

When the birds fly together. A framework for analysing international and domestic factors behind policy diffusion and convergence

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Abstract

How does the international spread of ideas influence domestic policy change? Why may external diffusion mechanisms sometimes result in policy convergence, but sometimes they may not? How do domestic factors shape patterns of policy convergence? Although a notable body of literature on policy convergence has been produced over the last three decades, we still know little about these questions. This paper aims to fill this void by investigating the interplay between international and domestic structural factors behind policy diffusion and convergence. It proposes an analytical framework for explaining external diffusion and policy convergence in the context of EU-Third countries relations. The study concentrates on the explanatory power of five factors: coercion, manipulation of utility calculations, socialization, persuasion, emulation.

Keywords

external diffusion, policy convergence, new institutionalism, agent-structure problem, EU-Third countries relations

1. Introduction

Policy convergence has become a central research theme in international relations, comparative politics and policy analysis. Although a notable body of literature has been produced over the last three decades, we still know little about the causes of this phenomenon (see Drezner 2001; Heichel et al. 2005). Recent studies have sought to systematise the theoretical discussion on causality (Knill 2005; Holzinger and Knill 2005). Nevertheless, authors have mainly elaborated on the so-called ‘second image reversed’ perspective (Gourevitch 1978), that is, international (external) factors shaping domestic policy change and influencing patterns of convergence (Bennett 1991; Keohane and Milner 1996). By contrast, little attempt has been made to study the influence of domestic structural factors behind policy convergence across countries. Above all, there has been no attempt to bring together both the international and domestic factors of convergence in one analytical framework.

In this regard, diffusion studies meets convergence research. Policy diffusion represents a flourishing field of research with a well-established tradition in political science and sociology. Authors have largely investigated the different mechanisms through which ideas spread across countries (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Strang and Soule 1998; Simmons et al. 2006, Börzel and Risse 2009). When it comes to domestic structural conditions for policy diffusion, many insights can be drawn from this literature. Sociological diffusion studies have pointed out that foreign ideas need to be made socially meaningful as to make domestic adoption practicable. In this view, culture and institutions are conceived as significant facilitating factors of diffusion (Stang and Meyer 1993). In other words, ideas diffuse insofar as they resonate with the cultural and institutional structures of their recipients. Lenschow et al. (2005) share these conclusions and study the impact of cultural, institutional and economic similarity on policy convergence. Indeed, diffusion studies offer a compelling toolbox for exploring even convergence of policies. However, the conditions under which diffusion mechanisms may result in cross-national policy convergence remain still unresearched.

With regards to EU studies, it is generally acknowledged that convergence research has the potential to add a new focus to the debates on globalisation, Europeanization and policy transfer (among others). In recent years, scholars of the EU have sought to fashion the broad issue of policy convergence into an enduring body of work within EU scholarship (for an overview, see Jordan 2005). Yet, the problems of theoretical

heterogeneity and comparability of the empirical findings (see Knill 2005) still pose important constraints to the emergence of this theme into the mainstream of EU. However, policy convergence is gaining momentum among researchers thus giving fresh air to the study of the EU. With respect to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), an active discussion is currently taking place on whether differentiation dynamics have or not positive implications in terms of policy convergence across neighbour countries (see Barbé et al. 2009).

This paper addresses the existing research deficit by investigating the interplay between international and domestic factors behind *policy diffusion* and *convergence*. It proposes a new institutionalist framework for analysing external diffusion and policy convergence, to be applied to the EU's relations with Third countries generally. This model builds upon selected contributions on diffusion and convergence (Albrecht and Arts 2005; Busch and Jorgensen 2005; Holzinger and Knill 2005; Knill 2005; Marcussen 2005; Börzel and Risse 2009) as well as upon rational choice and sociological institutionalist approaches (Bulmer 1994; Scharpf 1997; Jupille and Caporaso 1999; Aspinwall and Schneider 2000; March and Olsen 2004; Peters 2005).

Section 2 devotes to introduce the concepts of policy diffusion and convergence. It firstly studies the analytical relationship between the two concepts. Then, it bridges over the study of idea diffusion processes and policy convergence. Hence, the factors triggering diffusion can be conceived as potential causes of convergence. Lastly, this section explains to what extent mixing up the concepts of diffusion and convergence would help to shed light on the problem of causality.

Section 3 concentrates on extrapolating the analytical framework for explaining external diffusion and cross-national policy convergence. The explanatory variables –namely coercion, manipulation of utility calculations, socialization, persuasion, emulation – are firstly introduced. Whereas these variables allow to describe the nature of the external diffusion mechanisms at play, they do not allow to explain how diffusion processes emerge, nor in which circumstances diffusion is more likely to result in policy convergence. In order to explain the emergence and occurrence of external policy diffusion and convergence, this paper adopts a new institutional perspective that brings together formal rules, informal practises and routines based on shared causal beliefs, norms and values. Lastly, this section brings together both the 'international' and 'domestic' structural factors of policy convergence in one analytical framework.

To this end, three are the basic objectives of this paper. First, it attempts to link the study of policy diffusion together with the search for framework conditions of convergence. Second, it aims to contribute to the study of idea diffusion processes in the context of the EU's relations with Third countries. Last, it seeks to contribute to the theoretical debate concerning the causes of policy convergence.

2. Bridging over policy diffusion and convergence

Diffusion can be defined as a process through which ideas spread across time and space (cf. Strang and Meyer 1993). On the one hand, ideas are conceived here as *causal beliefs*, that is, shared claims regarding cause-effect relationships and states of the world (Börzel and Risse 2009: 6). On the other hand, ideas are seen as *principled beliefs* or norms encapsulating shared expectations on the appropriate behaviour to take in a given context (Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Jepperson et al. 1996). Diffusion is mediated by a broad range of mechanisms and channels of influence between countries, varying from the imposition of policies, international binding norms and regulatory harmonization, to voluntary adoption of foreign policy models (see Knill 2005). This paper concentrates on the diffusion of policy ideas, implying that policies to different extents entail both causal and normative ideas. In other words, policies encapsulate ideas on what is the cause-effect of a policy problem and how to appropriately deal with the problem *per se*.

Differently, policy convergence can be defined as: “any increase in the similarity between one or more characteristics of a certain policy (e.g. policy objectives, policy instruments, policy settings) across a given set of political jurisdictions (supranational institutions, states, regions, local authorities) over a given period of time” (p. 768). In this context, two general differences can be drawn between policy diffusion and policy convergence (Holzinger and Knill 2005; Knill 2005). First, the analytical focus. Diffusion studies place great emphasis on process patterns, whereas convergence research is rather concerned with the effects of the general process of policy change over time. Second, the dependent variable (explanandum). While diffusion seeks to explain patterns of policy adoption, convergence explores changes in policy similarity over time.

What is however more striking is that studies on diffusion and convergence have indeed a common ground. Even if not equivalent concepts, diffusion and convergence can be consistently mixed up (see table 1). From a theoretical point of view, three are the reasons for

bridging over policy diffusion and convergence. (a) With respect to the analytical focus, diffusion (as a process) may potentially result in increasing policy similarities across countries (Elkins and Simmons 2005:36).¹ In other words, the factors triggering diffusion can be conceived as potential causes of convergence. Hence studying diffusion processes can help to shed light on the causes of cross-national policy convergence. (b) When it comes to the empirical focus, both are concerned with observing policy characteristics (such as objectives, instruments, settings). Furthermore, diffusion and convergence focus on policy outputs (the policies adopted by a government) rather than policy outcomes (the actual effects of a policy in terms of goal achievement) (Holzinger and Knill 2005: 776).² (c) With respect to the dependent variable, both diffusion and convergence research pertain to the study of policy change. It is well reasonable that researchers may seek to explain the adoption patterns for certain policy innovations while looking at the consequences of the spreading process in terms of similarity changes over time.

Table 1: Bridging over diffusion and convergence research

<i>Main features</i>	
Analytical focus:	Process; Factors
Empirical focus:	Policy outputs; Policy characteristics
Dependent variable:	Adoption of policies → Changes in policy similarity

Source: Elaboration of the author

¹ Nonetheless, this do not imply that policy convergence is necessarily the result of diffusion processes (Drezner 2001). For instance, convergence might be caused by mechanisms such as independent problem-solving at domestic level (Holzinger and Knill 2005).

² It has to be said that studies on both dimensions can be found in the convergence literature. However, the vast majority of contributions focusing on EU studies elaborates on policy outputs. Indeed, the current debate actually follows this path. From a theoretical point of view, studying convergence of policy outcomes makes no sense when considering the broad number of variables intervening in the implementation stage (Holzinger and Knill 2005: 776).

3. Towards analytical framework for explaining external diffusion and policy convergence

When the birds fly together, sometimes they converge towards a common point. But sometimes they don't. In a similar vein, when state actors voluntarily engage in international cooperation schemes their policies sometimes may converge towards a common point. But sometimes they may not.³ With regards to the EU, this example can be generally applied to its relations with Third countries. Institutionalised patterns of dialogue and bilateral/multilateral cooperation schemes are employed as to spread policy ideas and foster cross-national policy convergence towards an European common point.

To analyse external diffusion and policy convergence with respect to EU-Third countries relations this paper adjusts a model developed by Börzel and Risse (2009). The model points out five mechanisms of diffusion: coercion, manipulation of utility calculations, socialization, persuasion, emulation. According to Börzel and Risse, *coercion* pertains to the non-voluntary adoption of policy ideas due to the use of physical force or legal authority. *Manipulations of utility calculations* refers to the ability of inducing other actors into adopting foreign policy ideas via negative and positive incentives. *Socialization* refers to the practices through which actors learn to internalise normative ideas, and seek to do 'the right thing'. *Persuasion* pertains to the practises through which actors internalise cognitive ideas. *Emulation* pertains to the voluntary adoption of policy ideas (imitation) by the recipient, and relies on indirect influence of the promoter of ideas.

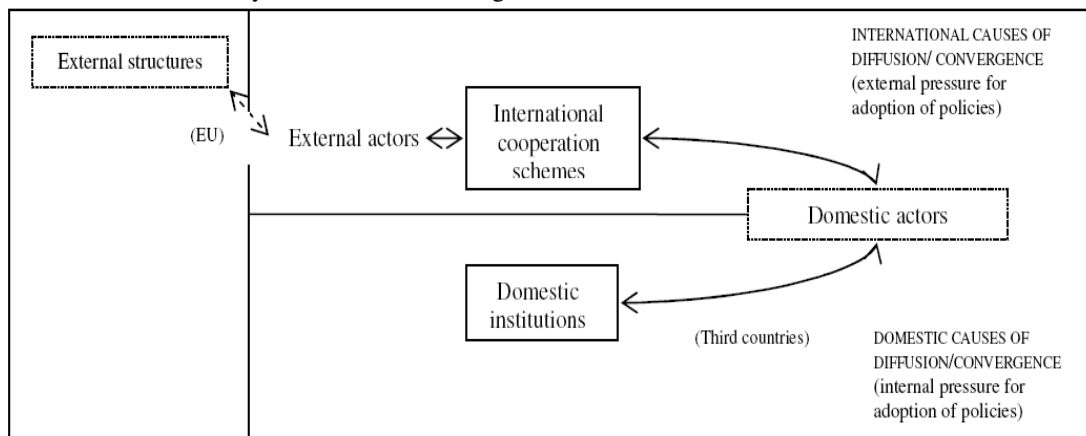
Although this model allow to describe the functioning of the international factors behind diffusion, it does not help to explain why and how external diffusion processes emerges, nor in which circumstances diffusion is more likely to result in policy convergence. Similarly, it does not allow to explain how patterns of policy adoption and convergence may be shaped by both institutionalised cooperation schemes and third countries' domestic institutions.

³ This example makes in a way reference to Lenschow et. al. (2005). While the latter concentrates on the domestic causes behind policy convergence, this paper seeks to contribute to the theoretical debate on policy convergence by investigating the interplay between international and domestic structural factors behind diffusion and convergence.

To explain the emergence and the occurrence of policy diffusion and convergence, this paper adopts a new institutionalist perspective assuming that both formal and informal institutions (at international and domestic level) have an influence on policy outputs and that they shape patterns of policy adoption and convergence. Indeed, theory allows to gain “a sense of understanding as a valued element in the pursuit of unravelling the puzzling features of complex social processes, organisations, episodes or system-steering events” (Xenakis and Chrysochoou 2001: 99). This paper therefore applies both rational choice and sociological institutionalist approaches (Bulmer 1994; Hall and Taylor 1996; Scharpf 1997; Jupille and Caporaso 1999; Kerremans 2001, March and Olsen 1996, 1998, 2004; Aspinwall and Schneider 2000; Peters 2005).

In doing so, this paper takes an ‘outside-in’ standpoint focusing on the EU as promoter of ideas and Third countries as recipients. The former and the latter voluntarily engage in institutionalised patterns of dialogue and bilateral/multilateral cooperation schemes. On the one hand, institutionalised cooperation schemes are conceived as structures (where to channel policy ideas) that may influence to different extents domestic actors’ preferences and behaviour thus impacting upon domestic policy change. On the other hand, domestic actors (of third countries) operate both internally and externally under the constraints of domestic institutions. Hence, both institutionalised cooperation schemes and domestic institutions are considered as structural factors intervening in diffusion processes and cross-national policy convergence (see table 2).

Table 2: Policy diffusion and convergence in EU-Third countries relations



Source: Elaboration of the author

At this point, the way of framing both rational choice and sociological institutionalism is of key importance as to gain useful insights for the study of diffusion and convergence. To introduce the two variants in a clear and coherent manner this paper takes a structure-agency approach (Wendt 1987; Hay 1995). Such a way of portraying new institutionalism is justified by the fact that much of its theoretical underpinning is based on the relationship between structure and agency. In brief, this ‘old chestnut’ (Rosamond 2000: 121) of social science is about the dilemma on the existing relationship between agents (human actors) and structures (human environment). According to Wendt (1987: 501): “the agent-structure problem has its origins in two truisms about social life which underlie most social scientific inquiry: 1) human beings and their organizations are purposeful actors whose actions help reproduce or transform the society in which they live; and 2) society is made up of social relationships, which structure the interactions between these purposeful actors”.

Within this theoretical problem, two are the main issues to be examined. On the one hand, the ontological question revolving around the nature of agents and structures takes centre stage. What unit of analysis is ‘ontologically primitive’? Which one comes before? The alternative answers are individualism (agency prevails over structure) (see Lukes 2006), structuralism (structure is ontologically primitive) (see Wight 2006) and structurationism (agency and structure as mutually constitutive) (Giddens 1984). On the other hand, the epistemological question pertains to the choice of the form of explanation concerning the structure-agency relationship (Wendt 1987: 502). In connection with the mentioned above, three main positions can be discerned (Rosamond 2000: 204). First, the so-called *agent-centred* theories see agents as capable of altering structures thus being the central element in shaping change. Second, *structuralist* theories conceive of structures as constraining agency and determining the boundaries of action. Third, *structurationist* theories assert that agency is constrained by structures, however the latter being generated by actors. As Wendt (1987: 501) puts it, structuration represents “a relational solution to the agent-structure problem that conceptualizes agents and structures as mutually constituted or codetermined entities”.

Now, does new institutionalism add a novel dimension when studying policy diffusion and convergence? Authors start out with diverse assumptions when addressing a set of basic problems. This paper extrapolates an analytical framework by answering the following key questions:

- (a) How should institutions be defined? Why and how are institutions created?
- (b) What is the relationship between structure and agency? Which one of two elements is ontologically primitive? Are they rather glimpsed as mutually constitutive components?
- (c) To what extent do institutions affect actors' preferences?
- (d) To what extent and how do institutions exert an influence on political behaviour, if any?
- (e) To what extent and how do institutions affect policy outputs?
- (f) How do mechanisms of policy diffusion and convergence work? Why and how external diffusion processes emerge? In which circumstances diffusion is more likely to result in policy convergence? How patterns of policy adoption and convergence may be shaped by institutionalised cooperation schemes and domestic institutions?

A rational choice institutionalist perspective

Rational choice institutionalism is centred on investigating rational strategic action within institutional contexts. (a) This strand construes institutions as formal structures (norms, decision rules, formal procedures) that impose some constraints upon self-seeking political actors and enable some courses of action (Wendt 1987: 115). According to Scharpf (1997: 38), institutions are “[...] systems of rules that structure the courses of actions that a set of actors may choose”. Institutions are rationally chosen by political actors in so far as they lower transaction costs and reduce the risk of interaction (Rosamond 2000: 203). Argued on this line, both institutionalised cooperation schemes and third countries' domestic institutions can be defined as a set of norms, rules, and formal procedures that facilitate cooperation and constitute an equilibrium contract among self-seeking actors.

(b) Rational choice institutionalism sees agency as ontologically primitive, being methodological individualism a central assumption of this strand. Nevertheless, it finds a ‘structuration’ answer to the epistemological agent-structure question that clearly contrasts with its ontological departing point⁴. Hence, structures constrain agency while being generated by political actors. Nonetheless, the emphasis is placed

⁴ This represents the central difference between rational choice and rational choice institutionalism, being the former strictly leaning towards an agent-explanation.

on agents since structure are considered as the passive players of the game.

(c) A central assumption of this strand is that actors' interests and preferences are exogenously formed - that is, they take shape outside of the institutional context (see March and Olsen 1996). Furthermore, preferences are supposed to be fixed, and actors strongly attached to their goals. This means that institutions do not exert any influence on preferences' formation.

(d) On the contrary, institutions do have a remarkable influence on political behaviour. The point advanced here is that political actors follows an institutionally affected logic of consequentiality (Kerremans 2001: 10), that is, the rational calculus is imperative while being institutionally influenced. This means that actors bump into institutions, go 'ouch', and then recalculate behaviour and strategies (Checkel 1999: 546). Self-interested actors necessarily have to adapt their behaviour in taking into account both the restraints and opportunities structured by institutions.⁵

(e) Rational choice institutionalism conceives of institutions as exerting an influence on policy outputs to a minimalist extent - that is, formal structures define the maximum outcome to be allowed. On the one hand, institutions are constraining structures. They provide the formal procedural path to be followed by actors when setting the policy. They bound the range of policy choices being available (Awesti 2007: 10). On the other hand, institutions are seen as a kind of opportunity structures. They make some options less costly thus enabling some courses of action otherwise impossible to take outside of an institutional context. Institutions constitutes an arena and therefore reduce uncertainty of political actors when cooperating. Furthermore, this strand sees the lowest outcome to be reached trough interaction as defined by the capacity of actors to carry out strategic action in pursuit of their goals. To sum up, rational choice institutionalism sees policy outputs as determined by rational purposive actors strategically operating within the structural context provided by institutions. Institutions do make a difference when

⁵ An example of how EU formal structures influence political behaviour is represented by the qualified majority voting rules being used in the Council of Ministers. Indeed this rule lowers the transaction costs and facilitate cooperation. As a consequence, governments have to device strategic coalitions in order to pursue their objectives (Rosamond 2000: 115).

influencing actors' behaviour and constraining the maximum outcome to be permitted. They mediate between actors' interests and policy outputs.

(f) Along this line of argument, what are the implications of a rational choice institutionalist perspective in terms of international and domestic mechanisms of policy diffusion and convergence? *Coercion* emerges as the result of the legal authority of norms in the context of institutionalised cooperation schemes. Indeed, coercion is expected to play a very small role in causing diffusion processes in the context of the EU's relations with Third countries. Cooperation schemes lack legal authority, and are agreed as to simply facilitate cooperation and reduce uncertainty. Instead, coercion pertains to diffusion process within the EU polity. For instance, binding norms on approximation of legislation may explain to some extents a number of patterns of policy adoption. Even so, convergence in this case is rather unlikely. Third countries, that mostly do not have any perspective of membership, simply may have no interests in attaining to these norms unless they receive strong positive incentives (for instance, 'a stake' into the internal market). This mechanism is expected to have a limited explanatory power.

Manipulations of utility calculations is the key factor behind policy diffusion and convergence. Policy diffusion processes emerge because the EU seeks to maximise its utilities when attempting to solve security problems, enter new markets, promoting the political stability of neighbouring countries, that is, when seeking to reducing or avoiding costs (Börzel and Risse 2009: 10). In this view, voluntary policy adoption and convergence within EU-Third countries relations are more likely to occur if there is a significant congruence of actors' initial preferences. However, congruence of preferences does not necessarily lead to policy adoption and convergence. Given the fact that both the promoter of ideas and the recipients are strongly attached to their interests and policy goals, manipulations of utility is of key importance in shaping the courses of actions. To influence domestic actors' behaviour, the EU provides Third countries with opportunity structures in the form of incentives and rewards – such as financial and technical assistance, projects of capacity-building, empowerment of communities etc. (Legro 1997). Domestic actors may also behave strategically and seek to realize individual gains in terms of funds to be allocated to cooperation projects.

By contrast, both *socialization* and *persuasion* have a different acceptance here. They are to a certain extent encapsulated in the strategic behaviour of political actors. Socializing and persuading hence turn to the

meaning of inducing third countries' political actors towards a certain behaviour, whereas preferences remain fixed.

When it comes to *emulation*, the analysis shifts towards the domestic mechanisms of policy diffusion and convergence. From a rational choice institutionalist point of view, Third countries may imitate successful European policy models in the pursuit of the optimisation of their utilities. Actors draw on lessons from other countries when seeking to solve a policy problem under conditions of uncertainty, or in cases of policy failure and dissatisfaction with the status quo (Börzel and Risse 2009: 12). What is however more striking is that interaction effects between incentives and lesson-drawing may hold a significant explanatory power with regard to country differentiation dynamics taking place, for instance, in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the European Neighbourhood Policy. The principle of competition is at the core of country differentiation. Briefly, different paths of cooperation may emerge on the basis of the progress done by each of the Mediterranean Non-member Countries (MNCs). In other words, countries that achieve better results can go further ahead in cooperation. The European Union provides MNCs with positive incentives and rewards. As a result of this, manipulations of utility calculations may indirectly foster processes of emulation by lesson drawing at domestic level.

A sociological institutionalist perspective

Sociological Institutionalism investigates institutions as social environments in which political actors are embedded (March and Olsen 1998). (a) This strand conceives of institutions as structures in a broader sense by including “not just formal rules, procedures or norms, but also the symbol systems, cognitive scripts and moral templates that provide the ‘frames of meaning’ guiding human action” (Hall and Taylor 1996: 947). Institutions originate as culturally-specific practises rather than being equilibrium contracts among self-interested actors. This means that formal and informal structures are not rational responses, but rather cultural responses to a perceived problem. Institutions do take shape, change and acquire certain features because they are seen as appropriate and legitimate within a given environmental context. Institutions are not seen as the best efficient way to satisfy pre-formed preferences of goals-oriented individuals. A sociological institutionalist perspective has much to offer in terms of insights for the study of policy diffusion and

convergence. It brings together formal rules, informal practises and routines based on shared causal beliefs, norms and values.

(b) Sociological institutionalism definitely turns to a structuralist solution of both the ontological and epistemological agent-structure questions. Institutions constitutes agency and determine the boundaries of action.

(c) Sociological institutionalism places great emphasis on the cognitive/ normative dimensions of institutions. Institutions mould the preferences of actors, and provide them with identities, conceptions of reality and behavioural rules (March and Olsen 1996: 249). Unlikely rational choice institutionalism, preferences' formation occurs within institutional structures. What is even more striking is that institutions are construed as structuring the boundaries of 'the possible'. In other words, what rational choice institutionalists believe is exogenous to institutions (i.e. interests, preferences and goals) is therefore the product of a cultural context in which actors are embedded.

(d) Along this line of argument, actors do not 'bump' into institutions and then recalculate behaviour and strategies. Rather, actors exist and behave within institutions. According to Hall and Taylor, "institutions influence behaviour not simply by specifying what one should do but also by specifying what one can imagine oneself doing in a given context" (Hall and Taylor 1996: 949). It can be argued that institutions as cognitive/normative structures determine the horizons of one's world. Hence the essence of actor behaviour is to be found in the so-called logic of appropriateness. Action is guided by the social environment and is process-oriented (March and Olsen 2004). This means that "actors have a given set of ends, they choose between them in a consistent fashion and, of the means of action available to them, they select the most appropriate to the realization of their chosen ends" (Hindess 1989: 49). The logic of consequentiality is not at play and action is not goals-oriented.

(e) Sociological institutionalism reads institutions as deeply affecting policy outputs. Norms, values, symbols, cognitive scripts, ideas and discourses produce actor behaviour, which in turn leads to policy outputs. Institutions are 'normative vessels' that play a relevant role in so far as guide actors towards outcomes (March and Olsen 1984). In short, institutional contexts surround and encase policy outputs.

(f) When it comes to the mechanisms of policy diffusion and convergence, *coercion* and *manipulations of utility calculations* have no say within a sociological institutionalist perspective. In a nutshell, the

logic of appropriateness is the rule (March and Olsen 2004). Rather, institutionalised cooperation schemes are seen as bringing together formal and informal rules, practises and routines. Such a perspective therefore enlarge the focus of the analytical framework proposed in this paper.

Socialization and *persuasion* takes the shape of formal patterns of dialogue between the EU and Third countries, such as high level committees and experts meetings. In a similar vein, informal practises of information exchange, transnational dialogue and elites networking emerge as channels of idea diffusion processes. Both mechanisms are concerned with social interaction between political actors in the context of institutional environments. What makes persuasion very different from socialization is that the former is about causal beliefs, while the latter is rather concerned with normative ideas. In other words, the above channels of social interaction are employed by the EU as to diffuse its own ideas on what are the cause-effect relationships concerning a given policy problem and to suggest to a set of policy solutions to the problem itself. In this view, EU's efforts at socialization and persuasion work depending on how much causal and normative ideas resonate with domestic structural factors. Domestic institutions clearly play a significant role insofar as they structure actors' preferences and behaviour. Diffusion and convergence research (especially sociological literature) points out that the more countries are culturally, institutionally and economically close, the more they are expected to adopt similar policies involving similar causal beliefs and normative models (Stang and Meyer 1993; Lenschow et al. 2005). What is more, divergent developments may be found depending on the policy type and related domestic actors' interests at stake (cf. Knill 2005: 771). Different policy areas involve different norms, rules, values and ideas, which in turn affect domestic actors' interests and behaviour. This paper argues that causal beliefs (claims on the cause-effect relationships concerning a given policy problem) are likely to diffuse with more ease, since they do not necessarily constitute a choke point with third countries' principled beliefs (what is appropriate to do as to solve the policy problem). This implies that, even if a country might converge towards a common casual idea concerning a given policy problem, different policy instruments and settings may potentially be adopted at domestic level. By contrasts, diffusion of normative ideas is rather unlikely if normative models choke with domestic principled beliefs that implies high distributional conflicts

between domestic actors.⁶ For instance, climate change policies may converge with more ease when it comes to the policy paradigm (that is, the casual belief that climate change is due to anthropogenic CO2 emissions arising predominantly from the burning of fossil fuels). Differently, policy instruments and settings are likely to converge insofar as they resonate with cultural, institutional and economical domestic structures. To sum up, diffusion processes may result in patterns of convergence and divergence (at the same time) in the very same policy type under investigation.

In a sociological institutionalist perspective, *emulation* by mimicry (Powell and DiMaggio 1991) emerge, for instance, when third countries may seek to increase their internal legitimisation. Also, mimicry can be triggered by persuasion and socialization processes. When Third countries internalise normative and cognitive ideas through social interaction they would then voluntarily adopt a given European policy model simply because its appropriateness is taken for granted, that is, they believe to do the 'right thing'.

To conclude, both perspectives do not represent alternative hypotheses, nor they constitute competing solutions. Table 3 summarizes the analytical framework having been designed for explaining policy diffusion and convergence.

4. Conclusion

In recent years, scholars of the EU have demonstrated a growing interest in the study of cross-national policy convergence. Convergence research has mainly concentrated on the domestic impact of European integration and globalisation. When screening the literature, too many are the factors suggested as causes of policy convergence. Yet, research efforts have been hampered by the lack of systematic theory-building and the scarcity of empirical findings in this field. As a result of this, we still know little about the causes of this phenomenon.

⁶ This paper takes a different view with respect to the argument proposed by Hall (1993) on the impact of policy characteristics on convergence within different policy dimensions (policy paradigm, instruments and settings). The author argues that change is more likely on policy instruments and settings rather than on paradigms, since the former implies adaptation and adjustments without necessarily leading to ideational shifts (see Knill 2005; Lenschow 2005).

Table 3: Policy diffusion and convergence in EU-Third countries relations: a framework for analysis

	<i>Rational Choice Institutionalism</i>	<i>Sociological Institutionalism</i>
International Cooperation Schemes/ Domestic Institutions	Formal structures - such as norms, decision rules, procedures Arenas Equilibrium contracts among self-seeking actors	Formal and informal structures - such as norms, values, rules, procedures, ideas, discourse symbol systems, cognitive scripts and moral templates
Structure-Agency Relationship (epistemology)	Structurationism	Structuralism
Preferences	Exogenous formation (no institutional influence)	Endogenous formation (firstly at domestic level, then reshaped within cooperation structures)
Behaviour	Logic of consequentiality affected by institutions Strategic/instrumental behaviour	Logic of appropriateness
Policy outputs	Rational purposive agents bump into structures, behave strategically and determine outputs Outputs are the result of congruent interests, trade-offs/deals	Institutions are normative-cognitive vessels that guide actors towards outputs. Cognitive-normative vessels tend to reproduce themselves over the time.
Diffusion/ Convergence mechanisms	(a) Legal coercion/ binding obligations (external pressures) (b) Incentives, Rewards (external pressures): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • financial and technical assistance • capacity-building • empowerment of communities • negative incentives (c) Emulation by lesson-drawing (at domestic level)	(a) Socialization (normative ideas diffuse, so that actors do the right thing): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enhanced dialogue and information exchange (high level committees, experts meetings) • elites networking (b) Persuasion (cognitive ideas diffuse) (c) Emulation by mimicry (indirect mechanisms at domestic level).
Institutionalised Cooperation Schemes/ Domestic institutions do make a difference...	When influencing (1) actors' behaviour and constraining the maximum output to be permitted. MEDIATING ROLE norms, rules, procedures, etc. mediate between actors' interests and policy outputs.	When constituting (1) actor's preferences, (2) behaviour. COGNITIVE ROLE ideas, norms and values guide political actors, who project and transfer these cognitive-normative structures into the policy outputs.

By contrast, diffusion studies have made substantial progress in studying how ideas spread across countries and impact domestic policy change. Scholars of the EU have mostly investigated processes of internal diffusion of ideas, and many efforts have been put on the study of Europeanization. Still, external diffusion processes remain largely unresearched.

One would argue that convergence research has still to catch up with diffusion studies. Instead, this paper has emphasized that diffusion research indeed offers a common ground for studying policy convergence. Given the close analytical relationships between the two concepts, this paper has proposed to consistently mix up policy diffusion and convergence. This meant three things. First, this paper investigated the factors triggering diffusion as potential causes of convergence. Second, it set the empirical focus on policy outputs (the policies adopted by a government) and policy characteristics (objectives, instruments, settings). Third, it sought to explain adoption patterns of policy outputs while looking at the implications of the spreading of ideas in terms of similarity changes over time.

To achieve these objectives, this paper concentrated on five factors: coercion, manipulation of utility calculations, socialization, persuasion, emulation (Borzel and Risse 2009). By pursuing a dialogue between rational choice institutionalism and sociological institutionalism, this paper has sought to enhance the explanatory power of this model. Great emphasis has been placed on explaining why and how diffusion processes might emerge in the framework of EU-Third countries relations. Much of the puzzle having been unravelled pertains to the question of how patterns of policy adoption and convergence may be shaped by both institutionalised cooperation schemes and domestic institutions.

In a rational-choice institutionalist perspective, institutionalised cooperation schemes have been conceived as formal structure that influence domestic actors' behaviour via manipulations of utility calculations. Interests are fixed. It has been said that the EU hence provides third countries with incentives and rewards, and seeks to induce them to a certain behaviour. To a lesser extent, binding obligations (such as norms on approximation of legislation) may explain some patterns of policy adoption. Nonetheless, convergence in this case of approximation of legislation is rather unlikely. Third countries, that mostly do not have any perspective of membership, simply may have no interests in attaining to these norms unless they receive strong positive incentives (for

instance, 'a stake' into the internal market). This mechanism is expected to have a limited explanatory power.

From a rational-choice institutionalist point of view, third countries' political actors operate both internally and externally under the constraints of their domestic institutions (norms, decision rules and procedures), which set the maximum outcome to be permitted. Furthermore, at domestic level emulation (by lesson-drawing) is expected to be at work only in conditions of uncertainty, policy failure or dissatisfaction with the status quo, unless the EU succeeds in shaping behaviour via incentives and rewards.

In a sociological institutionalist perspective, institutionalised cooperation schemes have been conceived as formal and informal structures that influence both domestic actors' preferences and behaviour through socialization and persuasion mechanisms. Both formal practises (high level committees, experts meetings, etc.) and informal practises (information exchange, elites networking, etc.) are employed by the EU so that third countries' political actors learn to internalise European causal beliefs (persuasion) and normative models (socialization). At domestic level, emulation takes the shape of mimicry processes that can be triggered by both persuasion and socialization mechanisms.

It has been concluded that persuasion is expected to hold a stronger explanatory power than socialization. This is because domestic institutions (in third countries) structure actors' interests and behaviour. In details, interests arguably tend to be more 'sticky' and unlikely to change in a significant way. This paper has argued that causal beliefs (claims on the cause-effect relationships concerning a given policy problem) are more likely to diffuse, since they do not necessarily constitute a choke point with third countries' principled beliefs (what is appropriate to do as to solve the policy problem).

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