

Book Review: The Democratic Foundations of Policy Diffusion: How Health, Family and Employment Laws Spread Across Countries

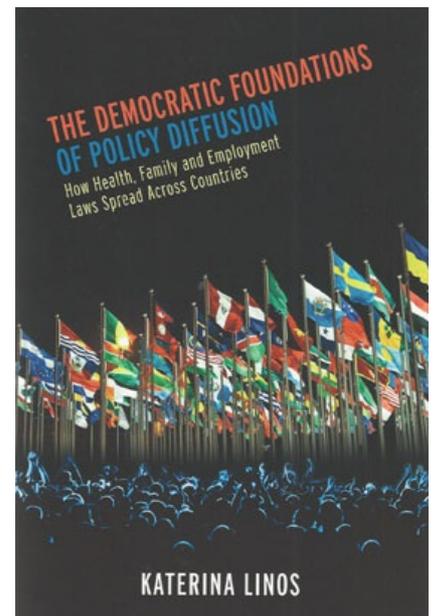
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*This book claims that laws spread across countries in very public and politicized ways. **Katerina Linos** argues that politicians choose to follow certain international models to win domestic elections, and to persuade sceptical voters that their ideas are not radical, ill-thought-out experiments, but mainstream, tried-and-true solutions. Whilst it is not new to discover that countries borrow and emulate policies, the original contribution of the book is in being able to empirically link this to elected politicians and voter behaviour, writes **Louise Brown**.*

The Democratic Foundations of Policy Diffusion: How Health, Family and Employment Laws Spread Across Countries. Katerina Linos. OUP USA. April 2013.

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The uniqueness of this book may initially lie in the fact that it is written by a US scholar yet predominantly addresses issues in Europe and that it brings together the two disciplines of political science and law. There is a good explanation for this approach in so far as the author has a PhD in political science and a position in a law school, and that her earlier work focussed upon legal reform processes in the EU. However, this book marks a slight departure or change of direction for [Katerina Linos](#) as it moves further into and towards the area of policy diffusion. Whether a departure or building on previous work it is fair to say that the book falls within a topical area namely; 'international policy diffusion' which is receiving much attention at the moment and thus makes it very timely. The book essentially aims to explore how policy ideas transfer internationally into domestic spheres and argues that this process does not necessarily consider the success of policies elsewhere, ie employ an evidence-based approach but rather the relationship between elected politicians and their voters (or citizens) plays a more major role in adoption and therefore ultimately diffusion. It goes on to provide a theory to explain how diffusion processes work in settings where decisions are made by elected politicians and how politicians respond to citizens and other interest groups. It sets out to do this through a series of examples drawn from the policy areas of health, family and employment.

The chapters that explore these specific areas in detail almost form case studies in their own right given that they tackle quite diverse areas of policy making and compare different geographical areas. Chapters 4 and 6 are somewhat broader as they examine National Health Services and family policy diffusion across OECD countries. Based upon a greater range of empirical data they offer an extremely interesting and informative insight into the different factors that drive policy choice and ultimately diffusion. These two chapters appear to form the main basis for the argument running throughout the book. Putting it simply, Linos claims through an examination of the empirical data to be able to identify that voters benchmark their governments against countries with which they are familiar

which creates an electoral incentive for politicians to borrow from those familiar countries.



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Chapter 8 sets out the conclusions and implications from the case studies described throughout the book. The theory espoused here is that voters are reassured when their politicians adopt policies from a familiar foreign country even when the proposal is untested, that politicians anticipate this and as they cannot easily relay complex 'stories' about a new idea to voters they often present their proposals accordingly. Hence a single, well promoted international model is much easier to gain acceptance for and thus promotes its diffusion. Whilst it is not new to discover that countries borrow and emulate policies the original contribution of the book is in being able to empirically link this to elected politicians and voter behaviour.

The diversity across the eight chapters clearly helps to increase the potential audience for the book and allows Linos to try and combine the learning into a theoretical contribution in the concluding chapter. However this approach may also leave some readers wanting more, for example questioning why Chapter 3 restricts itself to 'How Americans View Foreign Models' or family policy in Greece and Spain. The author justifies the setting of the book within 'rich industrialized countries' where well organised stakeholder groups fight over large investment in public services, arguing that whilst rich democracies are open to international benchmarking, they are 'least likely' cases and therefore provide 'strong support' that the theory will be more valid in most other cases. Whilst it is acknowledged that the book adopts a case study approach, this does somewhat limit the potential theoretical contribution and at best should perhaps make claim to offering a theory for diffusion within rich industrialized countries.

However, the area of international policy diffusion and the role of citizens are both currently topical and this makes the book very timely. It sits well alongside the work of other authors this side of the Atlantic such as Elkins (University College Dublin, Ireland) and Stone (Warwick, England). It does offer original insights into the relationship between elected politicians and voters as a policy driver and demonstrate how ideas transfer into a domestic policy making arena. I would recommend the book to academics and students with an interest in international policy making processes, processes of diffusion and the role of citizens and voters in influencing the shape of policy and practice. This will appeal to such audiences from a wide range of disciplines including social policy, law, international development, sociology and of course political scientists.

Dr Louise Brown is a Reader in Social Work at the University of Bath. With over 15 years experience of undertaking service evaluations her research interests are in the implementation and management of innovation in public sector organizations. She is particularly interested in the management of risk and uncertainty, scaling up and sustaining innovation and the relationship between evidence and diffusion. [Read more reviews by Louise.](#)