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# Party policy diffusion in the European multilevel space: what it is, how it works, and why it matters

Fabio Wolkenstein<sup>a</sup>, Roman Senninger <sup>a</sup> and Daniel Bischof<sup>db</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Political Science, Aarhus Universitet, Aarhus, Denmark; <sup>b</sup>Department of Political Science, University of Zurich, Zurich Switzerland

## ABSTRACT

Almost since the end of World War II, transnational cooperation among political parties has been a common feature of European politics. This paper makes the case for studying transnational partisan cooperation in the European multilevel space, focusing in particular on the phenomenon of “party policy diffusion.” At the heart of the paper is a conceptual discussion of party policy diffusion in the EU. Specifically, we look at the (1) aims that lead parties to learn from or emulate parties in other countries; (2) the mechanisms through which this may work; and (3) the wider implications of this practice both for domestic and European politics. Drawing on this conceptual discussion, the paper then goes on to offer leads as to how the phenomenon of party policy diffusion can be studied in the European multilevel space. To this end, we briefly point to possible ways of testing hypotheses about party policy diffusion using spatially explicit modeling strategies such as spatial regression models and exponential random graph models for transnational party networks.

## Introduction

It is uncontroversial that political activity is less and less restricted to the nation state and its traditional institutions of government. Nowhere is this perhaps truer than in the European Union, where decades of economic and political integration have led to the emergence of multiple trans- and supranational political arenas, on the one hand, and cross-border networks of political actors aimed at coordinating joint action in these new sites of political conflict and decision-making, on the other. In this multilevel political space, it is not atypical for political actors from different member states to cooperate on a regular basis, for instance to exchange information about policies. Political competition likewise acquired a trans- and supranational dimension: political parties increasingly look to other countries’ successful governments for inspiration in terms of policies. In this article, we discuss these and related phenomena under the heading of “party policy diffusion in the European multilevel space.”

**CONTACT** Roman Senninger  [rsenninger@ps.au.dk](mailto:rsenninger@ps.au.dk)  Department of Political Science, Aarhus Universitet, Aarhus 8000, Denmark

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In the last decades, a rich body of literature has developed around the concept of “diffusion.” Scholars have studied in various different ways how policies in one country affect the policies in other countries (e.g. Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007; Weyland 2005; Simmons and Elkins 2004; Meseguer 2009; Gilardi 2010; cf. also Dolowitz and Marsh 2000). The purpose of this article is to contribute to these debates, first by exploring at a conceptual level the *distinctive features and mechanisms of policy diffusion across political parties*; and second by providing guidance on *how party policy diffusion can be studied empirically*.

In focusing on *party policy diffusion* (rather than *diffusion tout court*), we build in particular on recent work by Böhmelt et al. (2016) which highlights the important role of partisan actors in diffusion processes (rather than seeing states as the principal actors in these processes). However, we seek to move beyond Böhmelt et al.’s contribution by advancing a conceptually more sophisticated perspective on party policy diffusion, as well as reflecting on alternative research strategies that do justice to the multi-dimensionality of the phenomenon of diffusion. Examples and illustrations from the case of the EU will be used throughout to link the conceptual discussion to real-world phenomena, thereby also underlining the ultimate relevance of systematically studying party policy diffusion in the European multilevel space.

The article divides into five sections. We begin by conceptualizing parties as central actors in diffusion processes (Section two), and then examine the object of diffusion (Section three) and the mechanisms of diffusion (Section four). On the basis of this conceptual discussion, we also offer leads as to how the phenomenon of party policy diffusion can be studied in the European multilevel space, outlining possible ways of how to test hypotheses about party policy diffusion using quantitative and qualitative methods (Section five). In sum, our efforts to unpack actors, policies, and mechanisms of diffusion, as well as our suggestions as regards research design, should be useful for scholars interested in party policy diffusion and help them to avoid mistakes previously made in the policy diffusion literature (Maggetti and Gilardi 2016).

## Parties as central actors

Research on party policy diffusion (Böhmelt et al. 2016) seeks to understand how policies diffuse across parties that operate in different countries. The key *actors* in that process are political parties. But what exactly *are* political parties? This is the first question that needs handling if we are to properly understand party policy diffusion.

The standard view in political science conceives parties in a Schumpeterian way as teams of politicians, usually meaning that the party = the party leadership (see Schumpeter 1942; Downs 1957). However, when it comes to cross-national diffusion processes, such a view seems problematically reductive.

Parties are multi-layered organizations, and diffusion often occurs via several of their layers.

A first useful step to better understand this point is revisiting Böhmelt et al.'s (2016) influential recent study of party policy diffusion. Böhmelt et al. interestingly never spell out what they take parties to be, but they note that one way in which parties might learn from, or be incentivized to, emulate their counter-parts in other countries is through transnational meetings, for example the meetings of the party groups in the European Parliament (EP). On these occasions, it is argued, "information [about the successful strategies of like-minded parties in other jurisdictions] may be readily available" (Böhmelt et al. 2016, 401). Importantly, though, these meetings usually do not involve party leaders or governments. Their main protagonists are arguably MEPs – who are not necessarily central figures within the party and in national politics – as well as non-elected party staff. So, if Böhmelt et al. are correct, and this mechanism is crucial for diffusion, then we must also adopt a wider conceptualization of parties. Focusing on party leaders only is not enough.

Now, what kind of "other" actors might there be within parties, in addition to party leaderships? To answer this question we turn, as a first approximation, to Katz and Mair's (1993, 594) three-fold distinction between *the party in public office* (the party in government or parliament), *the party on the ground* (the members, activists, etc.), and *the party in central office* (the national leadership of the party which, at least in PR systems, may be organizationally distinct from the party in public office). Disaggregating parties in this way, we can think more systematically about the different kinds of partisan agents that are implicated in party policy diffusion.

The first key point we wish to advance is that *each* of Katz and Mair's three "faces of party organization" can extend into the transnational realm, thus enabling policy diffusion within *parties of (roughly) the same political orientation*. Below, in the sections on mechanisms and venues of diffusion, we will explain this in greater empirical detail, as well as mention cases where diffusion occurs across ideological lines. For now, consider the following indicative examples of party policy diffusion in the European Union:

- *The party in public office* can transnationally connect with its counter-parts in core decision making arenas in the EU, as do national governments in the Council.
- *The party on the ground* is naturally more dispersed in terms of organization than the party in government or parliament, but there are multiple transnational channels through which party members and activists may learn from like-minded others from different countries. Consider the multiple partisan think tanks at the EU level. These regularly hold events where ordinary party members participate and can engage in cross-national dialogues,

thus learning from each other (e.g. the *Social-Democratic Foundation for European Progressive Studies*).

- *The party in central office* may likewise make use of think tanks to exchange information cross-nationally, but there are also other channels available, such as congresses of transnational European party groups. The European People's Party (EPP), for instance, meets once every three years, involving delegates from the national party leaderships. In addition, parties in central office meet bilaterally, be it to support each other during election campaigns or simply to exchange information and to stay in touch with each other.

Accepting that parties are not unitary actors but multi-layered ones has a further important implication for how we think of diffusion processes: it allows us to conceptualize *interactional* dynamics between the different party layers that may impact diffusion. For example, the *party on the ground* may put pressure on the *party in public office* to adopt a particular position that is influenced by what parties in other countries have (successfully) done. There is nothing unfamiliar in this; indeed, there is plenty of evidence from the domestic context that parties' policy positions can be influenced by multiple different groupings within the party, over and above party leaders (see, e.g. Lehrer 2012; Schumacher, de Vries, and Vis 2013; Pettitt 2018). Our contention is that cross-national policy diffusion processes can unfold in similar ways – a proposition we will flesh out more in the below discussion on mechanisms and venues of diffusion.

Importantly, the interactions that occur between the different layers of a party can plausibly be explained not only by way of different policy preferences, but also, and more generally, by different *strategic* dispositions. To relate this point to the example we have just offered, it is often assumed that the activists and party members in the party on the ground have a *policy-seeking* orientation, whereas the party leaders and MPs in the party in public office tend towards *office-seeking* (e.g. Hennl and Franzmann 2017). That is to say, the former are inclined to insist on standing up for the party's main normative commitments, even if this means losing electoral support, while the latter are more readily willing to modify the party's position in accordance with shifts in public opinion. If this is correct, it follows that diffusion processes are not always or necessarily a by-product of office-seeking aspirations, as assumed, for example, by Böhmelt et al. (2016). When diffusion occurs via the party on the ground, it may indeed be policy-seeking incentives that promote it.

## The object of diffusion

Having outlined how we understand parties qua *organizations*, and having offered a first approximation of what follows from a multi-layered

understanding of parties for the study of diffusion processes, the next question that arises concerns the object of diffusion: policy. Now, what are we talking about when we talk about policy? Here again, the answer might seem relatively clear-cut: the object of policy diffusion is positions that parties take on a basic left-right scale, as found (for example) in party manifestos. Böhmelt et al.'s (2016) aforementioned study of party policy diffusion employs this understanding of policy: The authors affirmatively note that the left-right scale provides a "common, well-understood language" for conceptualizing and measuring the policy preferences of party elites (which are, as noted, treated as synonymous with parties), one that "seizes the primary bases of political competition across national settings" (401) (on this view also see McDonald and Budge 2005).

Without denying that this view holds some plausibility, it seems that limiting the focus of enquiry to left-right positions of parties as found in manifestos (or other party documents) risks blinding us to multiple relevant complexities of diffusion processes. The argument we want to advance is that research on cross-national diffusion must take seriously the *differences between the different kinds of political contents that parties engage with, and the way in which these contents inter-relate*. We speak of *contents* here in order to underscore that parties do not only process, adopt and promote policy positions in the just-mentioned sense; as party theorists emphasize, parties' actions are usually also structured around some general normative principles and aims articulating how power should be exercised and in what way political institutions should enable social cooperation (White and Ypi 2016). This means one can differentiate between (1) principles, (2) aims, and (3) policies.

Before elaborating in what ways exactly this distinction is pertinent to the empirical study of party policy diffusion, let us briefly explain the categories of principles, aims, and policies (we draw here on Elster 1998, 100 and Dryzek and Niemeyer 2006, 638). The first, *principles*, refers to the basic values the party endorses in its foundational ideology (e.g. "our party seeks to maximize equality"). The second, *aims*, refers to how particular actions or courses of action are thought, either by the party as a whole or by one of its component parts, to map onto values in cause and effect terms (e.g. "more equality can be achieved by redistributing from the richest to the poorest in society"). The third category, *policies*, refers to the concrete means through which aims could be realized, according to either the party as a whole or one of its component parts (e.g. "redistributing from the richest to the poorest in society is best achieved by way of increasing the income tax for the highest income bracket to 55%").

The distinction between principles, aims, and policies allows us to better understand important complexities of cross-national diffusion processes among parties. Recall the above example, in which the *party on the ground* puts pressure on the *party in public office* to adopt a particular position that

parties in other countries have successfully adopted. Now, let us add another layer of complexity to this example and assume that the party on the ground seeks to pressure the party in public office to adopt particular *aims* (not policies). Suppose further that the party in public office gives in to the pressure of the party on the ground and adopts those aims. The interesting thing to note is that it does *not* follow from this that the party in public office resultantly also adopts the same *policies* that the successful party in the other country adopted. While endorsing the aims of another country's party will probably have *some* impact on concrete policies, what policies exactly are promoted is bound to depend much on the domestic party's national context and the feasibility constraints in place. What we have here then is a case of *aims*-diffusion that, following our three-fold distinction, is markedly different from *policy* diffusion but nonetheless a case of diffusion.

Unpacking diffusion processes in this way suggests that there are numerous variations in which diffusion might occur. In addition to a diffusion of aims via the party on the ground, for example, we might imagine a diffusion of concrete policies via the party in central office; a diffusion of principles via the party in public office (think of the political project of the "Third Way"); and so on. All the while these diffusion processes might have very different impacts on the other, remaining two kinds of political contents. So, for example, adopting a concrete *policy* of another country's party might not affect the general *aims* a party promotes: the adopted policy might simply be seen as a more effective means to achieve an already-endorsed aim. Conversely, the cross-border diffusion of *aims* might lead to a streamlining of certain *policies* across countries, since the newly-endorsed aims demand very similar policy responses. These and many other combinations are both logically and empirically possible.

## Mechanisms of diffusion

There is at least one further way in which the principles/aims/policies-distinction can shed light on party diffusion processes. This has to do with how parties look for guidance outside the national political arena. Traditionally, research on diffusion processes is concerned with the mechanisms of *learning*, *emulation* and *competition* (Elkins and Simmons 2005; Gilardi 2016). In the following, we discuss each of the three mechanisms with particular focus on the need and strategies of political parties to get access to information about our three different objects of diffusion (principles, aims, and policies). Our primary goals are to explicate differences between possible diffusion mechanisms, and to link those mechanisms to the central actors and objects of party policy diffusion. Here we draw on established theories of policy diffusion and discuss them in the light of our object of study, namely political parties.

## Learning

The first mechanism we concentrate on is learning. Learning denotes a change in an actors' evaluation of an object of diffusion that is induced by new information and evidence about that object. Studying policy diffusion through learning is accordingly concerned with the availability and exchange of information. The idea is that the actors who are willing to adopt an object will only be able to evaluate and learn when they can observe the causes and effects of another actor's adoption of that object.

The policy diffusion literature labels this kind of learning the "rational learning approach" (Weyland 2005). Actors are assumed to approximate principles of comprehensive rationality. As a starting point, actors are goal-oriented and want to solve a problem. To that end, they engage in a comprehensive search for a solution by screening the entire international environment. After a cost-benefit analysis of the various options, the most promising one becomes adopted. This means that political parties will adopt the principles/aims/policies of foreign parties when they conclude that these are *effective* in solving a particular problem (Shipan and Volden 2008).

This focus on effectiveness (or success) has consequences regarding the objects that are most likely to become internationally diffused across actors. When diffusion is driven by learning, we suggest, it will be limited to *aims* and *policies*, for only aims and policies are specific enough for political parties to understand whether their adoption by a foreign party has solved a particular problem efficiently. In contrast, *principles*-diffusion, the diffusion of basic values that parties endorse, is not compatible with the mechanism of learning. After all, it is difficult to see how one should evaluate the effectiveness and success of basic principles, given that the latter provide just a general frame or justification for more specific actions.

How do parties actually receive information about the precise measures of foreign parties' adoptions and their effects? As noted, the mechanism of learning usually assumes that parties that engage in diffusion processes follow a "scientific" strategy, evaluating individual pieces of information and basing their final decision on the evidence obtained (Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007). Numerous contributions in the policy diffusion literature question this "scientific" understanding of the process, however, stressing that the actual process of learning is socially channeled in one way or another (Hall 1993). The argument rests on evidence from psychological experiments showing that humans frequently draw on inferential shortcuts instead of using the full information available. Thus, in reality, principles of comprehensive rationality are rarely instantiated. Given this, policy diffusion theories highlight several inferential shortcuts (or cognitive heuristics) referring to the frequently observed phenomenon of bounded rationality (Weyland 2009).



Consider that parties that are willing to learn from foreign parties often have difficulties to assess the precise consequences of foreign parties' actions. For example, parties may not be able to identify the effects of a policy because the policy is part of a large set of policies that blurs the individual effect of the one policy that the party is interested in. Similarly, a party might not be able to observe foreign parties' aims because it has no access to internal party documents and therefore simply lacks information about the cause and effect terms identified by the foreign parties. To remove such epistemic obstacles, political parties rely on heuristics to make sense of both the complexity of information overload and the lack of information (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982). Very often, the heuristic applied builds on availability and familiarity. This means that parties, instead of relying on the full set of information, only focus on a small set of information that is immediately available.

Let us start with the availability heuristic. What kind of information is immediately available? Several studies demonstrate that information about the actions of foreign actors with which one is in close contact and communicates regularly will be most readily available (Elkins and Simmons 2005). Thus, a party will be more likely to evaluate information and eventually learn from a foreign party if the two are in contact with each other and communicate on a regular basis. To illustrate how contact and communication might promote diffusion in the European multi-level system, we turn to the already-mentioned case of party groups in the EP.

Party groups in the EP constitute the most central form of party representation at the European level, consisting of representatives from national political parties. Since the EP is one of the EU's co-legislators, a key task of party groups is to build and coordinate political majorities on legislation, the budget, and votes in the parliament. To this end, groups convene during the so called "group week" in Brussels, where they prepare the upcoming plenary agenda, and meet in Strasbourg during plenary week to brief before and debrief after parliamentary sittings. Importantly, these meetings, and the activities surrounding them, form an important channel of communication between the different national parties (cf. Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2011). Groups regularly receive visitors from other countries; they often send delegations to national parties; organize seminars and conferences with national parties and publish brochures, studies and newsletters aimed in part at national parties. All of this provides plenty of opportunities to receive information about policy ideas and policy positions of foreign parties. In other words, diffusion through learning is facilitated by the regular meetings of EP party groups.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Representatives of national parties to the EP have regular contact to the *party in public office*, the *party in central office* as well as the *party on the ground*, thus, there are many different possibilities how information available in the EP make their way to the decision-making units of national political parties.

In this context, parties might also rely on what is sometimes called the familiarity heuristic (Elkins and Simmons 2005). Consider that it could be the case that a party that evaluates information from foreign parties of the same EP group is still facing difficulties because there is simply too much information to process. In such a case, a party might deliberately select to consider only the information from a small set of parties that are most similar to itself. This short-cut builds on the idea that actions of parties with perceived common interests constitute a useful guide to a party's own behavior. So, in addition to *availability*, *familiarity* is a relevant short-cut parties may rely on when learning from foreign parties.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, it is important to note that a complete picture of the mechanism of learning must consider interactional dynamics between the sub-units of the party. This means that studies on party policy diffusion that look to learning as the core mechanism should be specific about the various party sub-units that engage in the diffusion process. Crucial in this connection is the aforementioned tripartite differentiation between (potentially) different kinds of party elites (party in public office, party in central office) and the party base (party on the ground). While in the example above party policy diffusion is depicted as an elite process, with parliamentarians and other prominent party figures being in contact with their counterparts from other countries, one might also observe that the party base receives access to the relevant information about the actions of foreign actors and, thus, becomes involved in the updating of party beliefs about effective aims and policies. We return to this in a later section.

## **Emulation**

Emulation can be seen as an extreme version of socially channeled diffusion. In contrast to learning, the mechanism of emulation is totally detached from the success or failure of policies elsewhere. In addition, parties that emulate actions of foreign parties are not interested in processing information and finding new evidence. Instead, the driving forces that make parties take over the actions of foreign parties are *cultural and social norms*. As such, emulation focuses on the actor (e.g. the other parties that are adopting an object) and not on the action itself like it is the case in the learning approach (Shipan and Volden 2008).

Thus, diffusion driven by emulation occurs because a certain foreign party (or a group of foreign parties) adopted an object of diffusion. In contrast to the learning mechanism that is driven by self-regarding interests, emulation is

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<sup>2</sup>While both short-cuts are best realized when there is contact between the involved parties, we note that contact is not a necessary condition. One could imagine situations in which information becomes available through the media or other third-party actors.

driven by other-regarding interests (Weyland 2005). The emulating party is only interested in becoming as similar as possible to the party that adopted the object. The consequences of this act of object imitation are of no significance. What matters is *reputation* and *legitimacy* (Elkins and Simmons 2005; Weyland 2005). If a number of internationally relevant actors adopt a certain policy, this confers a certain degree of legitimacy upon potential adopters: the thought is that imitating the earlier adopters may make the potential adopters “one of them.” As a rule of thumb, the higher the number of adopters the more pressure is put on the potential adopters to follow the critical mass. However, the number of actors becomes less important if highly reputable actors are among the early adopters.

Which objects are most likely to become transnationally diffused across political parties according to the mechanism? A considerable difference to the mechanism of learning is that there are no objects that *cannot* be diffused through this mechanism. As mentioned earlier, the mechanism of emulation focuses on the *actor* instead of the action. This implies that all three objects of diffusion might spread transnationally as long as the early adopter is considered worthy of being imitated. In other words, a party that wants to benefit from the legitimacy and reputation of a group of adopters might equally likely adopt their principles, aims, and policies because it only cares about becoming as similar as possible to the group members. That said, given that cultural and social group norms matter a lot for the realization of diffusion, we conjecture that positions on general group *principles* are most likely to be emulated by parties, as larger party groups usually agree on overall principles but less on specific measures.

To provide an example we return to transnational party groups in the European Union. Party groups like the EPP (European People’s Party) usually define basic principles that all members are (supposedly) committed to. These principles are marked by the very general and non-specific shape that we have argued is a distinguishing feature of principles. For example, according to its basic principles the EPP is fully committed to the social market economy, yet it refrains from defining more precise aims and policies with regard to social market economy.<sup>3</sup> A closer specification of *what exactly* a social market economy entails that all members of the EPP could endorse would likely be very difficult to formulate given the ideological heterogeneity of the group.

In connection with the mechanism of learning, we have seen that a party’s access to relevant information about other parties’ actions is important; therefore, contact to and communication with parties is beneficial. In the case of emulation, contact and communication may also play an important role to identify other parties’ actions. However, since the focus is clearly on the

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<sup>3</sup>This low level of specificity might also be beneficial for the party that is imitating foreign parties because the adoption of basic principles is less consequential than the adoption of aims and precise policies.

actor and not so much on the specific actions, much less detailed information is necessary. At a minimum, parties only require a basic understanding of *what kind of action* was taken by the other parties, without paying much attention to the consequences of the action taken.

Finally, as with the mechanism of learning we might observe interactional dynamics. The *party in public office* might want to adopt new principles to imitate foreign parties that hold high reputation within elite circles. However, these principles could conflict with the preferences of the *party on the ground* that wants to adopt different principles that are more in line with party members' images of reputation and legitimacy. Or indeed, if the often-made assumption that ordinary party members are more principled and "policy-seeking" is correct, then conflicts between the party in public office and the party on the ground might arise because the latter resist shifts on principles altogether, demanding that the party's principles ought to be upheld rather than transformed.

### **Competition**

The final mechanism we address is competition. In the classic literature on policy diffusion the mechanism of competition refers to economic competition between countries. As noted in the introduction, key examples are a "race to the bottom" scenario, e.g. regarding welfare spending (Volden 2002). However, competition is not necessarily defined in economic terms. Think for example of the recent refugee and migrant crisis in Europe, where many countries appeared to compete in a "race to the bottom" concerning the reception of refugees, trying to outperform one another in hostility towards refugees so as to become less attractive as destination countries. Many other diffusion scenarios are conceivable, with competition between countries being a plausible explanation.

Importantly, however, when we turn to political parties as the central actors of international diffusion, competition loses its explanatory power. The reason is that political parties compete with each other *at the national level*. For example, the German Social Democrats compete with the remaining German parties and not with foreign parties, and the same is true for virtually all parties we can think of. In general, the resources parties compete for – votes and seats in office – are determined domestically. This is even the case for the world's only supranational parliament, the EP: its seat distribution is determined by simultaneous national elections. So, contrary to the competition between countries the competition between parties is not directly affected by transnational dependence.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>However, several studies show that domestic party competition can lead to diffusion between national political parties (Williams 2015; Williams, Seki, and Whitten 2016).

Domestic party competition can still be linked to our paper's topic, however. This is because it may create the initial incentive to engage in diffusion across borders. How does this work? Consider first that parties face uncertainty about their electoral fortunes, as they do not know exactly whether they have an optimal strategy. Accordingly, they might orient themselves toward electorally successful parties from abroad – even if those parties are *not* politically like-minded – screening and copying the principles, aims, and policies of those parties. Similarly, parties may ground their decision to reproduce objects of diffusion in the political consequences of policy reforms. In that case, they do not focus on the policy effects of reforms but on political effects of reforms; for example, public support for the reform (for empirical evidence, see Gilardi 2010). In sum, competition between vote- and office-seeking domestic parties creates a reason for parties to engage in transnational diffusion. An outstanding question is still what the relevant mechanisms that underlie and structure the diffusion process are. After all, if competition is only the force that *initiates* diffusion processes, this does not by itself explain how exactly diffusion works in each particular case.

### **How to test hypotheses about party policy diffusion**

Existing research on party policy diffusion successfully answers the questions of *whether* policy diffuses across parties (Böhmelt et al. 2016; Senninger and Bischof 2018), and *which* parties are leaders and followers of this process (Lehrer et al. 2017). However, current empirical strategies appear to be ill-suited to distinguish the complex *conceptual* differences we discussed above. Moreover, a range of *methodological* concerns remain to be addressed in the current literature. Some of them have arisen in relation to party policy diffusion (Juhl 2018), while others are related to the study of diffusion in general, such as issues of endogeneity and omitted variable biases. Addressing all of these conceptual and methodological issues is well beyond the scope of the present paper. We nonetheless want to propose a number of research designs that promise to overcome some of these issues and thereby advance the study of party policy diffusion.

### **Understanding mechanisms and mediation**

We begin by discussing the potential to learn more about the *mechanisms* (learning, emulation, competition) behind party policy diffusion, since we believe this is crucial for our theoretical understanding of diffusion processes and key to drawing the right implications from empirical findings.

Existing research on party policy diffusion relies on data stemming from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP). Data collected at the macro-level of political parties does not allow researchers to make judgments concerning

the *intentions* (mechanisms) behind party behavior. Instead, researchers observe some behavior – such as the ideological convergence of party ideology – and interpret this pattern as being consistent with learning, emulation or competition. However, correlations between party ideologies across time are hardly surprising, and can have multiple different causes (on this point, see e.g. Caramani 2015).

Similar to previous research on diffusion we believe that experimentation is key to better understand the mechanisms standing behind party policy diffusion (Butler et al. 2017). Classical audit studies can be used to experimentally assign information about party behavior abroad to domestic parliamentarians (e.g. Grose, Malhotra, and Van Houweling 2015). In a first design letter writers could ask parliamentarians what they think about the shared information, and if they seek to “emulate” the actions of the party abroad. Researchers can then collect the responses and analyze how party elites responded and how they engaged with the material. For instance, researchers could send a sub-sample of Conservative parliamentarians information about the behavior of a Social Democratic party abroad while another sub-sample of Conservative parliamentarians receives information about a Conservative party abroad. This would allow a more direct and convincing test of the claim by pundits and scholars that political parties mainly seek to learn from information of parties within the same party family (*mediation*).

Similar experimentation is thinkable using survey experiments sent via email to party elites and/or the party base. To be sure, experimentation with elites comes with its own baggage of challenges (small *N*) and shortcomings (external validity). But, on the other hand, drawing on experimental methods would in many instances also help overcome problems of endogeneity and potentially omitted variable biases. In sum, like all research designs experimental methods come with trade-offs; but we think that making increased use of them in the study of party policy diffusion could significantly contribute to our knowledge of the subject matter.

### ***Differentiating principles, aims, and policies***

As briefly noted above, current research on party policy diffusion uses parties' general left-right placement to study diffusion. At best such measures are an amalgam of principles, aims and policies. Thus, a necessary step forwards would be to define and conceptualize measures of all three in political text. A first step in this direction would be to disentangle the general left-right scale coming with the CMP data. This can be achieved easily as the CMP allows researchers to focus on single dimensions of political conflict (e.g. positions on the European Union or positions on welfare policies). Doing so would ensure that scholars actually knew whether parties adapt their policies on the

same dimension or whether they moved their general left-right scale in the same direction but on very different policy dimensions.

A second and more promising avenue would be to conduct an original quantitative text analysis using any kind of political text – e.g. parliamentary speeches, campaign materials, press releases (Grimmer and Stewart 2013).<sup>5</sup> Focusing on a single political dimension – e.g. welfare policies – researchers' main task would be need to identify the conceptual differences between principles, aims and policies. To see how this could be done, recall first the difference in specificity of proposed legislation in our equality-example (see above, Section three). Using *plagiarism software* (see, e.g. Merz, Regel, and Lewandowski 2016) could enable researchers to compare specificity, thus identifying whether parties “merely” seek to redistribute more from the rich to the poor (i.e. share *aims*), or whether they also agree to increase income tax by 55% (i.e. adopt the same *policy instruments*). Practical burdens notwithstanding, it seems clear that making use of quantitative text analysis in this way will generate data that is superior to any pre-coded data (such as manifesto data).

### ***Distinguishing actors***

Taking the nuanced approaches to study diffusion provided by the policy transfer literature as a point of departure, researchers studying party policy diffusion could also resort to qualitative methods in order to gain a close understanding of the forms and patterns of contact and communication among partisan actors that promote diffusion.<sup>6</sup> Studies of this kind already exist, though they are rarely framed in terms of party policy diffusion. For example, in his work on the role of Europarties in EU treaty making and -reform, Johansson (2002a, 2002b, 2016a, 2016b) draws on elite interviews with officials of the European People's Party (EPP) and archival sources in order to reconstruct the key encounters between EPP elites that helped their party group develop a shared position concerning the future of European Integration at critical junctures (e.g. the passing of the Single European Act). Highlighting the ultimate importance of a specific set of intergovernmental conferences for the streamlining of policy positions across borders, Johansson is able to tell a story that is of utmost relevance to the study of party policy diffusion, for it shows that it was *particular meetings* that proved important.

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<sup>5</sup>Of course, researchers would either need to focus on countries sharing the same language (e.g. Austria, Germany and German-speaking Switzerland) or translate texts into one single language before the analysis (de Vries, Schoonvelde, and Schumacher 2018).

<sup>6</sup>Other than policy diffusion research, most studies in the policy transfer literature employ small-N qualitative case studies focusing on a detailed analysis of the transfer of a policy across a well-defined group of units (Marsh and Sharman 2009). Bulmer and Padgett (2005) fruitfully bring together policy transfer and the multi-level system of the EU by employing case studies.

In-depth qualitative research of this kind should be encouraged in research on party policy diffusion not only because it permits us to better understand the specifics of particular cases of diffusion, but also because it can help refine existing assumptions and hypotheses, as well as generate new ones. Consider, for instance, Roos's (2019) long-term study of intra-party group unity in the EP prior to 1979. Building on semi-structured interviews and historical EP documents, Roos finds that MEP's gradual socialization into norms of group solidarity contributed to aligning their preferences and attitudes towards European Integration (cf. also Kaiser 2007). This raises relevant questions for contemporary research on diffusion, e.g. What is the role of such group norms in facilitating mutual learning in transnational partisan cooperation? Consider furthermore Macklin's (2013) party document and in-depth interview-based study of transnational networking on the far right, which shows that the construction of a common strategic "action frame" was a necessary precondition for certain far right parties to engage in transnational exchanges of information. Only when parties managed to see themselves as aiming to realize roughly the same *aims*, in other words, were they capable of exchanging more specific information about *policies*. Again, one might see this as hypothesis-generating, and posing new research questions, e.g. is agreement on *aims* a necessary and sufficient condition for learning at the level of policies?

Finally, in addition to making use of such methods as interviews and qualitative document analysis, scholars of party policy diffusion could also expand their methodological toolbox to include focus group interviews. These could for example be used in order to get a better understanding of the relationship between "ordinary" party members – the party on the ground – and the party elites on which most studies of party policy diffusion concentrate. If, as we have argued, there is plenty of potential for conflicts between the former and the latter in connection with policy diffusion, then focus groups, which characteristically "produce more in-depth information on the topic in hand" (Morgan 1996, 137) than most other methods, can shed light on the nature of those conflicts and the power dynamics at play (cf. Wolkenstein 2018). This would likely enhance our knowledge about what is the arguably the least-studied aspect of party policy diffusion, namely the role of intra-party dynamics in diffusion processes.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to clarify the nature of party policy diffusion in the European multilevel space, examining at a conceptual level (1) the actors engaged in diffusion processes, (2) the objects of diffusion, as well as (3) the mechanisms of diffusion. In addition to illuminating these fundamental issues, which tend to be insufficiently differentiated in the emerging debate on party policy diffusion, the article has sought to advance some practical suggestions



concerning the study of policy diffusion. Here, we have argued for what might be called a “pluralistic approach” to studying the topic, one that highlights the potential of multiple quantitative and qualitative research strategies to add to our understanding of party policy diffusion.

Perhaps the best way of thinking about the considerations put forth above is in terms of a conceptual and methodological toolbox: our ambition was to point to new and, we think, better ways of conceptualizing and studying party policy diffusion, a topic we consider interesting and valuable. We also do not deny that other perspectives on the party policy diffusion may be possible, again both in terms of concepts and methods. If our discussion pushes scholars to articulate a conception of party policy diffusion that differs from ours, or pushes them to develop alternative research strategies, we would take this to advance the larger debate. Given the relevance of processes of party policy diffusion in a politically integrated EU, we think it is a debate well worth pursuing.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Notes on contributors

**Fabio Wolkenstein** is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Aarhus University and Affiliated Researcher at the University of Amsterdam. He works on multiple themes in democratic theory, including the democratic theory of the European Union.

**Roman Senninger** is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Aarhus University. His research is concerned with the intersection of national and European Union politics.

**Daniel Bischof** is SNSF Ambizione Grant Holder (Senior Researcher) at the Department of Political Science, University of Zurich. His research interests lie in the fields of comparative politics and political economy comprising questions mainly about public opinion formation.

### ORCID

Roman Senninger  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2254-145X>

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