

Introduction: Cross-national policy convergence: concepts, approaches and explanatory factors

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ABSTRACT Although there is an increasing number of studies on policy convergence (in recent years especially in the context of Europeanization and globalization research), we still have a rather limited understanding of this phenomenon. This deficit can be not only traced back to a lack of empirical findings, but is also the result of the heterogeneous and partially inconsistent theoretical literature on policy convergence. Although policy convergence constitutes a central concept in comparative public policy, it is not always consistently used and mixed up with related but not equivalent concepts. It is thus a basic objective of this paper to clarify the analytical relationship between policy convergence and related concepts used in the literature. Moreover, different approaches for the assessment and measurement of policy convergence will be presented. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of causes of policy convergence.

KEY WORDS Europeanization; policy convergence; policy diffusion; policy transfer; public policy.

The comparative analysis of public policies across countries is a well-developed research area with a long tradition in political science. One of the major debates in this research field centres on the question as to whether and why different countries develop similar policies over time. In the literature, there are two different answers to this question.

There are numerous studies that emphasize a striking degree of policy convergence; i.e. the development of similar or even identical policies across countries over time. For years, political scientists have been attracted by this phenomenon and its underlying causal factors (for an overview of the policy convergence literature, see Bennett 1991; Drezner 2001; Heichel *et al.* 2005). At the same time, however, there are many studies (typically in the tradition of the new institutionalism) that modify or even challenge the general expectation of cross-national policy convergence. Emphasizing important differences in national institutions and opportunity structures for domestic actors, these studies find diverging rather than converging policy developments across countries.

This debate of convergence versus divergence of national policies is closely related to the booming research industry on globalization and Europeanization. Does the strong growth of economic and institutional interlinkages between nation states lead to increasingly similar policies across countries? Or is the search for convergence emerging from the domestic impact of globalization and European integration ‘an impossible quest’ (Dimitrova and Steunenberg 2000: 201), as domestic responses to global or European challenges are strongly influenced by existing domestic structures and institutions (see, for example, Caporaso *et al.* 2001; Héri-tier *et al.* 2001; Knill 2001)?

This brief discussion clearly shows that we still have a rather limited understanding of the phenomenon of policy convergence. What explains the adoption of similar policies across countries over time? Under which conditions can we expect that domestic policies converge or rather develop further apart? Why do countries converge on some policies, but not on others? What is the direction of policy convergence? Do national policies converge at the regulatory top or bottom, and why?

Although a number of factors have been suggested in order to account for the mixed empirical evidence of both convergence and divergence, including the role of international organizations, regulatory competition between nation states, or capacities for national policy adjustment, we still have limited knowledge about the causes and conditions of cross-national policy convergence. This deficit can be not only traced back to a lack of empirical findings, but is also the result of the heterogeneous and partially inconsistent theoretical literature on policy convergence. Although policy convergence constitutes a central concept in comparative public policy, it is not always consistently used and mixed up with related but not equivalent concepts. It is therefore hardly surprising that the mechanisms and conditions affecting the degree of cross-national policy convergence are not yet well understood (cf. Seeliger 1996).

It is the objective of the following contributions to improve our understanding of policy convergence and its causes. This presupposes a clear definition of the concept of convergence. In the following sections, I will thus first clarify the analytical relationship between policy convergence and related concepts used in the literature. Moreover, different approaches for the assessment and measurement of policy convergence will be presented. I conclude with a brief discussion of the causes of policy convergence to which the following articles are related. Unless explicitly acknowledged, the contributions follow the definitions and assessment criteria as defined in the following sections.

POLICY CONVERGENCE AND RELATED CONCEPTS

While there is a broad consensus on the definition of convergence as ‘the tendency of societies to grow more alike, to develop similarities in structures, processes, and performances’ (Kerr 1983: 3), the empirical and theoretical assessment of policy convergence is generally hampered by the use of different, partially overlapping concepts (Tews 2002). Policy convergence is equated with

related notions, such as isomorphism, policy transfer or policy diffusion. This terminological variety often coincides with analytical confusion.

This becomes most apparent when focusing on the concept of *policy transfer* (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, 2000; Radaelli 2000; Rose 1991). Dolowitz and Marsh (2000: 5) define policy transfer as 'processes by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system'. Policy transfer is therefore concerned with processes rather than results. Moreover, it prescribes a development that might, but need not, lead to cross-national policy convergence. Policy transfer is not restricted to merely imitating policies of other countries, but can include profound changes in the content of the exchanged policies (Kern *et al.* 2000; Rose 1991).

Similar to transfer, *policy diffusion* typically refers to processes (rather than outcomes) that might result in increasing policy similarities across countries, hence leading to policy convergence (Elkins and Simmons 2005: 36). Diffusion is generally defined as the socially mediated spread of policies across and within political systems, including communication and influence processes which operate both on and within populations of adopters (Rogers 1995: 13). Most of the diffusion literature is characterized by this approach. Diffusion studies typically start out from the description of adoption patterns for certain policy innovations over time. In a subsequent step, they analyse the factors that account for the empirically observed spreading process. According to this concept of diffusion, no distinction in different forms of 'spread mediation' or 'influence processes' is made. Hence, from this perspective, policy diffusion is not restricted to the operation of specific mediation mechanisms, but includes all conceivable channels of influence between countries, reaching from the voluntary adoption of policy models that have been communicated in the international system, diffusion processes triggered by legally binding harmonization requirements defined in international agreements or supranational regulations, to the imposition of policies on other countries through external actors.

In contrast to this definition, however, some authors suggest a narrower focus of the concept, explicitly restricting diffusion to processes of voluntary policy transfer (Kern 2000; Busch and Jörgens 2005). Consequently, diffusion is conceived as a distinctive causal factor that drives international policy convergence rather than a general process that is caused by the operation of varying (both voluntary and coercive) influence channels. Following this approach, Busch and Jörgens distinguish three mechanisms of policy convergence: international harmonization (legal obligation from international or supranational agreements deliberately agreed by the involved countries in multilateral negotiations), imposition of policies, and policy diffusion (where national policy-makers voluntarily adopt policy models that are communicated internationally).

We are thus confronted with two different conceptions of policy diffusion. On the one hand, the concept describes the process of spreading policies

across countries with the possible result of cross-national policy convergence, regardless of the causal factors that are driving this development (e.g. regulatory competition, international harmonization, imposition). On the other hand, diffusion is conceived as a distinctive causal factor leading to policy convergence by voluntary (in contrast to obliged or imposed) transfer of policy models.

Both conceptions of diffusion are analytically well grounded and applied in the literature; it is therefore more important to point out their differences rather than arguing in favour of one or the other approach. Nevertheless, the following considerations as well as the contributions to this volume (except the article by Busch and Jörgens) follow the first definition, conceiving of diffusion as a process that can be triggered by a broad range of causal factors.

Policy diffusion and policy transfer share the assumption that governments do not learn about policy practices randomly, but rather through common affiliations, negotiations and institutional membership (Simmons and Elkins 2004). Both transfer and diffusion processes hence require that actors are informed about the policy choices of others (Strang and Meyer 1993: 488). Given these conceptual overlaps, diffusion is often equated with policy transfer (Kern 2000; Tews 2002). Notwithstanding these conceptual overlaps, however, analytical differences between diffusion and transfer should not be overlooked. Diffusion studies typically start out from a rather general perspective. While analyses of policy transfer investigate the underlying causes and contents of singular processes of bilateral policy exchange, the dependent variable in diffusion research refers to general patterns characterizing the spread of innovations within or across political systems. The diffusion literature focuses more on the spatial, structural and socioeconomic reasons for particular adoption patterns rather than on the reasons for individual adoptions as such (Bennett 1991: 221; Jordana and Levi-Faur 2005). Diffusion studies often reveal a rather robust adoption pattern, with the cumulative adoption of a policy innovation over time following an S-shaped curve (Gray 1973). Relatively few countries adopt an innovation during early stages. Over time, the rate of adoption increases, until the process gets closer to saturation, and the rate slows down again.

From these considerations it follows that policy transfer and policy diffusion differ from policy convergence in important ways. First, differences exist with respect to the underlying analytical focus. While diffusion and transfer are concerned with process patterns, convergence studies place particular emphasis on effects. Transfer and diffusion thus reflect processes which under certain circumstances might result in policy convergence. This does not imply, however, that the empirical observation of converging policies must necessarily be the result of transfer or diffusion (Drezner 2001). It is well conceivable that policy convergence is the result of similar but relatively isolated domestic events. Second, the concepts differ in their dependent variable. Convergence studies typically seek to explain changes in policy similarity over time. By contrast, transfer studies investigate the content and process of policy transfer as the dependent variable, while the focus of diffusion research is on the explanation of adoption

patterns over time (Elkins and Simmons 2005; Jordana and Levi-Faur 2005; Levi-Faur 2005; Gilardi 2005).

The particular focus underlying the analysis of policy convergence places it in close proximity to the concept of *isomorphism* which has been developed in organization sociology. Isomorphism is defined as a process of homogenization that 'forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions' (DiMaggio and Powell 1991: 66). The central question underlying studies on isomorphism refers to the mechanisms through which organizations become more similar over time. There is thus a broad overlap between studies on policy convergence and isomorphism, with the major difference between the two concepts being on their empirical focus. The literature on isomorphism concentrates on increasing similarity of organizational and institutional structures and cultures. Studies on policy convergence, transfer or diffusion, by contrast, focus on changes in national policy characteristics.

Following the above considerations, policy convergence can be defined as any increase in the similarity between one or more characteristics of a certain policy (e.g. policy objectives, policy instruments, policy settings) across a given set of political jurisdictions (supranational institutions, states, regions, local authorities) over a given period of time. Policy convergence thus describes the end result of a process of policy change over time towards some common point, regardless of the causal processes.

TYPES OF POLICY CONVERGENCE

Having discussed the relationship between policy convergence and other analytical concepts that are often used synonymously in the literature, we still have to address the question of how convergence can be measured and evaluated empirically. The most basic way of assessing policy convergence is to analyse the extent to which the policies of countries have become more similar to each other over time. However, depending on the underlying criteria for the assessment of similarity change over time, different types of policy convergence are applied in the literature.

Table 1 Policy convergence and related concepts

	<i>Policy convergence</i>	<i>Isomorphism</i>	<i>Policy transfer</i>	<i>Policy diffusion</i>
Analytical focus	Effects	Effects	Process	Process
Empirical focus	Policy characteristics	Organizational structures	Policy characteristics	Policy characteristics
Dependent variable	Similarity change	Similarity change	Transfer content transfer process	Adoption pattern

The most common convergence type in this context refers to σ -convergence. Following this approach, convergence occurs if there is a decrease in variation of policies among the countries under consideration. It has to be emphasized, however, that this is only one, albeit very common, form of assessing policy convergence. Other options that are discussed in the article of Heichel *et al.* (2005) shall only be briefly mentioned here. First, β -convergence occurs when laggard countries catch up with leader countries over time, implying, for instance, that the former strengthen their regulatory standards more quickly and fundamentally than the latter. Second, γ -convergence is measured by changes of country rankings with respect to a certain policy. Finally, we speak of δ -convergence when similarity change is operationalized by comparing countries' distance changes to an exemplary model.

Depending on the type of convergence investigated, empirical results might be interpreted very differently. Evidence of σ -convergence, for instance, does not necessarily mean that there is also γ -convergence or δ -convergence. Moreover, evidence of β -convergence does not imply that there must also be σ -convergence: the fact that laggard countries change more fundamentally than leader countries is not a sufficient condition for a decrease in variance across all countries. Especially when comparing empirical results from different studies, it is therefore crucial to be clear about the specific type of convergence that has been investigated. The following articles all concentrate on the first and most commonly used type of σ -convergence; other convergence types are not explicitly investigated. Moreover, two contributions (Holzinger and Knill; Lenschow *et al.*) not only concentrate on the degree of σ -convergence, but also analyse convergence directions; i.e. the extent to which a decrease in variation of national policies is accompanied by upward or downward shifts of the regulatory mean (e.g. setting levels of environmental standards).

CAUSES OF POLICY CONVERGENCE

The literature on convergence and its related concepts offers a broad range of causal factors in order to explain changes in the similarity of policies across countries. At a very general level, these factors can be grouped into two categories: (1) causal mechanisms triggering the convergent policy changes across countries; and (2) facilitating factors which affect the effectiveness of these mechanisms. They are discussed and analysed in detail in the following articles. The basic objective of this overview is therefore to show how these articles relate to the different factors of cross-national policy convergence.

With respect to causal mechanisms, five central factors can be found in the highly diverse literature (see, for example, Bennett 1991; DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Drezner 2001; Hoberg 2001; Holzinger and Knill 2005). First, cross-national policy convergence might be simply the result of similar but independent responses of different countries to parallel problem pressure (e.g. ageing of societies, environmental pollution or economic decline); i.e. policy convergence is caused by similar policy problems to which

countries are reacting (Bennett 1991: 231). Second, several studies emphasize convergence effects stemming from the imposition of policies. Imposition refers to constellations where countries or international organizations force other countries to adopt certain policies by exploiting asymmetries in political or economic power. Third, emphasis is placed on the harmonization of national policies through international or supranational law. Countries are obliged to comply with international rules on which they have deliberately agreed in multilateral negotiations. Fourth, regulatory competition emerging from the increasing economic integration of European and global markets has been identified as an important factor that drives the mutual adjustment of policies across countries. Finally, cross-national policy convergence can simply be caused by transnational communication. Under this heading, several mechanisms are summarized which all have in common that they rest purely on communication and information exchange among countries (see Holzinger and Knill 2005). They include lesson-drawing (where countries deliberately seek to learn from successful problem-solving activities in other countries), joint problem-solving activities within transnational elite networks or epistemic communities, the promotion of policy models by international organizations with the objective of accelerating and facilitating cross-national policy transfer as well as the emulation of policy models.¹ One could certainly argue that communication is also of relevance with regard to the other mechanisms of imposition, international harmonization or regulatory competition. In these cases, however, communication and information exchange are basically a background condition for the operation of the mechanisms rather than the central factor actually triggering convergence.

What are potential facilitating factors that affect the degree of cross-national policy convergence? The first group of factors in that respect refers to characteristics or, more precisely, the similarity of the countries under investigation. It is argued that converging policy developments are more likely for countries that are characterized by high institutional similarity. Policies are transferred and properly implemented only insofar as they fit with existing institutional arrangements (see, for instance, Knill and Lenschow 1998). Moreover, cultural similarity plays an important role in facilitating cross-national policy transfer. In their search for relevant policy models, decision-makers are expected to look to the experiences of those countries with which they share an especially close set of cultural ties (Strang and Meyer 1993). Finally, similarity in socioeconomic structures and development has been identified as a factor that facilitates the transfer of policies across countries (see, for instance, on environmental policy, Jänicke 1988).

The second group of facilitating factors that can be analytically distinguished is composed of characteristics of the underlying policies. In this context, the type of policy has been identified as a factor that influences the likelihood of convergence. The expectation is that policies involving high distributional conflicts between domestic actor coalitions will diffuse and hence converge to a lesser extent than regulatory policies with comparatively small redistributive

consequences (Tews 2002). A second argument about the impact of policy characteristics on convergence concentrates on different policy dimensions. Hall (1993), for instance, distinguishes between policy paradigms, policy instruments and settings,² arguing that change (and consequently convergence) is most difficult on ideas, given their deep embeddedness in dominant beliefs of domestic actors. Instruments and, even more, settings, by contrast, can be adjusted without necessarily demanding ideational change; hence convergence on the latter dimensions is more likely than on paradigms. This view, however, is not uncontested in the convergence literature (see, for instance, the contributions of Radaelli 2005 and Lenschow *et al.* 2005).

With the exception of potential effects of different policy types, the above-mentioned causes of cross-national policy convergence are investigated in closer detail in the following articles. Two theoretical contributions concentrate especially on the development of hypotheses on the conditions under which the different factors will actually lead to convergence. While Holzinger and Knill place particular emphasis on the role of causal mechanisms, Lenschow *et al.*, using the environmental field as a reference point, analyse facilitating factors of policy convergence. Some of the theoretical expectations developed in these papers are taken up again in the more empirical articles. While Heichel *et al.* present a general overview of empirical findings and analytical deficits of research on policy convergence, the remaining articles are concerned with the

Table 2 Causal factors of policy convergence analysed in the following contributions

Causal mechanisms	Independent problem-solving	Holzinger/Knill, Marcussen
	Imposition	Busch/Jorgens; Holzinger/Knill; Marcussen
	International harmonization	Busch/Jorgens; Drezner; Holzinger/Knill, Marcussen
	Regulatory competition	Drezner; Holzinger/Knill
	Transnational communication	Albrecht/Arts; Busch/Jorgens; Holzinger/Knill; Marcussen
Facilitating factors	Cultural similarity	Lenschow/Liefferink/Veenman
Country-group related	Institutional similarity	Lenschow/Liefferink/Veenman; Radaelli
	Socioeconomic similarity	Lenschow/Liefferink/Veenman
Policy-related	Policy type	
	Policy dimension	Holzinger/Knill; Lenschow/Liefferink/Veenman; Radaelli

assessment and explanation of convergence in individual policy sectors. Drezner focuses on two empirical cases (the regulation of genetically modified organisms and money laundering) and compares the influence of international harmonization and regulatory competition on policy convergence. Busch and Jörgens compare the convergence effect of three international factors (imposition, harmonization and transnational communication [in their terminology: diffusion]) in the environmental field. Albrecht and Arts also look at environmental policy, investigating the impact of reporting requirements and non-binding guidelines of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto protocol on the cross-national convergence of environmental policy instruments. Marcussen, by contrast, investigates the international factors (imposition, transnational communication) that contributed to the global spread of central banks and their independence. Finally, Radaelli, in his analysis of the use of regulatory quality assessments in Europe, studies the inter-play between international (transnational communication) and domestic causes (institutional factors) of policy convergence.

While each of the mentioned contributions is characterized by the analysis of one or more specific areas of convergence research, Jordan's commentary article offers a general assessment of the findings compiled in this volume and assesses the extent to which the individual contributions succeed in fashioning the broad issue of policy convergence into a cumulative and enduring body of work within EU scholarship.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is based on the research project 'Environmental governance in Europe: the impact of international institutions and trade on policy convergence (ENVIPOLCON)'. The support of the EU is gratefully acknowledged. For very helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper I am grateful to Bas Arts, Katharina Holzinger, Andy Jordan, David Levi-Faur, Duncan Liefferink and Jeremy Richardson.

NOTES

- 1 In the terminology used by Busch and Jörgens (2005), the mechanisms summarized under transnational communication would be referred to as policy diffusion.
- 2 For alternative but basically compatible classifications see, for instance, Bennett (1991) or Dolowitz and Marsh (2000).

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