

International impacts on welfare state change: Theories and methods in the study of social policy diffusion

Workshop Directors

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Outline of the topic

Welfare policy change has long been studied dominantly from the perspective of domestic politics. Originating mainly from the debates on globalization and Europeanization, ever more scholarly attention has been paid to the relevance of international and transnational factors in the (re)calibration of welfare policies in both mature Western and especially in the developing welfare states. The first generation of analyses on international impacts focused mainly on independent responses on similar external pressures, the understanding of internationalization thus being merely a functional one. More recently attention has been paid to processes of policy diffusion due to growing density of interaction patterns across countries and the importance of transnational actors. In Europe, the austerity politics after the crisis of 2008 has made the importance of international factors apparent. Yet, the study of international influences on social policy still has major theoretical and methodological shortcomings especially with regard to the applicability for macro-comparative studies. Theoretical approaches on the impact of different mechanisms of internationalization and policy diffusion are fragmented and empirical measures and methods of analysis for capturing diffusion processes in this specific field are underdeveloped. Empirical evidence is either limited to case studies or single social policy programs, or restricted by simplified empirical measures in comparative studies.

This workshop therefore invites scholars working on international impacts on welfare policies in order to develop a more coherent framework of analysis and more adequate empirical tools for

studying the international impacts on welfare policy change. Questions that shall be addressed in the workshop include, but are not limited to:

- What are the different mechanisms of diffusion at work in the field of welfare policy?
- How can we measure diffusion through these diverse mechanisms in macro-comparative studies?
- In which ways do diffusion processes impact different domains of welfare policies?
- How are international impacts filtered or modified by domestic politics?
- In what (differing) ways are mature and developing welfare states receptive to international impacts?

The aims of the workshop are thus twofold: to refine and integrate the theoretical arguments dealing with different forms of international impacts on domestic social policy making and to develop adequate methodological treatment and measurement of such impacts. The latter includes overcoming the Galton's problem, assessing mechanisms such as learning, imitation and coercion and developing more systematic empirical measures.

Relation to existing research

International impacts on welfare policies have been studied mainly within two areas of research which this workshop attempts to link more strongly; research on the impacts of globalization and diffusion, and research on the impacts of transnational actors and the European Union. Within studies on globalization, international impacts have mainly been seen as functional reactions to similar (economic) pressures (Garrett 1998; Huber and Stephens 2001; Swank 2002). This functionalist view has increasingly been complemented by studies where internationalization is seen as a process of diffusion of policies through different channels (among others Simmons and Elkins 2004; Beck, Gleditsch, and Beardsley 2006; Braun and Gilardi 2006; Jahn 2006; Brooks 2007; Dobbin, Simmons, Garrett 2007). While the methods of modeling spatial interdependence have become more sophisticated in recent years (Franzese and Hays 2007; 2008; Plümper and Neumayer 2010), such models have been applied in the field of welfare state research only scarcely. This is mainly due to lack of 1) sufficient theoretical determination and differentiation of relevant causal mechanisms and 2) adequate quantitative data on both the interaction measure and the dependent variable. Diffusion analyses in the field of welfare policies have therefore remained restricted to one main mechanism of interaction (economic interdependence/competition pressures), simple coding of membership in international organizations, simple measures of welfare policies (social expenditure) and/or few cases.

On the other side, there are several contributions on the role of inter- and transnational organizations and the European Union on different fields of welfare policy (Armingeon 2007; Orenstein 2008; Weyland 2007; Zeitlin, Pochet, and Magnusson 2005, Myant and Drahoukoupil 2010, Jahn and Kuitto 2011). This kind of contributions offer valuable in-depth insights on impulses, processes and mechanisms related to certain types of international impacts. However, they are often restricted to few cases, policies, and/or geographical areas. A synthesis of both lines of research can therefore provide us with a better understanding of how and under what conditions welfare policy change is driven by international influences. Developing a more coherent theory of the international impacts with systematic empirical support is the goal of the workshop.

Type of papers and participants

We invite scholars engaged in comparative study of welfare states with papers from both theoretical and empirical perspectives on different aspects of international impacts on welfare policy change. Priority is given to theoretically substantiated empirical papers utilizing a macro-comparative research design and/or bringing in innovative measures of policy diffusion in the field of welfare policy.

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