Four ways we can improve policy diffusion research[*]

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1 Tweak measures, not concepts

I argue that in political science we have reached a consensus on what diffusion is and how it should be conceptualised. The definition put forward by Simmons, Dobbin and Garrett (2006, 787) can be adapted to fit the vast majority of processes political scientists are interested in:

> [I]nternational policy diffusion occurs when government policy decisions in a given country are systematically conditioned by prior policy choices made in other countries.

This definition is based on that, even more general, put forward by Strang (1991, 325) in sociology:

> [A]ny process where prior adoption of a trait or practice in a population alters the probability of adoption for the remaining non-adopters.

Thus, diffusion is a consequence of interdependence and is not defined exclusively (or even primarily) by the fact that something has spread. An implication is that, when studying diffusion, we are interested more in the process than in the outcome. Convergence, for instance, can be a useful complement to a diffusion analysis, or it can motivate the research in the first place, but is not what we are actually studying.

Moreover, there is consensus on three broad classes of diffusion mechanisms: learning, emulation, and competition (Simmons, Dobbin and Garrett, 2006; Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett,

2007; Braun and Gilardi, 2006; Gilardi, 2012; Graham, Shipan and Volden, 2013). Of course, many nuances can be introduced, but these three labels capture the main ideas quite accurately.

First, learning is a process where policies in one unit are influenced by the consequences of similar policies in other units. In other words, policy adoption in one unit is more likely if the policy has been successful elsewhere (Meseguer, 2004; Volden, 2006; Gilardi, 2010). There are different forms of success. Success can be related to (a) the goals that the policy is designed to achieve, (b) the challenges of its implementation, and (c) its political support. When considering the adoption of a policy, policy makers can learn from others about all these dimensions. For instance, Volden (2006) showed that US states were more likely to imitate health insurance programs target to needy children from other states that managed to increase insurance rates while keeping costs low, while Gilardi (2010) found that, under some circumstances, policy makers are more likely to imitate a policy if elsewhere it has been shown to be compatible with the re-election of those who enacted it.

Second, in contrast to learning, emulation is not related to the objective consequences of a policy. Instead, the symbolic and socially constructed characteristics of policies are crucial here (Cao, 2009; Greenhill, 2010; Krook and True, 2010). Inspired by sociological institutionalism, the conceptualization of this mechanism implies that units have to conform to their normative environment. Thus, some policies will enjoy high acceptance, regardless of whether they "work" or not. By contrast, others will be taboo, even though they could possibly be beneficial. Another way to see this mechanism is that the "burden of proof" changes over time as a function of social acceptance. When considering a radical policy innovation, the burden of proof rests on its advocates, but when it becomes widely acceptance, it is the opponents of the policy who have to make their case compellingly in order to prevent its adoption. For example, Greenhill (2010) argues that international governmental organizations (IGOs) enhance the spread of human rights by fostering the development of norms through the socialization of their members. In this view, the material consequences of respecting human rights carry less weight than the the pressure for confirming with a norm within a given peer group.

Third, competition occurs when units react to one another in the attempt of attracting or retaining resources. Tax competition is the prototypical example (Basinger and Hallerberg, 2004; Cao, 2010), but competitive dynamics can be found also in many other areas of economic

	Learning	Emulation	Competition	Total
Proximity	10	11	3	24
Interaction	7	14	1	22
Success	18	3	0	21
Similarity	6	12	13	31
Critical mass	4	7	1	12
Trade	2	4	5	11
Total	47	51	23	121

Table 1: *The operationalization of diffusion mechanisms is inconsistent (Maggetti and Gilardi, 2014).*

policy, such as capital account and exchange rate policies (Simmons and Elkins, 2004), bilateral investment treaties (Elkins, Guzman and Simmons, 2006), and market-oriented infrastructure reforms (Henisz, Zelner and Guillén, 2005). For instance, Simmons and Elkins (2004) found that a country is more likely to liberalize its international economic policies following similar reform among its competitors, defined as countries with which it shares similar trade relationships.

(Some would add a fourth mechanism, coercion, but I tend to disagree. Coercion can definitely contribute to the spread of a policy, but it does not fit the definitions cited above.)

I argue that the diffusion literature in political science is, and should be, coalescing around these definitions. Therefore, conceptually speaking, it is pretty clear what we talk about when we talk about diffusion. There is definitely room for some conceptual improvement, but not much. Most new conceptual distinctions are hairsplitting. Where we have real problems is with operationalization. A meta-analysis of 100+ diffusion studies has found that there is a lot of confusion on what indicators are appropriate for the different mechanisms (Maggetti and Gilardi, 2014). The same indicators are used for different mechanisms, and different indicators are used for the same mechanism (Table 1). This has to improve if we want to generate more cumulative knowledge, but it does not necessarily require conceptual advances—just conceptual consistence.

2 Be clear about goals: Learn about diffusion or use diffusion to learn about something else?

I argue that there are two types of research questions that are worth asking. First, we can try to make a contribution to the diffusion literature itself. This is becoming harder and harder to

pull off successfully. Yet another study showing that a unit is more likely to adopt a policy if its neighbors/competitors/etc. have done so is not going to cut it anymore. What is required is better, more focused questions, which themselves require better, more focused theory. Since the building blocks of diffusion are fairly clear, theoretical advances should aim to explain more precisely how they operate in different contexts. For instance, some scholars have been working on how practices diffuse and become norms in virtue of the signals they send. Thus, refusing to invite observers to monitor elections has become an unambiguous sign that a country is not democratic, which is why even clearly non-democratic states do it (Hyde, 2011). In my own work I have tried to move theory forward by, for instance, arguing that different policy makers learn from different policy outcomes (including implications for their re-election) (Gilardi, 2010).

Second, we can try to use the insights of diffusion research to learn something new about other phenomena. Diffusion often gives an original angle for old questions. For instance, traditional work on tax competition focuses on, well, competition, but diffusion research tells us that this is just one type of interdependence among others: there is more to competition than just competition—for instance, socialization (Gilardi and Wasserfallen, 2014). Or, the literature on women's representation has identified many types of spillovers, but it has not looked at cross-unit influences. It turns out that the number of women candidates in one unit increases with the number of women elected in other units, but only early in the early stages of women's representation (Gilardi, 2014). This is because women's participation in politics has become increasingly accepted as normal over time but also, more specifically, because cross-unit influences occur only when no female incumbent is running for re-election (Gilardi, 2014). Since over time there are fewer and fewer such units, the scope for cross-unit effects becomes smaller.

3   Upgrade research designs

Standard research designs have almost fulfilled their potential. $y_{i,t} = \rho W y_{i,t-1} + X_{i,t}\beta + \epsilon_{i,t}$ has been done over and over again. Mostly for good reasons: it is a good approach to show that something diffuses. But if we want to push things forward, at this point we need to improve on this.

First, research designs should be tailored to the specific questions asked. This is a truism that applies to any area, of course, but the problem seems particularly acute in diffusion research.

There is a clear template with which we can study almost anything, so there is the temptation to actually do it. Which is fine, except that we cannot expect significant new insights to follow.

Second, we need better data. Often this means moving away from cross-national analysis, which is also a trend in political science in general. In many cases sub-national units offer data of higher quality, are more comparable, and are closer to the level at which the action is really going on. We should also think creatively about data sources. Automated text analysis seems an especially promising avenue in this respect (Gilardi, Shipan and Wüest, 2013).

Third, whenever possible we should carry out "placebo tests," that is, look for diffusion where there should be none. For instance, Lloyd, Simmons and Stewart (2012) argue that human trafficking laws spread through policy externalities linked to the diversion of trafficking flow, and find evidence of diffusion among countries sharing many road connections, which are the main channel through which people are trafficked across international borders. As a placebo test, they then check whether roads matter also for other closely related policies which, however, do not involve externalities (victim protection), do not involve externalities via surface traffic (money laundering), or do not involve transnational externalities (internal trafficking). The null results for these tests strengthen the original argument. Similarly, in my study of the diffusion of women representation I replicated the analyses using the number of male candidates as the dependent variable instead of that of female candidates (Gilardi, 2014). The fact that I find diffusion effects for women but not for men is a strong confirmation of the argument that cross-unit spillovers pick up at least some of the effect of role models and are not due to some generic geographic clustering.

Fourth, we should take causal inference more seriously. This is a big trend (some would say fad) in political science right now, but one needs not be an identification Taleban to say that very, very few diffusion studies in political science pay any attention at all to this issue. Although in our context the problem is even thornier than usual—some say there is little (Angrist, 2013) or no hope (Shalizi and Thomas, 2011)—the status quo is not satisfactory and we should do our best to improve on this front.

4 Discuss why diffusion matters

Diffusion scholars are often interested in diffusion as such. But why should others care? Policy diffusion actually has important practical implications. For instance, it would be very useful for advocates of a given policy to know which states or countries one should persuade in order to accelerate its spread. By analogy with the "social multiplier" (Glaeser, Sacerdote and Scheinkman, 2002), we can call this the "diffusion multiplier:" if the "right" units adopts a policy, others will be more likely to do the same. Thus, by influencing one unit directly, many more are reached indirectly. This works also the other way round: if one wants to prevent the spread of a policy, it would be useful to know on which units you should concentrate the efforts. Of course, we first need to know which units are influential and why, which is where diffusion research has something to say. We are nowhere near being able to make such specific recommendations, but this is certainly one of the potential practical payoffs of this literature.

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