Party Policy Diffusion in the European Multilevel Space: What it is, how it works, and why it matters.

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1. Introduction

A rich body of literature has developed in the last decades around the concept of "diffusion" (e.g., Dobbins, Simmons & Garrett 2007; Simmons & Elkins 2004; Meseguer 2004; Gilardi 2010; cf. also Dolowitz and Marsh 2000). Conceptually, research on diffusion seeks to understand how policies in one country affect the policies in other countries. Thus, the major interest of research on diffusion is to understand *how, when* and *why* policies spread across nation states. The classroom example for such processes might be the politics of neo-liberalism spreading throughout advanced democracies in the last third of the 20th century, with politicians increasingly calling for market liberalization, privatization, deregulation and free trade (Simmons, Dobbin and Garret 2006).

Traditionally research on diffusion processes deals with three major mechanisms driving policy diffusion across states: *learning, emulation* and *competition* (Elkins & Simmons 2005; Gilardi 2016). The first, *learning*, refers to the idea that governments – much like scientists – empirically assess the quality of policies based on the success and failure of policies elsewhere. If policies in other countries are successful, domestic governments should then subsequently implement similar policies in the future (Volden 2006; Gilardi 2010). Success can hereby refer to (a) policies achieving the goals they are meant to achieve, (b) overcoming challenges to the implementation of particular policies and (c) maximizing political support for policies.

In contrast, *emulation* occurs irrespective of the success or failure of policies elsewhere. It happens when domestic governments seek to adapt their behavior towards a group norm. Thus, as a mechanism it is based on the principal ideas developed in constructivist thinking. Irrespective of policy evaluation, policies are being implemented because they enjoy a high acceptance for a group of peers while other policies are tabooed and, thus, never considered as a functional alternative. Finally, *competition* resonates with the idea that governments compete with each other for scarce resources. The prototypical example would be any "race to the bottom", such as competition on low taxing (Cao 2010) or the aforementioned wave of neo-liberalization in the last century (Simmons & Elkins 2004).

While initially being mainly a domain of research in the fields of political economy and conflict research (Harvey & Most 1985), in recent times the idea of policy diffusion has itself diffused into other areas of research (Graham, Shipan and Volden 2012). The concept has been prominently used to explain the rise and spread of public discontent during the Arab spring (Weyland 2012; Bamert, Gilardi &

Wasserfallen 2015); to explain the electoral success of female candidates (Gilardi 2015) and lately the diffusion of policy offerings across political parties (Böhmelt et al. 2016).

At first sight, the expansion of research on diffusion into different subfields of political science sounds plausible and intuitively straightforward: the concept of diffusion remains the same, the mechanisms standing behind diffusion remain similar, only the *actors* vary (for example, instead of diffusing across states policy ideas diffuse across political parties). Yet, as we will show in this paper, numerous conceptual, theoretical and empirical challenges emerge once we seek to understand how policy ideas diffuse across parties instead of states. The aim and contribution of this paper is to clarify what these challenges are exactly, why taking them seriously is important, and how one can navigate them conceptually. We begin by conceptualizing parties as central actors in diffusion processes (Section 2), and then examine the object of diffusion (Section 3) and the mechanisms of diffusion (Section 4) in turn. 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 5).

2. 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 study of party policy diffusion. This study interestingly never fully spells out how exactly it conceives of parties but notes 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 this point, also see Senninger, Bischof & Ezrow 2018). 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). Now, of course, these meetings usually do not involve party leaders or governments. They centrally involve MEPs – who are not necessarily central figures within the party and in national politics – as well as non-elected party staff. *If* Böhmelt et al. are correct, and this mechanism is crucial for diffusion, surely, 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 theory, is 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 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 et al. 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.

3. The object of diffusion

Having outlined how we conceive of 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* in very general terms 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). More specifically, it is possible to differentiate between the (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 (1) principles, (2) aims, and (3) 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 hypothetical 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 very 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 *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, and we argue that neither of them are especially far-fetched. All of them, however, merit attention.

4. Mechanisms of party policy 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. As we have noted in the introduction, traditionally research on diffusion processes is concerned with the mechanisms of *learning*, *emulation* and *competition* (Elkins & 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 the three different objects of diffusion (principles, aims, and policies). Our primary goal is to explicate differences between possible diffusion mechanisms and to link the mechanisms with the central actors and objects of party policy diffusion.

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.

In this approach, policy diffusion is most likely if the adoptions of foreign actors are considered as being effective (Shipan and Volden 2008). Hence, to make political parties take over the objects that foreign parties have already adopted, they need to conclude that the object's adoption is effective in solving a particular problem. This focus on effectiveness (or success) has consequences regarding the objects that are most likely to become internationally diffused across actors.

As outlined earlier, our three objects (principles, aims, and policies) differ in their level of specificity. In our example about equality, the level of specificity goes from defining the overall goal, to describing the cause and effect terms, to portraying the precise measure being implemented. Accordingly, if party policy diffusion is truly following the mechanism of learning from each other, we should observe the diffusion of aims and policies. Only the two allow political parties to conceive the necessary information to update their beliefs about the cause and effect of a certain action by a foreign party. *Principles*-diffusion, the diffusion of basic values that parties endorse, on the other hand, is not compatible with the mechanism of learning as parties are unable to identify cause and effect terms and the precise measures that are necessary in order to learn. A party that processes information about another foreign party's basic values is incapable of evaluating the effectiveness and success of the principles, as the latter are beyond measure.

After identifying the linkage between the mechanism of learning and the various objects of diffusion, we need to address how political parties actually receive information about cause and effect terms as well as the precise measures of foreign parties' adoptions. As noted at the outset, the mechanism of learning usually assumes that parties that engage in diffusion processes follow a "scientific" strategy as they evaluate individual pieces of information and base their final decision on the evidence obtained (Dobbins, Simmons & Garrett 2007). Numerous contributions in the policy diffusion literature question this "scientific" understanding of the process, however, stressing instead that the actual process of learning is socially channeled in one way or another (Hall 1993). The reason for this is that political parties that are willing to learn from other parties abroad often have difficulties to assess the consequences (or effects) of foreign parties' actions.

To see this, consider that parties may often 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. Likewise, 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 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.

What kind of information is immediately available? First and foremost, several studies demonstrate that information about the actions of foreign actors with which one is in close contact and communicates 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. The party groups in the EP are composed of representatives from national political parties. Similar to the national level, individual members go together in party groups to organize political processes in parliament and allocate parliamentary resources. For example, party groups in the EP manage the allocation of committee seats to individual members of the European Parliament (MEPs). In addition, EP party groups decide about the issues that are put on the parliamentary agenda.

Since the EP is one of the EU's co-legislators (together with the Council of the European Union) a key task of party groups in the EP is to build and coordinate political majorities on legislation, the budget and every other vote in the parliament. To this end, groups generally convene during the so called 'Group week' in Brussels where they prepare the upcoming plenary agenda (Senninger, Bischof & Ezrow 2018). In addition, they also meet in Strasbourg during plenary week to brief before

and debrief after parliamentary sittings. While the purpose of these meetings clearly serves the goal of having smooth and informed parliamentary processes, they are also used for

'(...) discussions of the Group's own activities (campaigns, conferences, publications etc.), for development of Group positions on major political issues or debates or broader political strategy, and for receiving visiting delegations or leaders of national parties or other personalities (Commissioners, ministers or personalities from third countries).' (Corbett, Jacobs and Shackleton 2011)

This suggests that EP party groups do many things that go beyond the work that is directly related to what is happening in the EP. In fact, EP party groups organize their own political activities bringing together politicians from many different national parties. Very often these activities form an important channel of communication between corresponding national parties. Groups receive visitors from national parties on a regular basis, including ministers and front-bench parliamentarians. In addition, 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.

In sum, direct contact between different national parties that belong to the same EP group provides plenty of opportunities to receive information about policy ideas and policy positions of foreign parties. This implies that party groups in the EP constitute a venue for national parties to observe, evaluate and learn about aims and policies of foreign national parties.[1]

Relatedly, parties might also rely on the familiarity heuristic (Elkins and Simmons 2005). 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 still 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, availability and familiarity are two relevant short-cuts that parties are likely to rely on when learning from foreign parties.[2]

Finally, it is important to note that a complete picture of the mechanism of learning must take into account interactional dynamics between the sub-units of the

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[1] 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.

[2] 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.

party. This means that studies on party policy diffusion that look to learning as the core mechanism should be specific about the various party units that engage in the diffusion process. Crucial in this connection is the aforementioned tripartite differentiation between the party elite (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 cause and effect actions. We speak more to this in a later section in which we point out ways to empirically test the various mechanisms that underlie party policy diffusion.

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 really 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 takes place because a certain foreign party (or a group of foreign parties) adopted an object of diffusion. The party that is imitating 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). 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.

Again, let us take up the question of 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 we cannot clearly single out objects that cannot be diffused through this mechanism (recall that we have argued that it is hard to see how *principles* could be diffused through learning). 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 worth 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 as such. 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.[3] 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 to learn from was considered 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 actor and not so much on the precise actions, much less detailed information is necessary. Parties would only need to have a basic understanding of what kind of action was taken by the other parties without paying attention to the consequences of the action taken. Yet, it goes without saying that contact and exchange of information about actions is convenient in order not to miss any actions taken by foreign parties.

Finally, similar to 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 uphold rather than transformed.

Competition

The final mechanism that 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, classic examples are a "race to the bottom" scenario, e.g. regarding welfare spending (Volden 2002). However, competition is not

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[3] 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 polices.

necessarily defined in economic terms. Think for example of the recent refugee and migrant crisis in Europe. Fearful of becoming a refugee magnet, many countries appeared to compete in a "race to the bottom" concerning refugee reception and integration, trying to outperform one another in providing hostile towards refugees, supposedly in order to become less attractive as destination countries. Many other diffusion scenarios are conceivable in which competition between countries is a likely 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 only supranational parliamentary institution we know of, the EP: its seat distribution is determined by simultaneous national elections. In sum, contrary to the competition between countries the competition between parties is not directly affected by transnational dependence.[4]

Domestic party competition can still be linked to party policy diffusion, though. This is because it might create the initial incentive to engage in party policy diffusion. How does this work? Consider first that parties face uncertainty about their final result on election day as they do not know exactly whether they have an optimal strategy. When that is the case, parties might orient themselves toward successful parties from abroad. In this sense, one may say that competition between domestic parties creates a reason for parties to engage in transnational diffusion. Researchers would here still need to identify the relevant mechanisms which underlie and structure the diffusion process. 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.

5. How to empirically test hypotheses about party policy diffusion

In the remainder of the paper, we map promising research strategies for studying party policy diffusion. We begin by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the research design applied by Böhmelt et al. (2016), the most sophisticated and influential empirical endeavor to capture party policy diffusion to date.

Böhmelt et al. (2016) use time-series cross-sectional data on the party-year level and apply spatial regression analysis. To measure parties' policies, the authors rely on the left-right dimension from the Comparative Manifesto Project which is constructed by subtracting the sum of 13 "left"-associated categories from the sum of 13 "right"-oriented categories. The result is a continuous scale that indicates where

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[4] However, several studies show that domestic party competition can lead to diffusion between national political parties.

parties are located in the ideological space going from -100 (left) to +100 (right).[5] This set-up is an effective and widely-used approach to study interdependencies between units of analysis. An obvious advantage is that it allows for the comparison of a large number of parties from different countries over a long time period. Yet the measurement of party policy also holds serious problems.

For one thing, reducing policy to left-right positioning in party manifestos offers very little information about the specific *object* of policy diffusion. Parties use election manifestos to inform the public about their principles, aims, and policies. The data in the manifesto project do not differentiate between these different objects, however, which leaves us uncertain about the actual content that is being diffused. Moreover, and relatedly, Böhmelt et al.'s (2016) left-right measurement blurs parties' policies. According to the research design, party policies diffuse if a party moves in the same direction as foreign parties have moved previously. While this tells us whether a party gets closer to foreign parties on the left-right scale, it is impossible to know whether this is actually because of changes in the *same policy sub-categories*. In short, many relevant details of policy diffusion ultimately remain opaque in Böhmelt et al.'s (2016) study, and this is a direct consequence of their research design.

There are some straightforward ways of overcoming these problems. To cite just one possible strategy, one could consider spatial regression models that use individual sub-categories instead of a broad left-right scale. This would of course still not resolve such important issues as the appropriate identification of the objects that are being diffused and the mechanisms underlying the diffusion process. If these issues are to be addressed in an adequate fashion, it seems that the research program on party policy diffusion would have be extended and refined way beyond the approach taken in Böhmelt et al.'s (2016) contribution. To offer a first glimpse of the resources future research on the topic could avail itself of, we want in closing to suggest some quantitative and qualitative research strategies that have the potential of moving the debate forward in a fruitful and productive direction.

How can we improve existing research designs seeking to study party policy diffusion?
Beyond research on party policy diffusion, a key issue with existing research designs studying parties is the focus on ready-made data such as the Comparative Manifesto Data. By nature studies based on such resources and employing typical time-series-cross-sectional data will suffer from unsolved issues of endogeneity and omitted variable biases. But, most crucially for research on party policy diffusion, data collected at the macro-level of political parties does not allow researchers to make a judgment concerning the *intentions* 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.

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[5] Böhmelt et al 2016 rescale the variable so that is goes from 0 (left) to 10 (right).

However, correlations between party ideologies across time are hardly surprising, can be rooted in many causes and can be subject to several mechanisms (on this point, see e.g. Caramani 2015).

We argue that a crucial step forwards in quantitative research on party policy diffusion is the actual study of the very mechanisms that are at work behind the correlations that scholars routinely observe. We want to highlight two quantitative research designs that allow researchers to get a better understanding of these mechanisms. First, and at the most basic level, using quantitative text analysis permits researchers to eschew pre-coded data that is not necessarily adequate to the task of testing party policy diffusion (Grimmer, Stewart 2013). Consider for instance the potential of *plagiarism software*, which could allow a more fine-grained judgment of the content that is being shared across parties and time. 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 & Schumacher, 2018). These 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).

Second, using experimental methods could provide researchers with enhanced insight into the mechanisms underlying party policy diffusion. For instance, similar to field experimental research done in the US (Grose, Malhotra & van Houweling 2015), classical letter experiments could be used to assess how party elites react to randomly assigned information about party behavior abroad. Letter writers could specifically ask politicians what they think about the actions taking by the party abroad and if "emulating" such behavior might address a specific party aim, thus trying to uncover the intentions that shape politicians' actions. Similar experimentation is thinkable using survey experiments send 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.

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. 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, since it shows that it was *particular* meetings that proved important, and explains why they were important.

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 (forthcoming) 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. 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. 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 paper has been to clarify the nature of party policy diffusion, 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 paper 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 articular 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.

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