

Research on "Irrational Decision-making" of China's Policy Diffusion from the Perspective of Horizontal Intergovernmental Competition

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, policy innovation has become the focus of competition among local governments at the same level as the country's key focus in the field of innovation. Under the dual effects of pressure from competition at the same level and pressure from higher-level evaluations, some local governments have encountered "irrational decision-making" problems when coping with policy proliferation. The issue of "irrational decision-making" will hinder the spread of innovative policies, increase policy costs to a certain extent, and affect the actual performance of policies and even the government's governance capabilities. This article analyzes the causes of the "irrational decision-making" of policy proliferation from two levels, and draws three viewpoints and conclusions: first, the combination of horizontal intergovernmental competition and the role of local government "economic man" are important reasons for the "irrational decision-making" problem of policy proliferation; second, the combination of the short term of office of local officials and the pressure of competition at the same level and the pressure of higher-level evaluation is another reason for the promotion of "irrational decision-making" by local governments; third, by adjusting the horizontal intergovernmental competition relationship and alleviating the pressure of the same level and superiors faced by local governments, the possibility of rushing decision-making by local governments can be reduced, thereby improving "decision-making rationality". Proposing countermeasures after analyzing the "irrational decision-making" problem of policy proliferation can reduce corresponding problems and improve China's overall policy performance and governance capabilities, which is of great value.

Keywords: *Intergovernmental competition, Policy diffusion, Irrational decision-making.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As a socialist country with Chinese characteristics, China's intergovernmental relations are mainly characterized by local competition and cooperation under the leadership of centralization. Local governments can innovate local governance methods without violating the will of the central government. In recent years, under the vigorous advocacy of the central government, an atmosphere of encouragement and innovation of "up to the central government and delegated to local governments" has been formed. Policy innovation, as an important means for the government to innovate governance methods, has become the focus of attention by governments at all levels. Local governments at the same level will compete

in the field of policy innovation in order to obtain the approval of the higher level or the central government, which will generate corresponding imitation motivation or repulsive force, and the problem of policy proliferation "irrational decision-making" also arises.

China's intergovernmental relations have their own characteristics, which are mainly manifested in dependence on vertical intergovernmental relations and competition in horizontal intergovernmental relations. Specifically, the vertical relationship between central and local governments is manifested by the appropriate decentralization of economic and social local powers and the centralization of organizational and personnel systems; horizontal inter-government relations are

more of a competitive state, and local governments at the same level will introduce corresponding policies to increase their own attractiveness in order to attract resources in order to seek development. [1], [2] The vertical and horizontal differences in inter-government relations make the policy proliferation between local governments have corresponding characteristics: on the one hand, the decentralization of economic and social responsibilities gives local governments the attributes of "economic man". As an important policy exporter, they have the motivation to improve policy performance and attach importance to policy innovation; on the other hand, the centralization of the organization and the personnel system has formed a unified transmission of the will of the central government from top to bottom. The policy innovation produced by the local government in pursuit of policy performance has always been carried out in a centralized political context, and has constructed a policy innovation and policy diffusion method under the framework of the central deployment. Policy diffusion usually refers to the dissemination of innovative policies among members of the social system. [3] Policy innovation refers not only to the first adoption of a policy, [4] but also to innovations in tools or theories that exist in the process of policy formation. The former is more macroscopic, while the latter focuses on the innovation of more microscopic policy-related elements. This article discusses the issue of policy diffusion "irrational decision-making" based on the above concepts. The "irrational decision" of policy proliferation refers to the "irrational" decision made on a policy that is about to be proliferated or that is proliferating without evidence collection, subjective and objective factors evaluation, and full argumentation, which will have a negative impact on the policy.

The issue of "irrational decision-making" in policy proliferation may cause unnecessary administrative burdens, increase the cost of government decision-making and ultimately affect policy performance. Therefore, studying the "irrational decision-making" of policy diffusion from the perspective of horizontal intergovernmental competition and putting forward corresponding suggestions can reduce the cost of policy diffusion between horizontal governments, increase the possibility of policy innovation, and prevent governments at the same level from getting caught up in the competition and consumption of "putting the roots for the last". This article studies this issue and discusses issues that help reduce the

blind acceptance or rejection of policy proliferation by local governments, thereby reducing policy errors and reducing the cost of scientific policy proliferation, and ultimately improving the local government's policy innovation ability and comprehensive governance level.

2. THE PERFORMANCE AND LOGIC OF "IRRATIONAL DECISION-MAKING" UNDER HORIZONTAL INTERGOVERNMENTAL COMPETITION

Policy diffusion "irrational decision-making" is the "irrational" behavior of local officials affected by various factors when facing innovative policies. The "irrationality" in the decision-making process may have a negative impact on all aspects of the implementation of local government policies. To study this issue, it is necessary to discuss the performance of the "irrational decision-making" problem of policy proliferation and its production logic in the horizontal intergovernmental competition environment.

2.1 The Performance of the "Irrational Decision-making" Problem of Policy Diffusion Under Horizontal Intergovernmental Competition

The "irrational decision-making" of policy diffusion is mainly manifested in two behavioral tendencies, namely, "irrational acceptance" and "irrational avoidance". The former refers to the blind transplantation of innovative policies from other places in the process of the diffusion of innovative policies, because the policy has been affirmed by the superior or the central government, without inspection and demonstration of the policy itself, local conditions, and the degree of adaptation between the policy and the local government. The latter refers to the one-sided pursuit of "different" behavior by the government of a certain place in the process of policy dissemination and diffusion, because it deliberately pursues policy innovation and avoids the effective policies used by other governments.

At present, the "irrational behavior" of local governments in the face of policy proliferation is mainly "irrational acceptance", such as the proliferation of China's domestic waste classification policy. After the "Implementation Plan for the Domestic Waste Classification System" was released in March 2017, Shanghai took the lead

in piloting the domestic waste classification system, and then began to explore the implementation of domestic waste classification policies. By 2020, 237 cities across the country have launched a policy of compulsory garbage classification. [5] However, due to the weak foundation of the lower-level waste classification and the relatively macroscopic design of the upper-level system, there are certain problems when the policy is spread and actually operated at the meso level. The results of the Shanghai municipal solid waste sorting policy pilot program depend to a large extent on the relatively complete urban infrastructure and the high quality of personnel. Many cities in China do not yet have the above conditions. However, under the dual promotion of higher-level advocacy and competition at the same level, many places still initiated this policy. When the garbage classification policy was implemented in different cities, it encountered different classification standards and large implementation resistance, and the final policy effect failed to meet expectations. The "irrational avoidance" in the proliferation of local government policies is less than "irrational acceptance", but it still has an impact on China's overall policy performance. "Irrational avoidance" with the purpose of "avoidance" will become an obstacle to the diffusion of innovative policies and reduce the fluency of the spread of such policies between horizontal governments.

In short, the "irrational acceptance" of policy diffusion is the main manifestation of "irrational decision-making" under horizontal intergovernmental competition. The "irrational avoidance" behavior of blindly pursuing "policy innovation" also has an impact on policy performance. Although "irrational acceptance" and "irrational avoidance" are two diametrically opposed behaviors in the issue of policy proliferation and "irrational decision-making", they are produced under a similar logical framework, so they can be discussed and analyzed from the same perspective.

2.2 The Generation Logic of "Irrational Decision-making" of Policy Proliferation Under Horizontal Intergovernmental Competition

Although the cooperation among local governments in China has been strengthened and a

new situation of "regional cooperation and joint development" has been formed, this new situation is still formed under the promotion of the central government. Without the support and promotion of the central government, the cooperation momentum among local governments will be affected, and competitiveness will still be the main characteristic of horizontal intergovernmental relations in China. At the same time, the performance appraisal and personnel decision-making power of local governments in China is in the hands of the central government. [6] The "economic man" attribute of local governments will promote their efforts to improve their own economic rankings to obtain the affirmation of superiors or the central government, thereby launching more fierce competition and forming competition tensions among local governments at the same level. [7] Horizontal intergovernmental competition is the main content of horizontal inter-government relations. Based on the pressure of the same level, the pressure of higher-level evaluation and resource incentives generated by this competition, local officials and government organizations are encouraged to make response decisions.

Under the horizontal inter-government competition, the logic of the issue of policy proliferation "irrational decision-making" comes from three aspects: First, greater autonomy in economic and social development gives local governments more "economic man" attributes. This attribute motivates them to take profit-oriented actions to achieve their own development; second, the advocacy of the central government has a directing effect on social development, and the superiors or the central approval will become an important channel for local governments to obtain more resources and realize their own development; third, the emphasis on policy innovation from the central to the local level has made policy innovation an important content for obtaining superiors or the approval of the central government. Based on the above, local governments will compete in the field of policy innovation, and such competition will eventually lead to two results: one is that local governments achieve creative policy innovation and diffusion in the policy field under healthy competition; the other is the emergence of "irrational decision-making" under vicious competition, resulting in blind imitation or rejection of policies. ("Figure 1")

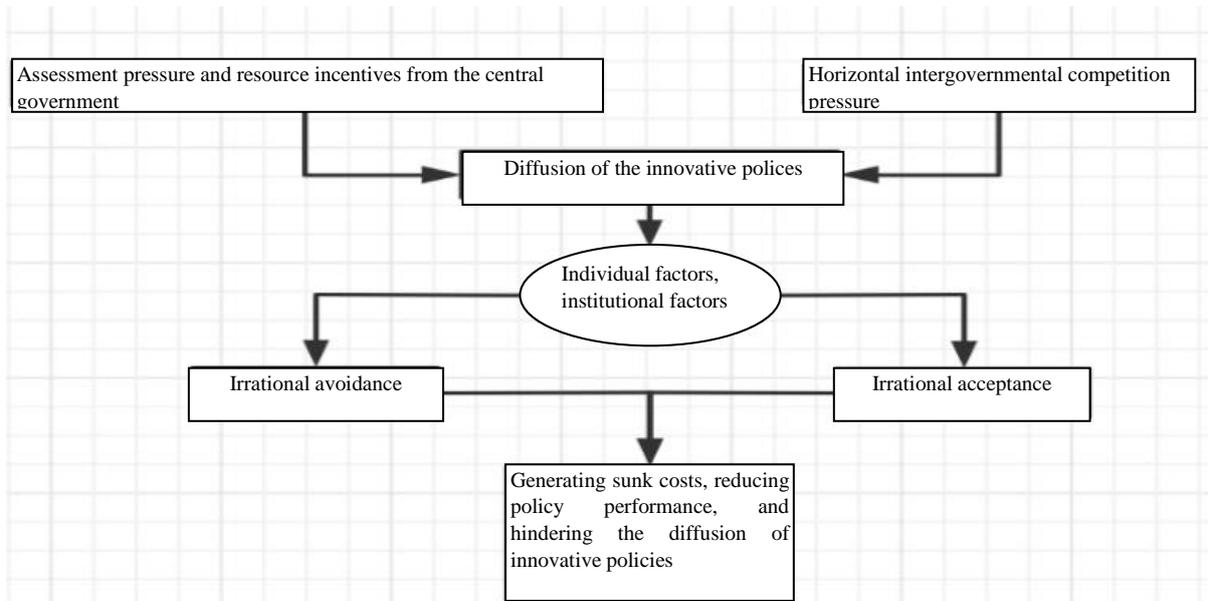


Figure 1 Logic diagram of the issue of "irrational decision-making" in policy diffusion.

To sum up, the existence of horizontal intergovernmental competition makes local governments at the same level compete in the policy innovation field that the central government attaches importance to. The "irrational decision-making" problem of policy proliferation discussed in this article is based on this logic, which arises under the comprehensive influence of various factors, and ultimately counteracts the policy performance of local governments.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE REASONS OF THE "IRRATIONAL DECISION-MAKING" PROBLEM OF POLICY DIFFUSION

Under horizontal intergovernmental competition, the reasons for the "irrational decision-making" problem of policy diffusion are more complicated. This article attempts to analyze the reasons for the problem of "irrational decision-making" in policy diffusion under horizontal intergovernmental competition from the two levels of individual and system. The reasons at the individual level are mainly based on local officials who are policy entrepreneurs, and the researchers need to analyze the reasons for their "irrational decisions" in policy proliferation. As for the reason at the system level, the researchers have explored the impact of the relevant system design on the "irrational decisions" made by local officials.

3.1 The Individual Reasons of the "Irrational Decision-making" Problem of Policy Diffusion

The individual reasons for the "irrational decision-making" problem of policy diffusion mainly refer to the strong subjective initiative, mostly due to individual factors. The Chinese government implements the executive head accountability system. This system concentrates administrative power and responsibilities in the hands of the head. On the one hand, it gives the executive head more space for creative management and clarifies the accountability subject; on the other hand, the greater power of the executive head may reduce the scientificity and democracy of decision-making. This responsibility system provides conditions for the "irrational decision-making" of policy diffusion. Based on such conditions, there is a greater possibility that "individuals influence decision-making", which results in "irrational" factors. Specifically, the individual reasons for policy diffusion "irrational decision-making" are mainly as follows:

First, some local officials have short-sighted behaviors. Local officials are not only policy executors, but also policy entrepreneurs, with functions such as refining central policies and making decisions. The positions of local officials in China are highly mobile, and some officials often do not make decisions in a relatively short term that cannot obtain their political achievements in a

relatively short term in order to pursue short-term political achievements, so short-sighted problems arise. The intersection of time pressure and higher-level evaluation pressure forms an implicit thrust that may force some local officials to make decisions that they believe can quickly produce performance. The central government's emphasis on policy innovation will intensify competition among the same levels of governments and increase the probability of "irrational decisions". The urgency brought by the short-term and the pressure brought by local governments at the same level make it easier for local officials to adopt a new policy proposal, and the degree of vigilance about the risk of adopting the new policy is reduced, which may cause corresponding policy problems. The proliferation of some effective innovative policies in the context of "irrational avoidance" may face discounts or forced interruptions, reducing the possibility of effective policies being put into practice within a larger administrative division. And looking at the overall development, the expected performance of innovative policies will also decline accordingly.

Second, there exists the deformed profit-seeking doctrine that "centers on self-interest". Both local officials and local government organizations may be self-interested. After the central government delegates more economic and social development rights to local governments, local governments have more independence and become a substantial institutional entity.[8] Local governments with the dual identities of agent and economic man will be affected by the profitability when deciding whether to adopt a certain policy, making them eager to pursue policy innovation. But in the absence of sufficient scientific evidence, their blind pursuit of policy innovation may cause negative effects. Appropriate profit-seeking can increase the enthusiasm of organizations and individuals, while abnormal profit-seeking can have a negative impact on government decision-making. Deformed profit-orientedism is beyond reasonable scope. The self-interest-centered tendency of self-interest has a negative impact on the diffusion of innovative policies because too much self-interest is the center, and the more scientific but time-consuming path is intentionally or unintentionally ignored. They choose the so-called "shortcut" to make achievements in a shorter period of time that can be seen by superiors or the central government, which creates the problem of "irrational decision-making".

Third, there are the individual's wrong assessments of policy risks. Adopting a new policy

or new policy tool may involve certain risks. Due to the limitations of individual rationality, local officials' assessment of policy risks is not completely accurate, and the shortness of their tenure will push them to make decisions as soon as possible, these provide space for "irrational decisions". In addition to the limited rationality of local officials, the degree of risk preference will also become a factor that affects their "irrational decisions". It is easier for risk appetite officials to choose "irrational avoidance" in policy diffusion, that is, to choose to formulate a new policy; risk aversion officials are more willing to transplant other local governments' policies that have proven effective through practice to the local area. Preference and aversion to risk also affect the assessment of new policy risks. The former will underestimate the possibility of negative effects of the risk, while the latter will vice versa.

Individual reasons are relatively subjective and have certain limitations. Analyzing them can better explore the corresponding countermeasures.

3.2 Institutional Reasons for Policy Proliferation "Irrational Decision-making"

In addition to individual reasons, there are institutional reasons that lead to the issue of "irrational decision-making" in policy diffusion. Institutional reasons refer to those caused by the limitations of the system itself. The institutional reasons mainly include the following aspects:

The first is that the content of the new performance appraisal has not deviated from the old performance appraisal concept. Since the reform and opening up, China's government performance management has moved from the performance appraisal stage to the performance governance stage. In the process, the wrong assessment concept of "efficiency as the center" emerged. Later, in order to respond to more diverse public needs and achieve sustainable development, a more scientific performance assessment system was designed. Although the scientificity of the government performance appraisal system has improved compared with the past, there is still path dependence on the previous appraisal concepts and methods. [9] The specific manifestations are "people's reliance" and "reliance on tools". "People's dependence" means that people who are accustomed to the previous assessment methods need a gradual adaptation process when accepting the new performance assessment management. At

present, most of the officials holding important positions in the local governments in China are middle-aged people. They are more deeply affected by the "efficiency-centered" assessment method, and they can exercise relatively large powers, so they are more likely to make decisions with the goal of "efficiency". "Reliance on tools" refers to relying on the old performance appraisal methods, including tools, procedures, etc. Policy innovation has become a content of government performance appraisal, but the old government performance appraisal concepts and methods still exist, and the content of the new assessment conflicts with the old assessment concepts and methods, making local officials wrongly pursue policy innovation, so that the problem of "irrational decision-making" in policy proliferation arises.

The second is the tendency of local officials to avoid responsibility under the accountability system. Government performance appraisal encourages local governments to pursue political achievements, and the accountability system will form accountability constraints on the behavior of local officials, thus forming a behavioral pattern that combines credit and avoidance. [10] At present, the official accountability system in China still focuses on the post-event accountability, and the boundaries of accountability are not clear. The accountability subjects are concentrated in a few officials, which makes officials fearful of mistakes in carrying out their work. While the central government decentralizes economic and social management power, local governments will also take on more responsibilities. Under this circumstance, it is easier for local governments to make "irrational acceptance" decisions on innovative policies of other local governments under the dual drive of gaining the affirmation of the superior or the central government and avoiding responsibility, trying to obtain the affirmation of superiors by implementing policies that have been successfully tested in other places as soon as possible.

The above is based on the background of horizontal inter-government competition, and the analysis of the reasons that may lead to the "irrational decision-making" problem in policy diffusion. And the countermeasures and suggestions put forward on the basis of the reason analysis have certain pertinence.

4. COUNTERMEASURES AND SUGGESTIONS

Although the "irrational decision-making" of policy diffusion is not a holistic issue, it is in the policy diffusion chain, so it has a greater impact on the value realization of a new policy, especially a feasible innovation policy. Therefore, it is of great practical significance to study this problem and put forward corresponding countermeasures and suggestions. The countermeasures to the problem of "irrational decision-making" in policy diffusion can also be based on the analysis of the cause from two levels:

4.1 Countermeasures Based on Individual Reasons

First, it is a must to change the policy innovation and performance appraisal concepts of local officials. Just like the definition of policy innovation in the previous content, the first adoption of a policy in a certain place is a policy innovation, irrespective of the time when the policy appeared and whether other governments have already adopted it. Therefore, it is also a type of policy innovation to adopt policies already implemented by other governments after careful argumentation. It is not scientific to deliberately avoid new policies of other governments in order to seek policy innovation, so as to update the concept of policy innovation from top to bottom, and encourage and guide local governments to be rational about the new proliferation policies; Then, it is necessary to update the performance appraisal concept of local officials, change the single goal as the action guide, and redefine "policy innovation" on the basis of implementing more scientific and reasonable policies as one of the performance goals. At the same time, it will be also necessary to establish a governance mechanism for performance appraisal from the central to the local level, improve the limitations of the old government performance appraisal, and give full play to the incentive effect of performance appraisal on local officials.

Second, there is a necessity to strengthen the comprehensive ability training for local officials. Local officials are the facilitators of local policy formulation and higher-level policy refinement. In order to improve the quality of local policies and improve policy performance, it is necessary to inspect and train the comprehensive capabilities of local officials. First of all, a systematic training

mechanism should be established. Through the formation of a policy expert training team, the officials in the local government will be systematically trained to improve their ability to respond to innovative policies and rational decision-making capabilities; secondly, it will be of great significance to improve the age structure and professional structure of local officials from the overall level, update the team of local government leaders, improve the professional competence composition of the team, and increase the diversity of local government decision-making suggestions from the inside; finally, it is important to establish a relatively complete decision-making information collection and risk assessment system to "arm" local governments from the outside and increase the hard power of local governments in scientific decision-making, thereby reducing the problem of "irrational decision-making" from policy diffusion.

Third, it is necessary to implement the accountability system of local officials for changes in positions. The positions of local officials in China may be transferred according to the needs of superiors and the central government. The short-term nature of the tenure makes some officials, in order to achieve "visual" performance as soon as possible, reduce or even remove the procedure of policy argumentation, and choose policies that can obtain benefits in a short period of time, which increases the possibility that some local governments will make "irrational decisions" in the face of the proliferation of innovative policies. The accountability system for local officials that implements the change of positions can continue to link the possible negative results of the policy after the implementation of the policy to the main decision-making personnel, forcing local officials to pay attention to the scientific nature and sustainable development of the policy. There will be a need to clarify the actual participants in policy formulation and the main decision-makers when establishing a system of accountability, clear the responsibility boundaries of relevant subjects, put the control of negative behaviors before the actions of local officials, and timely reduce the short-sighted behaviors of some local officials, thereby reducing the situation of local officials making "irrational decisions" in the face of proliferation policies.

4.2 Countermeasures Based on Institutional Reasons

The first is to establish a flexible policy innovation fault-tolerant mechanism. The purpose of the fault-tolerant mechanism is to tolerate the mistakes that leading cadres may make when innovating working methods. [11] There are many steps between the formulation and implementation of a new policy. These steps may be affected by complex factors, and the actual situation of the policy may deviate from the policy expectations. As long as the degree of deviation is within the controllable range and does not deviate from the original spirit of the policy, then it is still a normal phenomenon. Serious accountability due to this deviation will not only affect the normal development of the policy, but also affect the innovation motivation of local officials in the long run. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a fault-tolerant mechanism for policy innovation. First of all, it is a must to link the incentive mechanism with the fault-tolerant mechanism, and establish a "power combined pressure" promotion model that combines positive incentives and negative accountability, so that local officials dare to innovate, are willing to innovate, and want to innovate; secondly, there is a necessity to promote the three-dimensional, vivid and diversified assessment content, so that local officials can better understand the will of the central government, and reduce the space for distortion of the policy spirit; finally, there will be a must to explore feasible ways to regulate accountability and reduce the arbitrariness of official accountability. Laws and regulations can standardize official accountability procedures and clarify the scope of fault tolerance.

The second is to improve and standardize the scientific process of policy argumentation. Policy scientific argumentation is an indispensable link in the adoption of policies. However, in the actual government decision-making process, full argumentation of policies conflicts with the short-term nature of officials' tenure, and policy argumentation has become a link that can be "formalistic" operations. Lack of sufficient argumentation for the policy and mainly using subjective judgment as the basis for adopting a certain policy may make the policy "unacceptable" when it spreads to other places, and ultimately increase the cost of policy implementation and reduce policy benefits. To improve the policy argumentation process, it is a must to first further emphasize the importance of policy argumentation,

so that local officials can realize the inherent logic and function of policy argumentation; secondly, it is necessary to assist local governments, especially those that are underdeveloped, to establish corresponding expert think tanks, and use expert think tanks as a reference element for judging whether government decision-making is scientific; finally, it is also necessary to add the link of citizen participation in policy argumentation. On the one hand, this link can reduce the possibility of "irrational decision-making" by local officials. On the other hand, residents' worries and doubts about policies also reflect the society's ability to withstand the new policies to a certain extent, prompting the government to make rational decisions.

The third is to establish a competition and cooperation mechanism between local governments at the same level. The "irrational decision-making" of policy diffusion is a product of vicious horizontal intergovernmental competition. Then, by guiding local governments, especially local governments at the same level, to engage in benign competition and, if possible, to strengthen cooperation between local governments, it can reduce the possibility of policy diffusion "irrational decision-making" to a certain extent. Based on the actual situation of China, the establishment of a competition and cooperation mechanism requires the promotion of superiors or the central government. On this basis, a consensus for cooperation is formed, economies of scale are expanded, and psychological boundaries formed indirectly due to administrative divisions are resolved, and the consciousness of "a game of chess across the country" is established.

In the context of horizontal intergovernmental competition, facing the problem of "irrational decision-making" of policy diffusion, the problem of "irrational decision-making" of policy diffusion caused by the comprehensive influence of individual and institutional reasons, etc., is proposed to address the individual and the whole. In order to improve the "irrational decision-making" in the current policy proliferation stage, and the local government's internal and external restraint mechanisms have been established, so as to improve the "irrational decision" in the current policy diffusion stage.

5. CONCLUSION

This article studies the disorderly spread of policies in the context of horizontal intergovernmental competition, and analyzes the

reasons for this situation and proposes corresponding countermeasures. Through research, this article draws three viewpoints and conclusions: first, the combination of horizontal intergovernmental competition and the role of local government "economic man" is an important cause of "irrational decision-making" in policy diffusion; second, the short term of local officials, pressure from their peers and pressure from higher-level assessments will affect local government decision-making and become another reason for them to make "irrational decisions"; third, by adjusting the horizontal intergovernmental competition relationship and alleviating the pressure of the same level and superiors faced by the local government, the possibility of the local government making decisions in a hurry can be reduced, thereby improving the "rationality" of the local government in the face of policy diffusion.

As mentioned above, the "irrational decision-making" of policy diffusion under horizontal intergovernmental competition is not a holistic problem, but because of its objective existence and actual impact on policy performance, research on it has practical value; At the same time, there are still few studies on this issue in the academic circles of China, so the issue studied in this article also has academic value. Public policy runs through public management and is an important means of government governance. The research in this article is only a small part of public policy research. In order to build a service-oriented government that meets current and future development needs, similar studies will spring up like mushrooms, and have an unprecedented impact on the innovation of public policies.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Fan Zhang is responsible for structure sorting and revising, Xiaoxia Wang is responsible for the research theme confirmation and thesis writing.

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