did on the eve of full implementation in 2014. Though the majority of bills affirm initial support for CCSS (by addressing the design of systems and supports to faithfully implement common standards), Figure 1 also makes clear that those with a negative focus were introduced with much greater frequency in 2014 than immediately after adoption. Indeed, between 2012 and 2014, there was an eight-fold increase in the number of negative bills. More than twice as many negative bills were introduced in the first nine months of 2014 as were introduced in all of 2013.

Figure 1: Positive and negative bill introductions have grown over time

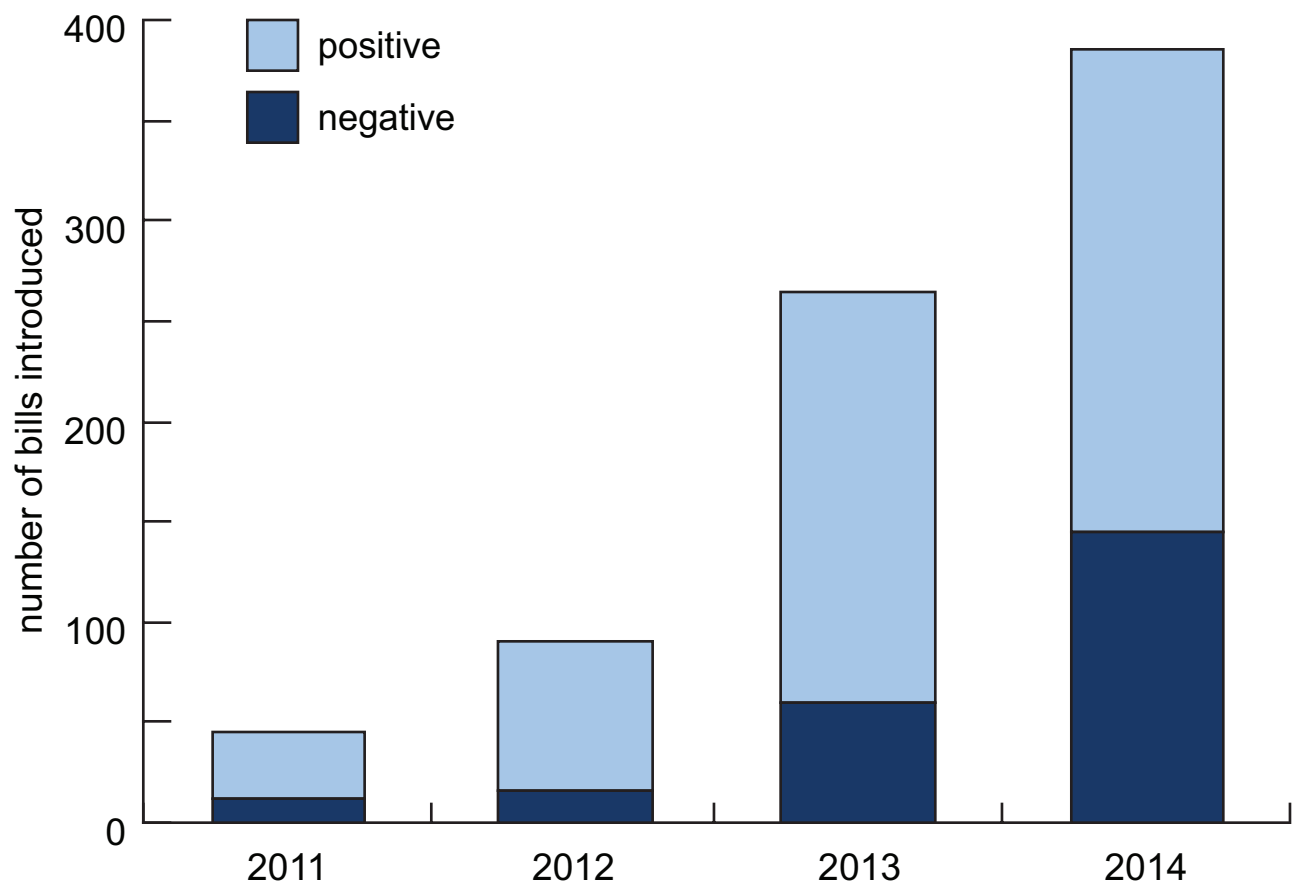
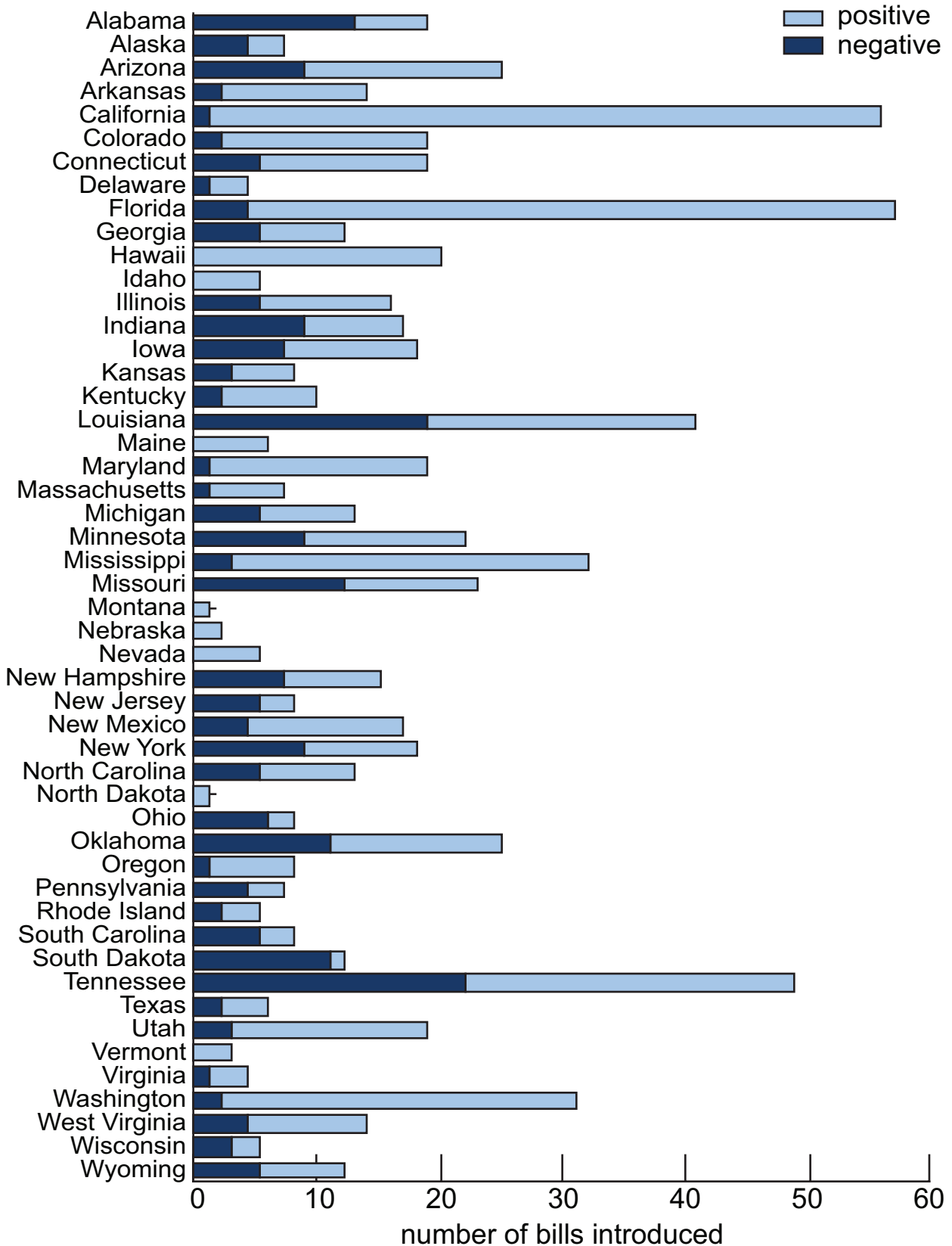


Figure 2 illustrates bill introductions by state for the entire period of study. For each state, it depicts the total number of positive and negative bills introduced. States are arrayed by the percent of the CCSS agenda that is negative, such that those states with a more negative agenda (e.g., South Dakota) are presented first.

Figure 2: Tone and intensity of bill introductions varies considerably across states (2011-2014)



Several things are evident from considering the pattern of bill introductions across states. First, the distribution of legislative attention varies considerably. A nontrivial number of states have done little on CCSSI. A fair number of states have introduced a similar number of bills and in a small number of states, members have focused a great deal of legislative effort on the initiative. Two of the four states where revocation has proceeded the farthest – Louisiana and Oklahoma – fall into the top quartile of states based on bill introductions while two others – Indiana and South Carolina – are decidedly in the middle of the pack in terms of legislative attention.

Second, Figure 2 demonstrates that there are considerable differences across states in terms of the energy behind the push to opt out, delay or review CCSSI. This energy is captured in two ways. One is the number of negative bills introduced. The number of negative bills introduced in Tennessee (22 bills) and Louisiana (19 bills) far outstrips those efforts in other states. Interestingly, neither state legislature has revoked the standards; suggesting intensity does not necessarily result in success. A second indicator of energy behind efforts to roll back common standards is the percent of the state's CCSSI agenda that is negative. In some states, negative legislation is balanced by positive legislation (in Tennessee, more than half of the legislative agenda related to CCSSI is positive) while in other states this is simply not the case (in South Dakota all but one bill is negative in nature).

Finally, a moderate positive correlation (0.50) exists between the total number of bill introductions and the extent of negative bills. That is, states with the most legislative attention devoted to Common Core are more likely to have a significant number of negative bills pending on the legislative agenda.¹³

WIDENING PARTISAN CONFLICT

Much of the early debate over Common Core was driven by conservatives concerned with the expanding role of the federal government in public education. The Obama administration fueled concern among right-leaning activists when it made eligibility for grant dollars and regulatory waivers conditional on adoption of college- and career-ready standards, a requirement most easily satisfied by adopting Common Core standards. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan further exacerbated this suspicion by publicly denouncing state legislators in South Carolina and Utah after legislatures in those states made movement on bills rescinding Common Core adoption.¹⁴ In response to increasing concern amongst their constituents, the Republican National Committee passed a resolution in 2013 suggesting the standards are an “inappropriate overreach to standardize and control the education of our children,” and reaffirming their support for states’ rights in the realm of standards and curriculum. Though the media has widely publicized this narrative, the partisan dimensions of the conflict are complicated by the fact that many establishment Republicans are supportive of the standards.

To better understand the widening conflict, we consider the partisan composition of bill co-sponsorship coalitions in state legislatures. Table 1 presents the average percent of Republican co-sponsors for all bills, positive bills and

¹³ When we model the number of negative bill introductions over time, this finding is reaffirmed. The number of bill introductions is a statistically significant predictor of negative bill introduction in a negative binomial model that controls for the partisan composition of state government, method of adoption (legislative or non-legislative), and time.

¹⁴ “The idea that the Common Core standards are nationally imposed is a conspiracy theory in search of a conspiracy. The Common Core academic standards were both developed and adopted by states and they have widespread bipartisan support. GOP leaders like Jeb Bush and Governors Mitch Daniels, Chris Christie, and Bill Haslam have supported the Common Core standards because they realize states must stop dumming down academic standards and lying about the performance of children and schools. In fact, South Carolina lowered the bar for proficiency in English and mathematics faster than any state in the country from 2005 to 2009, according to research by the National Center for Education Statistics” Duncan, Arne. “Press Release: On a Legislative Proposal in South Carolina to Block Implementation of the Common Core Academic Standards.” Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Accessed October 22, 2014: <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/statement-us-secretary-education-arne-duncan-4>

negative bills, as well as the estimated variance in Republican support (as represented by the standard deviation).¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, Republicans are more likely to be represented as co-sponsors on bills that aim to study, delay, or revoke CCSSI. On average, 85 percent of the co-sponsors on negative bills are Republicans, compared to 61 percent for all bills and 51 percent for positive bills. Interestingly, the variance in coalition composition is much higher for negative bills than it is for positive bills, suggesting greater instability in the partisan parameters of negative bills.

Table 1: Republican support for Common Core legislation varies

	Positive Bills	Negative Bills
Mean	51% (32.1)	85% (45.3)
2011	34% (41.8)	90% (22.9)
2012	49% (44.3)	98% (6.4)
2013	45% (44.2)	73% (41.8)
2014	59% (45.0)	88% (28.7)

Note: Table presents the mean percent of Republican co-sponsors for positive bills and negative bills. Standard deviation estimates are reported in parentheses and estimate the degree of variability in Republican support for positive bills, and negative bills.

Table 1 also shows the rate at which Republicans are co-sponsoring positive Common Core legislation has actually *increased* since 2011. In 2011, on a typical bill 34 percent of co-sponsors were Republicans. By 2014 that figure has risen to 59 percent. Republican co-sponsorship of negative bills was much more likely, though some instability is evident over time. In 2013, 73 percent of co-sponsors were Republican compared to 98 percent in 2012.

Considering variability in co-sponsorship behavior among Republicans reveals that positive bills are characterized by greater variability in co-sponsorship coalitions (as represented by the larger standard deviations). Interestingly, this variability has remained nearly constant on positive bills across the period of study. In contrast, co-sponsorship coalitions on negative bills reflect less variability overall (as revealed by the smaller standard deviations) but more instability over time.

Looking at the co-sponsorship coalitions within states reveals remarkable variability. In Wisconsin and Utah, both positive and negative bills are co-sponsored by Republicans; in New York and New Jersey, both positive and negative bills are largely co-sponsored by Democrats. In other states, including California and Massachusetts, negative bills are much more likely to be sponsored by Republicans.

These analyses reaffirm that the conflict over CCSSI in state legislatures has clear partisan undertones. However, the nature of this debate is more complicated than typically depicted. In some state legislatures, Republicans are much more likely to be opposed to the standards and much less likely to co-sponsor positive legislation than their Democratic counterparts. But, in some cases, Democrats are as likely as Republicans to oppose the standards.

THE DIFFUSION OF CONFLICT OVER COMMON CORE

Another way to consider the evolution of conflict over Common Core is through the lens of policy diffusion, that is by determining where conflict over the standards initiated and more closely examining the characteristics of leader states. Do conservative, Republican states lead the charge to repeal CCSSI? Table 2 portrays the year in which a state first introduced a negative-CCSSI bill (a bill that sought to delay, study, or revoke the standards). Interestingly, the first seeds of debate occurred across a politically diverse set of states: Alabama, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Washington. While some of these states are

¹⁵ Ashley Napier provided co-sponsorship data for bills introduced between 2011 and 2013, Co-sponsorship data for 2014 was collected by the authors using the OpenStates database.

led by Republican dominated legislatures and Republican governors (Alabama, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and South Dakota) others are characterized by more ideologically divided political systems (Minnesota, New Hampshire, Oregon, and Washington). By 2014, most state legislatures had at least one negative CCSSI bill pending. However, interestingly, several states led by conservative state legislatures – Montana, Nevada, and North Dakota – have managed to avoid conflict over the standards.

Table 2: Diffusion of negative Common Core legislation

Year of First Negative Bill	States
2011	Alabama, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Washington
2012	Utah, Alaska, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Missouri
2013	Florida, Kansas, Louisiana, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia
2014	Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Wisconsin, Wyoming
States With No Negative Bill Introductions	Hawaii, Idaho, Maine, Montana, Nebraska*, Nevada, North Dakota, Vermont

Notes: Table depicts the first year in which a negative bill was introduced related to CCSSI. Nebraska never adopted the standards.

To understand the extent to which partisanship shaped the propensity of states to push back against the standards, we also model the likelihood that a negative piece of legislation would be introduced based on characteristics of the state legislature using an event-history framework and a discrete time logit model.¹⁶ Even when we consider a range of factors related to the diffusion of state policies,¹⁷ the results largely confirm what was reflected in the descriptive data: partisanship is not clearly related to the introduction of negative legislation and the most significant predictor of negative bill introductions is *time*.¹⁸

ISSUES TIED TO COMMON CORE PROLIFERATE

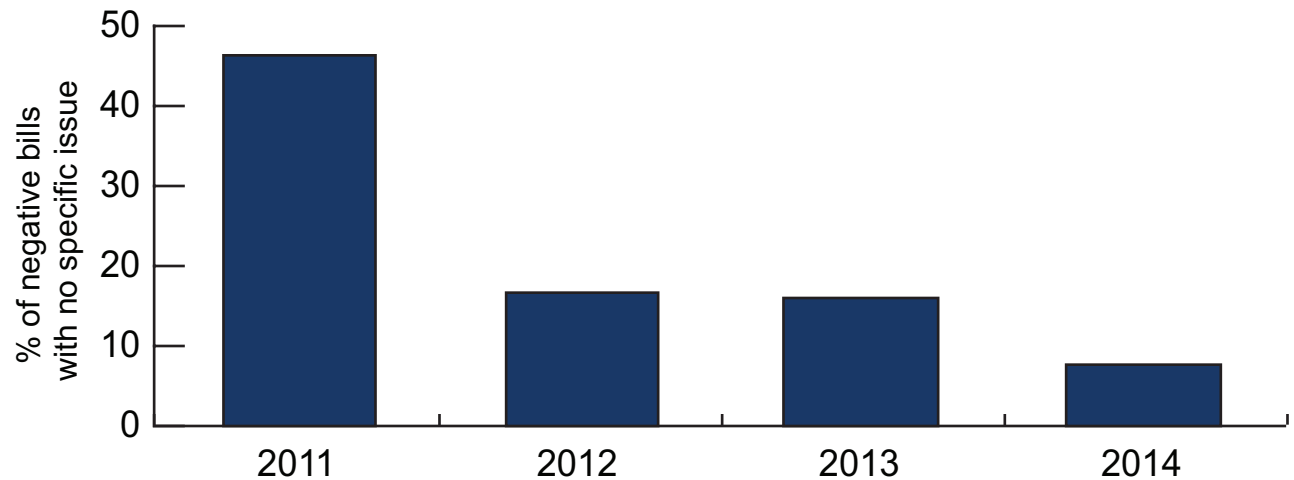
While conflict over CCSSI has continued to expand, so has the number of issues tied to the standards. Figure 3 depicts the number of bills that contained no specific mention of related issues (e.g., testing, accountability, student data privacy) based on our coding of all negative bills. Non-specific opposition clearly declined between 2011 and

¹⁶ While the Cox proportional hazards model is an increasingly popular choice for event history analysis, the logit model is more appropriate for discrete time data. Because enactments are made during state legislative sessions, bill introductions may be considered a discrete event. The dependent variable is coded zero for all state-years in which the legislature did not consider negative CCSSI legislation and one for state years when a negative CCSSI bill was introduced.

¹⁷ We include the following variables: Republican governor, percent of Senate Republicans, percent of House Republicans, unified Republican control of state legislature, divided government, overall legislative attention to CCSSI, and whether the adoption was overseen by the legislature. Data on partisan composition of state government are drawn from the National Council of State Legislatures and the National Governors Association.

¹⁸ Duration dependencies across time may be accounted for using a range of transformations including linear, logarithmic, and quadratic. Alternative time dependencies were modeled but did not significantly improve the fit of the model.

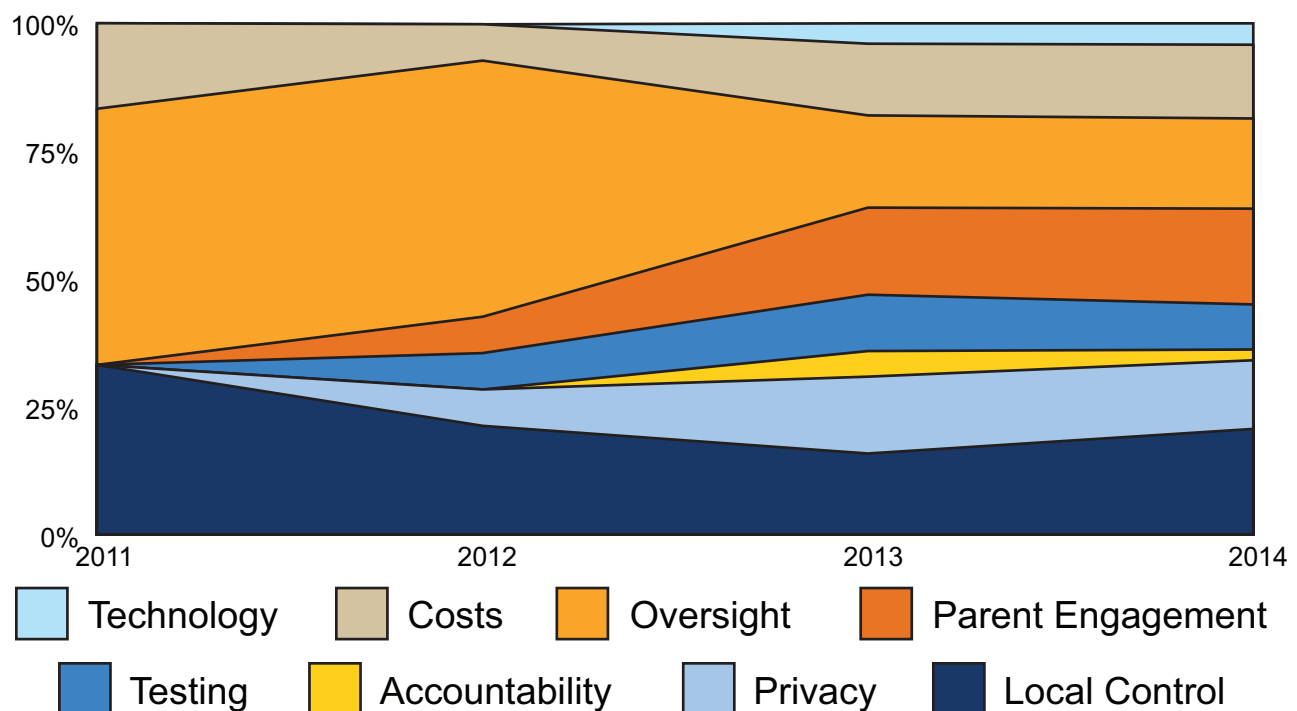
Figure 3: Nonspecific opposition declines, 2011-2014



2014. In 2011, nearly half of all negative bills were not tied to another issue. By 2014, fewer than 8 percent of negative bills referenced only general opposition.

While general opposition declined, the number of issues tied to CCSSI expanded dramatically between 2011 and 2014. Figure 4 depicts the issue content of the Common Core agenda between 2011 and 2014. Each negative bill was coded for reference to one of eight specific issues: local control, student data privacy, accountability, testing, parent engagement, oversight, costs, and technology. The figure makes clear that early in the debate over Common Core, two issues – local control and legislative oversight – dominated. This largely fits with media depictions, which typically portray the debate in terms of larger concerns over the appropriate role and place of the federal government in education. Yet since 2011, the issue agenda has expanded dramatically. Student data privacy, accountability,

Figure 4: Issues tied to negative CCSS bills diversify



testing, parent engagement, and technology were not issues mentioned in 2011. By 2014, these issues had significant places on the agenda of state legislatures.

Table 3 considers the partisan composition of co-sponsors for each issue. Interestingly, again given the media’s focus on conservative opposition, the issues that rose on the agenda after 2012 are more likely to include Democratic co-sponsors. The least partisan of the issues is accountability; patterns of co-sponsorship for bills mentioning this issue are nearly evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats. Bills mentioning costs, testing and technology are characterized by co-sponsorship coalitions of more than 25 percent Democrats. The most partisan issues are local control and non-specific statements of opposition, both of which on average are sponsored by an overwhelming majority of Republican (upwards of 90 percent Republican co-sponsors). This analysis suggests that as the debate over Common Core has evolved to incorporate new issues, opposition among Democrats has expanded.

MAKING SENSE OF THE EXPANDING CONFLICT

The last several years have witnessed increasing levels of contentious debate and opposition to CCSSI in a way that merits attention and explanation. Though popular media accounts of rising opposition to CCSSI suggest that opponents are driven by partisan and ideological concerns about federal overreach and intrusion, we demonstrate here that this narrative only begins to describe the evolution of dissent. By carefully considering the actors and issues tied to reform over a significant time-span we demonstrate that though partisan issues accurately characterize opposition at some points of time and in some places, the broader story is much more complicated.

Importantly, our findings strongly suggest that the conflict has expanded as implementation has proceeded. While this evolution has taken many proponents by surprise, they are, in our view, predictable responses. During implementation, stakeholders learned more about the real impact of the reforms.¹⁹

Perceptions of the CCSSI changed over time. CCSSI became tethered to other reform initiatives including RTTT and the NCLB Waivers. As the standards started to influence instruction and became a part of existing accountability systems, theoretical understandings of equity and excellence were replaced by a keen awareness that standards fit hand in glove with testing, accountability, education spending, and student privacy. Different groups of stakeholders turned against the standards for their own reasons. Some teachers were fearful of the consequences for failing to meet a higher bar. Textbook publishers or pedagogues whose chosen methods were abandoned because of the alignment with Common Core disliked the standards. Families from across the political spectrum turned against the Common Core because they were unaccustomed to how the standards’ encroached on curricula and teachers.

Table 3: Partisanship varies considerably across issues

Issue	Average percent Republican Co-Sponsors
Accountability	61.2
Costs	72.3
Testing	72.6
Technology	73.4
Oversight	86.3
Parent Engagement	86.8
Privacy	87.1
Non-specific	91.3
Local Control	91.5

Note: Based on author’s analysis of co-sponsor coalitions and issue content for all negative Common Core bills introduced in state legislatures.

¹⁹ For a forward looking account of these political dynamics, see Ashley Jochim. 2013. “Reform at Risk? The Political Realities,” In Frederick M. Hess and Michael Q. McShane (eds.) *The Common Core Meets the Reform Agenda* (New York: Teachers College Press).

We show that with time, concerns over federal control and intrusion were somewhat muted, or at least balanced by a wider range of worries about privacy, accountability, technology, and cost.

This analysis holds several lessons for education reformers. Most salient from our perspective is a call for advocates to make central and take seriously the politics of implementation. Observers of politics often forget that fights do not end once agreements are forged and written into law. To move from vague proclamations of support to full implementation requires highly specific decisions to be made about who to target, how much money to invest, and which stakeholders to engage. The winners and losers of political debates are profoundly shaped by these choices; some individuals face greater oversight, some programs win a greater share of available dollars, and new regulatory authorities are established and threaten existing power bases.

The rollout of the CCSS is a case in point of what Aaron Wildavsky called “policy as its own cause.”²⁰ Wildavsky observed that policies “create their own effects which gradually displace the original difficulty...public agencies are ever more involved in making adjustments to past programs, creating new ones to overcome difficulties, and responding to forces originating in other sectors or in society”. These evolutions have important implications for the political coalitions that initially supported enactment as well as interests who had little at stake initially. In the case of CCSS, implementation not only transformed initial supporters, like teachers unions, into opponents but also generated new opposition as previously inactive groups saw how the standards would be reconciled with existing systems of testing and accountability.

The centrality of implementation to understanding political conflict, and ultimately, the prospect of repeal suggests the use of politically insulated bodies, like state boards of education, is at best a temporary solution for avoiding a fight. Implementation of complex policies like standards-based reforms often requires changes to related systems and these provide new and existing opponents opportunities to voice their concerns and pick up legislative allies.

It also suggests there are risks to pursuing multiple related reforms simultaneously. The increasing fallout among Democratic constituencies is driven in no small part by the connection between Common Core and statewide teacher evaluations. This fallout was entirely predictable and could have been mitigated by delaying the use of testing data to make high stakes decisions for teachers.²¹ While some actors did eventually call for a moratorium—most notably, the Gates Foundation in June 2014—it came after support amongst teachers had dropped considerably.²²

CONCLUSION

As noted at the outset of this paper, CCSS enjoyed widespread support at its inception. Today’s popular accounts of the policy would suggest its doom. After all, Republicans and conservatives air their disagreements, Democrats and liberals find fault with other policy tenets, and teachers and families, those most closely involved with the policy taking root in American classrooms, have registered sharp drops in policy approval over the last four years.

But, it is also important not to overstate the vigor of the opposition. After all, only five states have actually rescinded their support of the Common Core and other states considering some form of policy resistance vary in the level of

²⁰ Aaron Wildavsky, *Speaking Truth to Power* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979). Page 81

²¹ Hess and McShane (2013)

²² See Henderson, Michael B., Paul E. Peterson, and Martin R. West. 2014. “No Common Opinion on the Common Core.” *Education Next* 15(1). Accessed October 22, 2014: <http://educationnext.org/2014-ednext-poll-no-common-opinion-on-the-common-core/>

and reasons for disregard. Many state reform initiatives alter little aside from the standards' name while still holding teachers' accountable for implementation, and many states despite facing conservative opposition have worked to carefully and purposefully wade through implementation challenges and build public support. For an opt-in policy that came about without legislative buy-in or federal dollars (in some cases, though some states were granted NCLB flexibility or earned RTTT dollars for making a commitment) the Common Core's success, or at least prospect for inciting true reform, might actually be considered quite impressive.

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