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The politics of policy diffusion

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Abstract. This article discusses the recent literature on policy diffusion and puts forward a new articulation of its political dimensions. Policy diffusion means that policies in one unit (country, state, city, etc.) are influenced by the policies of other units. The diffusion literature conceptualises these interdependencies with four mechanisms: learning, competition, coercion and emulation. The article identifies a model of diffusion that is dominant in the diffusion literature. According to this model, policies spread because decision makers evaluate the policy implications of the actions of other units. It is argued that the role of politics remains in the background in this model, and the article shows how going beyond a narrow focus on policy adoptions helps us to consider the politics of policy diffusion more explicitly.

Keywords: policy diffusion; policy transfer; policy learning

Introduction

In an ever more interdependent world, diffusion has become a defining feature of politics. Countless diffusion phenomena shape the everyday lives of people all over the globe. Prominent examples are the diffusion of free market policies (Simmons & Elkins 2004; Meseguer 2009), same-sex marriage (Kollman 2007; Fernandez & Lutter, 2013; Mitchell & Petray 2016), protests in the Arab Spring (Weyland 2012) and national conservative forces (Rooduijn 2014; Van Hauwaert 2018), to name just a few. A vast and growing scholarly literature sheds light on these processes with rich and detailed accounts of how policies and other political phenomena diffuse. This article summarises the conceptual state of the field, takes stock of the findings of the literature and shows how the political aspects of diffusion have not been in the foreground. In doing so, our purpose is to focus squarely on policy diffusion. We are not primarily interested in closely related, but clearly distinct (Knill 2005; Benson & Jordan, 2011; Graham et al. 2013), concepts like 'policy transfer' (Dolowitz & Marsh 1996, 2000) or 'policy convergence' (Bennett 1991). Similarly, we set aside adjacent streams of research in sociology (Strang & Soule 1998), economics (Banerjee 1992) or network science (Valente 1996). However, we do consider how insights from these related literatures can help to improve the study of the political side of policy diffusion.

A cornerstone of the diffusion literature is the distinction between learning, competition, coercion and emulation (Braun & Gilardi 2006; Simmons et al. 2006; Shipan & Volden 2008; Gilardi 2012). These mechanisms summarise the main forces of diffusion as policy makers are influenced (a) by the success or failure of policies elsewhere (learning), (b) by policies of other units with which they compete for resources (competition), (c) by the pressure from international organisations or powerful countries (coercion) and (d) by the perceived appropriateness of policies (emulation). To highlight the core features of the policy diffusion literature, we identify a dominant model of policy diffusion and describe a stylised version

according to which policies spread because decision makers evaluate the policy implications of the actions of other units. With the exception of emulation studies, the vast majority of policy diffusion research builds on the core idea of this model. In this literature, the political side of diffusion is not clearly articulated and remains in the background. We recognise this blind spot as a significant weakness and present conceptual arguments to study the political side of policy diffusion more systematically.

To this end, we discuss the politics of policy diffusion by highlighting several elements that are in contrast to the idea that diffusion prioritises the spread of policies through fact-based evaluations of policy consequences. First, the diffusion of policies is not restricted to successful policies because policy makers also pay attention to their political effects. Second, policy learning is heavily mediated by politics, and decision makers filter the policy experiences of others through their ideological stances. Third, policies are also shaped at the issue-definition stage, where the nature, causes and solutions of problems are discussed. Finally, policy makers react to the decisions of others also based on assumptions that are empirically false. These arguments emphasise that diffusion is a political process. Using the policy cycle, we show how going beyond a narrow focus on policy adoptions helps us to consider political processes more explicitly.

Policy diffusion: A stylised model

At the core of the policy diffusion literature is the question of why and how policy makers react to decisions made elsewhere. In different incarnations, the basic idea underlying this question has been studied in many different literatures in the social sciences, each with its specific focus. While policy transfer and policy convergence are closely related to, but conceptually distinct from policy diffusion (Knill 2005: 765–768), they represent a distinct research focus (Benson and Jordan, 2011, 367) and, based on citation patterns, form separate literatures (Graham et al. 2013: 675–684). Moreover, the combination of policy diffusion and policy transfer is not easy and has seldom been attempted (Marsh & Sharman 2009: 269), and is not the goal of this article. Although policy transfer is not directly within the scope of this article, we do consider how, along with related streams of research in other parts of the social sciences, it can contribute to improving the study of the political side of policy diffusion.

The study of policy diffusion has a long tradition in the context of American federalism (Walker 1969; Berry & Berry 1990) but was introduced to the comparative politics and international relations literature more recently (Simmons & Elkins 2004; Simmons et al. 2006). In their seminal contribution, Simmons et al. (2006: 787) outline the diversity of perspectives in the research on diffusion by stating that the theories 'of diffusion encompass a wide array of assumptions about who the primary actors are, what motivates their behaviour, … and [what] their ultimate goals [are]'. In essence, their core contribution is the elaboration of a common analytical definition of 'diffusion' and the classification of diffusion into four mechanisms.

Following this work, it has become conventional to define diffusion as a process of interdependent policy making where the analytical focus is squarely on 'external determinants' (Berry & Berry 1990), while domestic factors ('internal determinants', according to Berry and Berry) are often treated as control variables. Furthermore, the

convention is to distinguish between the diffusion mechanisms of learning, competition, coercion and emulation (Braun & Gilardi 2006; Shipan & Volden, 2008; Wasserfallen 2018). The analytical focus on interdependent policy making has connected scholarship with a shared research interest in diffusion that had been isolated from each other before. By emphasising the overlap between the different strands of diffusion research, this encompassing definition of diffusion has been very productive. We summarise, in the following, the four diffusion mechanism and show how most of the research on learning, competition and coercion can be subsumed under a distinct stylised model of diffusion that leaves politics in the background. Emulation is often treated as a residual category; although it allows for a stronger focus on the political dimension of diffusion, it does not fully articulate it.

The conventional reference to learning in diffusion research builds on the idea that policy makers decide based on the analysis of the consequences of policies that are enacted elsewhere. This perspective is particularly prominent in the study of federalism (Gray 1973; Volden 2006). Many scholars have emphasised the advantage of decentralisation as a polity structure that provides the opportunity for policy experiments and innovation. According to this account, policy makers systematically assess the policy experiences of other subnational units. As a result of policy innovation and careful evaluations, successful new policies gain acceptance and spread (Meseguer 2006; Gilardi et al. 2009).

In the case of the competition mechanism, policy makers enact policies to attract investment and taxable resources. The basic models of competition assume that people, businesses and investors consider several countries or subnational units as potential locations for their residence and activities. To attract these mobile resources, policy makers anticipate or react to policy changes of their competitors. Competition research has analysed the conditionality of international and subnational tax competition by showing that several political, fiscal and institutional factors constrain a race-to-the-bottom (Hays 2003; Basinger & Hallerberg 2004; Plümper et al. 2009; Wasserfallen 2014; Gilardi & Wasserfallen 2016). Besides the work on tax and investment competition, diffusion scholars have also explored competition in regulatory and social standards, often studying the so-called 'California effect' as an alternative explanation to the race-to-the-bottom hypothesis. The name of the 'California effect' originates from Vogel's (1997) study on automobile emission standards in the United States, where automobile producers enacted the (comparatively) high standards of California because they did not want to lose that sales market. Further research found similar race-to-the-top effects in the case of process standards and labour rights (Prakash & Potoski 2006; Greenhill et al. 2009).

The diffusion mechanism of coercion stipulates that policies are introduced because powerful countries or international organisations enforce policy changes. In terms of the underlying mechanism, the classic example of coercion is conditionality. International organisations like the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank shape policy change by setting requirements for aid and loans (Mosley et al. 1995; Vreeland 2003). Or the European Union asks for the fulfilment of certain criteria in its enlargement and accession procedures (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2004; Schimmelfennig 2008). The key feature of coercion is that powerful countries or international organisations change the (economic) incentives for policy change in the countries they are targeting. In this sense, the mechanism of coercion is similar to the competition mechanism.

Table 1. A stylised model of policy diffusion

Main actors	Policy makers (government or legislature)
Assumption	Decisions are the result of fact-based assessments
Mechanisms	Learning from the experience of other units
	Economic incentives from abroad (competition or coercion)

Based on the above discussion of learning, competition and coercion, we identify a dominant diffusion model that is prominent in the research on international relations, federalism and political economy. We articulate a stylised version of this model to highlight the distinct theoretical core of the vast diffusion literature. Table 1 summarises the three defining core components of the model. First, the key actors of diffusion are governments or the legislature. Second, the model assumes that a government or legislature makes decisions based on information gathered from elsewhere. Third, the government or legislature is expected to process information systematically (i.e., policy makers evaluate and analyse policy-relevant information from well-identified reference countries, cities or states). Most diffusion studies argue, explicitly in the theory or implicitly in the empirical modelling, that policy makers either rationally learn from other units or react to decisions from elsewhere because of economic incentives that are the result of competition or coercion.

This stylised model of diffusion has a particular long tradition in research on international relations and federalism. The idea that economic incentives from abroad shape governments' decisions in the international system is as prominent in the international relations scholarship as the argument, in the federalism literature, that federal states provide policy laboratories and learn from the successes and failures of others (Walker 1969; Gray 1973; Volden 2006; Schimmelfennig 2008). In the last decade, the dominant model of diffusion has been extended with the formal analysis of learning, competition and coercion (Volden et al. 2008; Devereux et al. 2008).

We formulate, for the purpose of this article, a reduced version of the model to highlight the unifying perspective of a diverse literature. Our stylised formulation is not intended to be all-encompassing. For example, the work of Weyland (2009, 2012) on bounded learning makes an important contribution to the literature by integrating cognitive heuristics into the diffusion process that deviate from a fully rational account of learning. However, the model summarised in Table 1 illustrates the dominant approach of the vast diffusion literature, which is useful, we believe, for identifying what is not sufficiently addressed by the current scholarship – namely the political side of diffusion.

The stylised model is selective in that it does not easily accommodate emulation as an alternative logic of diffusion (Gilardi 2012; Graham et al. 2013). Inspired by sociological research, the diffusion mechanism of emulation focuses on the social construction of appropriate policies (as a contrast to the objective properties of policies). Accordingly, norms and conventions are socially constructed, and policy makers conform to these norms with the adoption of appropriate policies (Tolbert & Zucker 1983; March & Olsen 1998; Finnemore & Sikkink 2001). Prominent examples are the diffusion of educational and human rights policies (Meyer et al. 1992; Simmons 2009; Greenhill 2010). Also, emulation scholars focus on international agencies and organisations as venues where the

norms fostering the appropriateness of policies are constructed and diffusion is promoted (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998; Bearce & Bondanella 2007).

How this process of social construction unfolds empirically is difficult to trace. Following the argument that networks, powerful countries and widespread adoption drive diffusion, scholars use, as empirical measures for diffusion, the number of adopting countries, shared membership in international organisations and the adoption by leading countries, which in many cases is not an empirical strategy that clearly distinguishes emulation from learning or coercion (Maggetti & Gilardi 2016). Overall, the theoretical perspectives and empirical approaches are very diverse in the research on emulation. As a common denominator, the literature on emulation bundles a large number of diffusion studies that explicitly deviate from the stylised model of diffusion. Therefore, emulation serves, to some extent, as a residual mechanism of diffusion, encompassing research that does not assume rational and fact-based assessments of policy consequences.

The scholarly work on emulation provides an important corrective to the dominant model, but, at the same time, the studies grouped under the umbrella of emulation lack a distinct theoretical grounding in political science (not unsurprisingly, given that emulation has its origins in sociology). Consequently, although emulation emphasises that diffusion is very often not the rational search for the best policy alternatives, it is not focused explicitly on the political side of diffusion. The next section discusses how we can put the politics of policy diffusion front and centre in the diffusion literature.

The politics of policy diffusion

Political learning

Policy learning is often understood (and sometimes criticised) as technocratic, implying the smooth diffusion of best practices defined by experts, disconnected from politics. This perspective is partial. The concept of learning is much more complex and multifaceted (Dunlop & Radaelli 2013; Dunlop et al. 2018). For our purposes, we focus on the idea that policy learning is heavily mediated by politics, a notion that is explicit in 'lesson-drawing' as defined by Rose (1991, 1993). Moreover, as Dolowitz and Marsh (1996: 346), argued, '[b]oth supporters and opponents of various policies use lessons selectively to gain advantage in the struggle to get their ideas accepted'. Policy makers can be significantly biased against policies countering their ideologies and unwilling to learn from them, and they take more cues from their co-partisans than from governments controlled by opposing parties (Butler et al. 2017). Gilardi (2010) shows that policy makers learn from political (particularly electoral) consequences (not only from policy effects) and that they filter this information through ideological lenses (Volden et al. 2008). An example of this are conservative governments that may rely on evidence that cuts in welfare spending have no negative electoral consequences, while ignoring information suggesting the opposite.

Moreover, it is entirely possible that bad policies spread. In fact, this is very common particularly because policy makers pay as much attention to the political effects of policies (Do they please their constituencies? Do they threaten their re-elections?) as they do to policy effects (Do they help solve the problems they were designed to address?). If the former dominates, popular policies that do nothing to solve actual problems or that may

even be counterproductive can spread very widely as policy makers learn that a given idea is a good way to enhance their political profiles or support. Of course, what is good or bad is essentially contested. Therefore, it would be a mistake to see policy learning either as a technocratic tool or an unambiguous benefit of experimentation at the local level.

Diffusion as self-fulfilling prophecy

Some findings of the literature on investment and tax competition also illustrate that policy makers do not gather and process information on policy consequences systematically. They often make political decisions based on the false assumptions that the location decisions of individuals and businesses are sensitive to tax changes. Some empirical evidence suggests that we find competition also when there is little, if any, tax-induced mobility. For example, several analyses report abundant evidence of international tax competition for foreign direct investment, whereas Jensen (2012) finds no evidence that investment decisions are correlated with corporate tax rate changes. Similarly, in Switzerland, almost all cantons have abandoned bequest taxation since the 1980s. By far the number one argument that proponents of these reforms put forward in the parliamentary debates was cantonal competition, although the location decisions of elderly high-income residents are not responsive to bequest taxation, as Brülhart and Parchet (2014) show. They conclude in their analysis that the pressures for tax reforms were alleged, not real. Tax competition without (or with very low) tax base mobility is real, yet self-induced. In this case, competition becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. As with political learning discussed above, we should expect that policy makers with strong ideological priors in favour of tax competition are less sensitive to evidence of low tax mobility, but may nevertheless strongly react to tax changes of other units.

Diffusion and issue definition

The most powerful way in which diffusion can shape policy making is by changing the terms of the political debate, making some ideas taboo or, on the contrary, increasing their acceptance in the mainstream political discourse. The literature has examined the diffusion of norms such as the abolition of the death penalty (McGann & Sandholtz 2012; Kim 2016), but more generally the logic is highly relevant for understanding the political side of diffusion. In other words, diffusion influences policy making well before the adoption stage – at the issue-definition stage, when the nature, causes and solutions of problems are discussed from competing perspectives. The early stages of the policy cycle, those in which a given definition of the problem gains the upper hand, can be affected by diffusion with profound consequences. There is very little research on this aspect of diffusion, which Dolowitz and Marsh (1996: 357) identified as a blind spot of the policy transfer literature, too. In the policy diffusion literature, an exception is Boushey (2016), who looks at issue-definition as an explanatory variable, finding that policies spread faster when they are framed in ways that are consistent with stereotypes – in the specific case, regarding who is deserving of policy benefits. Moreover, Gilardi et al. (2019) study issue-definition as a dependent variable and show that the way a policy is framed depends on how widespread it is within a given

state's diffusion network. One of the main findings is that normative frames (rationales for supporting or opposing a policy) are much less sensitive to diffusion than frames focused on practical aspects of a policy such as enforcement.

Decoupling and legitimacy

Sociologists, qualitative studies of diffusion and research on lesson-drawing point to a question of considerable practical importance – namely, how policy makers implement diffusing policies (Rose 1991, 1993; Beissinger 2007; Chorev 2012). According to the emulation mechanism discussed above, policies can spread simply because of their symbolic properties. A certain institution, like central bank independence, or a specific policy, like inflation-targeting, may be considered as appropriate and legitimate, and therefore diffuse (McNamara 2002). However, several studies show that diffusing policies may have the same label, but they are implemented in localised versions (i.e., they are decoupled) (Meyer et al. 1992; Rose 1993; Chorev 2012; Wasserfallen 2019). Meyer and Rowan (1977) have developed a seminal explanation for this, arguing that policy makers aim to conform to dominant international norms, and they take domestic constraints into account by implementing legislation that is tailored to their specific contexts. The research on decoupling overlaps to some extent with the work on emulation, but we would like to emphasise the (understudied) political dimension of this strategy. After all, policy adaptations to local contexts are attractive for political reasons. By following dominant norms, policy makers signal adherence to international best practice, while local adaptations allow them to either water down the effectiveness of a policy or even pursue goals that are not consistent with the original version of a policy. This way, policy makers can serve, at the same time, an international and domestic constituency.

Policy diffusion beyond policy adoption

The arguments in the previous section suggest that the dominant model of policy diffusion is too narrow and does not sufficiently take politics into account. Although most studies do consider political and institutional factors, they do so by including them as control variables or as factors mediating diffusion. To articulate more clearly what the dominant model fails to consider, we rely here on the policy cycle. The policy cycle is a classic heuristic model in policy analysis, arranging the various stages of a decision-making process – issue-definition, agenda-setting, policy adoption, implementation and evaluation – in a circle and illustrating the idea that policy making has no clear beginning or end. For our purposes, we highlight the two most relevant stages: issue-definition and policy adoption. The dominant model of diffusion is both focused exclusively on the policy adoption stage and has a narrow understanding of it. The arguments in this article go beyond the dominant model in several ways. In particular, they go beyond the dichotomy between 'internal' and 'external' determinants (Berry & Berry 1990) and outline clearly a more integrated framework to study the politics of policy diffusion.

First, policy adoption is not a mere technocratic act; it is political, of course. Information is processed through ideological lenses. Decision makers are not only interested in what works, but also in what is popular. If policy makers observe that a certain policy is popular

Table 2. Dominant and political models of policy diffusion

	Dominant model	Political model
Issue definition		Terms of discussion
		Self-fulfilling prophecies
Policy adoption	Policy consequences	Electoral consequences
		Ideological biases

elsewhere, they are more likely to adopt it, regardless of the policy consequences. Therefore, policies also spread through political evaluations that are biased by ideological stances and focus on the political consequences of policy adoptions. Second, we should pay attention to the issue-definition stage. The example and experience of others change the terms of the political debate by strengthening certain policy options, as the adoption of a policy by other units increases its acceptance and thus changes the political discourse. In addition, the decision to change a policy can be based on perceived pressure that dominates the issue-definition, no matter whether the pressure is real or alleged. In that case, diffusion through competition is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Changing the terms of political debates and self-fulfilling prophecies can drive the political diffusion of policies in the issue-definition stage, well before a policy reaches the adoption stage. Of course, the two stages interact and reinforce one another, which is a basic idea of the policy cycle. Politically motivated reasoning at the adoption stage will affect how the issue is defined. Conversely, as the terms of the debate change, different kinds of policies will reach the adoption stage. Therefore, policies diffuse through a self-reinforcing political cycle.

These arguments are summarised in Table 2. The policy diffusion literature has been focused on explaining policy adoptions using technocratic arguments emphasising the relevance of policy consequences, in terms of either competition or learning in general. A focus on the political aspects of diffusion broadens the scope of the analysis in two ways. First, within the policy adoption stage, political factors such as the electoral consequences of policy adoption and the way ideology biases the assessment of policy consequences can shape policy diffusion. Second, within the issue-definition stage – a blind spot of the dominant model – the terms of the discussion are subject to diffusion themselves, can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies and have a clear impact on policy adoptions and how policies diffuse.

The range of political diffusion processes is greater than in the technocratic model. The latter is dominated by professional technocrats guiding the decisions of policy makers. In political diffusion, all kinds of actors from professionals to politicians, journalists and pundits seek to influence both the spin of policy evaluations and the issue-definition with reports, lobbying, interventions in the political debates, campaigning and so on. The whole process is less structured and more complex because it involves many actors and it spans the whole policy cycle. These ideas resonate with those advanced in the policy transfer literature, which is less singularly focused on policy adoptions and identifies a much broader range of actors involved in the process (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996, 2000). Importantly, these ideas are not adequately captured by the simple inclusion of 'internal determinants' (i.e., domestic factors) in the analysis.

Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed the recent policy diffusion literature and showed how research in this area has been overly focused on the idea that effective policies spread as policy makers evaluate policy outcomes in other units because either they learn from or they compete with them. While this is one of the main aspects of diffusion, it neglects its more political elements. First, the evaluation of policy consequences is filtered by ideology and electoral consequences matter as much as policy consequences. Second, diffusion can affect the terms of the political debate well before policies are actively considered. Third, perceptions regarding the state of the world can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies (e.g., competitive behaviour as a consequence of beliefs in the presence of competition). Fourth, decoupling can be used to serve different political constituencies on the domestic and international levels. Using the policy cycle, we have shown that these arguments reveal a blind spot in the diffusion literature – namely events occurring outside of the policy adoption stage, and especially those taking place during the issue-definition stage. These aspects cannot be addressed simply by considering domestic factors, or 'internal determinants' (Berry & Berry 1990), which most studies already do. Instead, they require new approaches such as those that we have discussed in this article.

These arguments have a number of implications for ongoing and future research. First, our analysis points to a much broader set of (political) motivations of policy makers in how and why they react to external influences. Future research should seek to provide a more thorough theoretical analysis of these political mechanisms. As a first attempt in that direction, we identified several theoretical arguments, but we need more theoretical work to better understand the political dimension of diffusion. Second, we think that the next generation of diffusion studies should reorient their efforts away from a narrow focus on policy adoptions. The issue-definition stage strikes us as particularly important to understanding key diffusion phenomena. Gilardi et al. (2019) put forward a new approach to study the issue-definition stage from a diffusion perspective. Also, the study of underlying assumptions of diffusion and the ideological use of decisions from other countries are questions of agenda-setting and issue-definition (not the adoption itself). Not only governments, parliaments and civil servants, but also parties think tanks and other political actors are key in these processes (Böhmelt et al. 2016). Third, this proposed broader theoretical and empirical focus should come with greater diversity in research designs and methods, since standard approaches are not necessarily well adapted to studying the new questions outlined in this article (Gilardi 2016), not least because they often imply a focus on policy adoption that, as we have shown, prevents researchers from fully exploring the politics of policy diffusion.

Finally, the shift in research perspective that we propose has also a normative dimension. The broader point of political diffusion is that biased evaluations and altered political discourses can push any policy. Whether one criticises or welcomes the diffusion of a certain policy is less a question of how the process of diffusion unfolds, but rather depends on whether one is an advocate or opponent of the policy itself. Liberals support the spread of human and minority rights, while conservatives appreciate the diffusion of stricter immigration rules. In this context, a note of concern is warranted because the playing field of how policies spread has changed substantially in the age of 'post-truth' politics. A case in

point is the denial of global warming. The evaluations and issue-definitions of a whole set of policies change fundamentally when the argument becomes (more) acceptable that the climate is not changing (or that it is changing, but not because of human activity). Whereas the diffusion of a norm or a policy is, as such, not inherently good or bad, it is certainly a problem when the political drivers of diffusion systematically undermine the reliance on facts in policy making.

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