The Fourth Level of Government: on the Standardization of Public Policy within International Regions*

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Both in the literature and in public documents one usually operates with *three* levels of government: local, regional, and national. This may be partly due to a common perception of coordination and standardization as something that takes place only through hierarchical forms of organization. However, if we realize that coordination and standardization may also take place through other organizational forms, as for instance bargaining, consultation, and autonomous adjustment, we can add a *fourth* level of government. At the same time, hierarchy seems considerably modified at the national levels. Thus, a central argument is that 'national' policies cannot be adequately explained by 'national' politics alone. Some data from the Norwegian context are used to illustrate this argument.

If we compare the content of public policy in western countries, it seems rather easy to point out differences. However, the many similarities are perhaps even more obvious (cf. for instance Heidenheimer et al. 1975; Heisler 1974). Such differences and similarities between countries have to a great extent been explained by *intra*national variables.[1] The purpose of this paper is to inquire whether these observed similarities indicate a process of political standardization within the western region. From an organizational-theoretical point of view, the important question is whether policy similarities can be regarded as a result of organized, political-administrative networks *across* national boundaries. In other words, the international regional level may be looked upon as one more level in the governmental system; a *fourth* level of public policy-making. While such an idea may seem rather strange to many, my hope is that this paper will contribute towards making this idea more acceptable.

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If we compare the content of public policy in western countries, it seems rather easy to point out differences. However, the many similarities are perhaps even more obvious (cf. for instance Heidenheimer et al. 1975; Heisler 1974). Such differences and similarities between countries have to a great extent been explained by *intra*national variables.[1] The purpose of this paper is to inquire whether these observed similarities indicate a process of political standardization within the western region. From an organizational-theoretical point of view, the important question is whether policy similarities can be regarded as a result of organized, political-administrative networks *across* national boundaries. In other words, the international regional level may be looked upon as one more level in the governmental system; a *fourth* level of public policy-making. While such an idea may seem rather strange to many, my hope is that this paper will contribute towards making this idea more acceptable.

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three levels of government; local, regional, and national. This may be partly due to a common perception of coordination and standardization as something that takes place only through *hierarchical* forms of organization. We have to remember that a common perception of the political organization of the nation-state has been that of a centralized organization, sometimes combined with *majority rule* in some way or another. On the other hand, the international level has often been characterized as *anarchy* (Riggs 1961; Alger 1963; Masters 1964). Obviously these extremes are able only to a modest degree to cover real world situations in the western region or the OECD area today. Neither hierarchy nor anarchy has reasonably existed in its pure form. My assertion is that today these forms are, even more than in the past, both considerably modified and mixed. Political organization *within* countries as well as political organization *between* countries can also be characterized as a *system of bargaining and consultation* and *autonomous adjustment*.

Political organization implies that it is possible to make and implement binding decisions on behalf of society. These decisions may refer to *all* citizens, and regulate *some* aspects of their lives (Wolin 1960). *Standardization* means equalizing public tasks and norms throughout the territory (Kjellberg 1974; Strand 1978). In this paper the territory is more inclusive than the nation-state. Our reference is the OECD area, or some part of it. Standardization of public policy within this region means, in practice, that policies have much *in common* across national boundaries. Public policies are to a less extent typical for each country. My assumption is that policies cannot be adequately explained by national politics alone.

I shall first discuss how standardization and coordination may be attained through *different* forms of political organization, including non-hierarchical forms. Some empirical examples from the Norwegian context will then be given to illustrate the extent of international standardization, and how this phenomenon may be linked to the entangling of the political-administrative systems across national boundaries; or what here is called the fourth level of government. The main purpose of this paper, however, is to present some perspectives and ideas for future empirical studies on the relationship between the national and the international regional level of public policy-making.

1. Forms of Political Organization

The form of political organization found in democratic theory often *combines majority rule and hierarchical control*. Public bureaucracy acts on

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behalf of a politically elected leadership. The premises are to be found in written rules. However, few observers of western governments today will accept this as an adequate description of political life. Rather, there seems to be an increasing interest in how majority rule and hierarchical control are *constrained*, and how political leadership through these organizational forms has been considerably modified. Both the formulation and implementation of public policy increasingly involve a broad network of institutions localized at different territorial levels and within different functional areas, often closely connected with private organizations. Territorial and functional differentiation imply that the governmental system can be characterized as a loosely coupled system; a set of institutions, each with limited tasks, competences, resources, information, and interests.[2] This development indicates that the political organization of the nation-state cannot be adequately described only as majority rule and hierarchical control. Other forms of organization, such as for instance *systems of bargaining and consultation* and *autonomous adjustment*, emerge as rather important elements (Mayntz and Scharpf 1975; Hanf and Scharpf 1978; Olsen 1978). The term 'system of bargaining and consultation' is for this purpose given a rather wide meaning, implying simply that participants and issues are not arranged in a clearcut hierarchical manner. Another property of a system of bargaining and consultation will normally be that of regulated streams of participants, problems, solutions, and choice opportunities, both regarding the access to, and the linkages among those streams. When such a regulation is modest, the term '*organized anarchy*' would perhaps be more appropriate than 'system of bargaining and consultation' (March and Olsen 1976). 'Autonomous adjustment' designates a form of coordination among two or more actors which may take place without *mutual* contact. The actors make their choices unilaterally (Dahl & Lindblom 1953; Lindblom 1965). In a certain sense they choose autonomously. However, this adjustment depends on an existing system of information among actors that makes it possible to obtain information about the preferences and choices of other actors. Coordination and standardization may then be perceived as a *by-product* of the choices of the individual actors. In one sense the economic market is an analogue to this form of political organization (Lindblom 1965).

One important task, of course, is to specify some of the *conditions* under which the different organizational forms work. It has for instance been pointed out how Weberian hierarchical control (Weber 1971) depends on *political-cultural factors* more often found in, for instance, Germany than in Great Britain or the United States (Rudolph and Rudolph 1979). Scan-

dinavian political culture, too, is to a great extent characterized by a belief in non-hierarchical forms of organization (Anton 1969; Torgersen 1975). Elements of democratic theory, stressing the importance of discussion, and of constitutional theory, also argue the necessity of constraining majority rule and hierarchical control (Wolin 1960).

Issue-related or goods-related variables also correlate with organizational forms. Quantitatively as well as qualitatively, the public agenda has changed in character considerably. This phenomenon, accompanied by a high rate of change in society as a whole, has increasingly reduced the capacity of public problem-solving through written rules. Discretion and competence are being transferred from formal political authorities to bureaucracies. Important conditions, then, on which bureaucratic organizations rest have changed over the past years (Olsen 1978).

Scholars have argued that the distinction between collective and individual goods can also be fruitful in political analysis. I suppose that the more the goods in question are of the collective or public type, the greater the probability that the public tasks can be legitimized through majority decisions and hierarchical implementation. The more the goods in question are of the individual or private type, the greater the probability that legitimation will depend on whether other forms of organization are established. In practice this is done by assigning to groups specially concerned exclusive rights of consultation and bargaining. In other words, the more selective the public tasks, the greater the probability that the tasks will affect different groups or areas differently, and the greater the probability that the intensity of interests of different groups and areas will vary. This makes legitimization through majority rule and bureaucratic organization difficult, even problematic. As a consequence, other forms of organization tend to emerge; e.g. systems of bargaining and consultation, organized anarchy, or autonomous adjustment (cf. also Lindblom 1965).

'Der Nachtwächterstaat' is a common label that has been attached to political systems which limit their tasks to collective goods, and especially to matters of internal and external security. Confronted with empirical material, such a simple characterization seems rather inadequate. No doubt, however, public tasks have changed, quantitatively as well as qualitatively. For example, the proportion of individual goods has increased. According to the line of thought pursued above, I assume forms of political organization other than majority rule and hierarchical control to have developed in parallel. We have to remember that organizational forms based on the principles of majority rule *and* bureaucracy broke through at a time when characteristics of public tasks were 'classical', i.e.

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stressing collective and general elements (Wolin 1960). That means perhaps a type of decision most suited for legitimization through majority rule.

When we consider *international* political systems, however, majority rule and hierarchical organization in a Weberian sense are almost *non-existent*. From the above-mentioned theoretical reasoning, it follows that it seems to be a rather bad prediction to expect these organizational forms to become of any great importance at this territorial level. The factors counteracting such a development tend to be more crucial at this level of government. For instance, organizational environments tend to be more heterogeneous and shifting at the same time, conditioning decentralized forms or organization (Thompson 1967; Dahl & Tufte 1974). More heterogeneity implies that not only individual, but also typical collective goods tend to affect different groups and areas in rather different ways, making legitimization dependent on the existence of systems of bargaining and consultation at different levels of government.

Keohane & Nye (1975, 1977), perceiving international regions as *complex, political-administrative systems of bargaining and consultation,* stress the following factors (cf. also Holsti 1978):

(1) Military power is not considered relevant for public problem-solving *within* an international region. Such regions could be examplified by North-America, the Nordic area, Western Europe and the OECD-area.

(2) The 'national' political-administrative systems within the region are woven together in a rather complex manner; international relations are certainly not monopolized by foreign ministries and diplomacy. Other ministries, agencies, interest groups, political parties and parliamentarians, research institutions, corporations and their international counterparts, international governmental and non-governmental organizations, transnational parties and assemblies of parliamentarians, and multinational corporations are all represented in this network (cf. also Kaiser 1971).

(3) The public agenda of international relations is made up of very different issues, including problems and solutions normally associated with domestic politics. Absence of hierarchy among issues predominates (also cfr. Hanrieder, 1978).

A complex network of political-administrative relations across national boundaries, accompanied by a corresponding complex agenda, and without clearcut hierarchical arrangements, implies that we should expect

lines of conflict and cooperation to be found *across* as well as *along* national boundaries. And in the process of bargaining and consultation, international organizations, or parts of them, are assumed to play a crucial role, regulating and relating the streams of participants, problems, solutions, and choice opportunities. In practice this is done through agenda-building and through the founding of committees and work groups (Keohane & Nye 1974). Altogether, this organizational context seems decisive for understanding most public policy today. And from this perspective, the distinction between domestic and foreign politics becomes blurred.

Political organization perceived as a system of bargaining and consultation has to be supplemented with the same organization perceived as a system of *autonomous adjustment within international regions*. For instance, the OECD can be also seen as an informational system encompassing all member states. Standardization of public policy then also takes place without bargaining (Sjøstedt 1973).

Copying public policies of other countries when planning public tasks can also be subsumed under the concept of autonomous adjustment. In fact, such an imitation means standardization of public policy across national boundaries. However, since coordination through autonomous adjustment is attained as a by-product of individual choices, it is still not obvious what conditions this type of standardization. In markets, it is argued, individual choices are motivated mainly by economic self-interest. A theory of how the standardization of public policies across national boundaries takes place through autonomous adjustment could possibly be deduced from a general theory of organizational decision-making. The organizational search for solutions has been described as problemistic, simple-minded, and biased (Cyert & March 1963). *Problemistic search* means search that is stimulated by a problem – usually a rather specific one – and is directed toward finding a solution to that problem. *Simple-minded search* means search in the neighbourhood of the problem symptom, and search in the neighbourhood of the current alternative. *Bias in search* reflects the special training, experience, and goals of various parts of the organization.

Organizational search for solutions in the neighbourhood of the current alternative may also accelerate looking at *other* organizations acting under similar conditions. Local and regional governmental organizations tend to adopt solutions adopted and proved by comparable neighbouring organizations (Walker 1969; Sharansky 1970). Governmental organizations at the national level, however, can be expected to imitate organizations

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acting under similar conditions in other countries. At this point, however, a theory of organizational search has to be supplemented by a theory of exposure. Problems are looking for solutions, but solutions are also looking for problems to which they may be an answer. Negotiated environments routinize organizational exposure to solutions not being asked for (Cyert & March 1963; March & Olsen 1976; Olsen & Wagtskjold 1979). However, students of political diffusion have not supplied us with much information about those *channels* of diffusion (cf., for instance, Walker 1969; Collier & Messick 1975; Kuhnle 1978). In sum, I will conclude this theorizing by arguing that organizational differences between the national and the international regional level of government should not be exaggerated. My point of departure is that to understand the content of public policy and its implementation, we necessarily need to take into consideration the multilevel character of the modern governmental system. This multilevel system also includes a fourth level of public policy-making.

2. The Fourth Level of Government and Standardization of Public Policy: Some Empirical Examples Drawn from the Norwegian Context[3]

2.1 Organizational Context

A complex set of linkages among political-administrative systems across national boundaries is no new phenomenon (cf., for instance, Gourevitch 1978). During the period 1915–1920 Norway was already a member of 22 international governmental organizations (IGOs). Several factors indicate, however, that the amount of intergovernmental relations across national boundaries has grown even faster after World War II (Egeberg 1978). In 1970 Norwegian IGO-memberships numbered 72. During the same period IGOs continuously expanded and specialized. At the national level ministries established special units (divisions, sections etc.) for handling international relations.

Most Norwegian ministerial administrators and executive officers (60 percent) handle issues of an international character at least once a year. Only in the Ministry of Agriculture do we find a majority – 63 percent – dealing with national issues only. These results indicate the difficulties involved in discovering issue-areas which are *not* linked in one way or another to the international level. Coordination, planning, and law-making appear to be the most internationalized functions. In the higher echelons, almost everyone handles issues of an international character. Of the

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Director-Generals, 65 percent allocate a rather large portion of their attention to international affairs.

External contacts are in no way monopolized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Those handling issues of an international character also usually have their own direct international contacts. Most of the contacts are directed towards the other Nordic countries and the rest of the OECD-area.

Of those handling international issues, only about one-third perceive conflicts *between* countries to be dominant. Only in the Ministries of Commerce and Shipping, of Foreign Affairs, and of Industry does this percentage exceed 50 percent. Instead, patterns of conflict and cooperation are mainly perceived to be rather complex and shifting, often cross-cutting traditional lines of conflict associated with international politics. Thus 'unusual' coalition behaviour can also be predicted. How patterns of conflict are perceived may be expected to be highly correlated with properties of organizational structure. Here I have in mind not only ministerial contact networks, but also the organizational links between political parties and interest groups across national boundaries. Most Norwegian party organizations and their sub-groups are formally linked to international party organizations and their 'sister parties' in other countries (Moren et al. 1976). More than half of Norway's 1200 national voluntary organizations are reported to be in regular contact with their 'sister organizations' in other countries, and a similar portion holds memberships in one or more international non-governmental organizations (Hallenstvedt & Moren 1975).

2.2 *The Content of Public Policy: Standardization*

The growing complexity of *organizational* links between governmental levels is paralleled by a multi-level *standardization of policy*. In 1972 Norway was a party to 1038 treaties with other countries or international governmental organizations. Three out of four treaties had come into effect during the post-war years: 45 percent were signed during the period 1961–1972 (Egeberg 1978).

During one year (1975) the harmonization of national laws and rules across national boundaries activated 21 per cent of the Norwegian ministerial administrators and executive officers. If we look only at those preparing laws and rules, the percentage is 29. Concentrating on those preparing laws and rules in the Ministry of Justice we found two out of three to be occupied with the international standardization of these rules. This ministry has a central position in the legislative process. The ministry

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expresses its opinion about most proposals, and this makes up a formal procedure.[4] The amount of time spent on preparing laws and rules in general correlates significantly with harmonization activity (gamma = .53). Of those *mainly* preparing laws and rules in the ministries (N = 71) 54 per cent were also working on international standardization of these rules. The formal harmonization of laws and rules across national boundaries can be related not only to the rather complex Nordic political-administrative network, but also to the organizational constraints imposed by the committee systems of international organizations in general (cf. Appendix). At the moment, it is not quite obvious what the standardization *motives* really are, if indeed there are any. An internationalized legal system may, however, represent an end in itself. A belief in the value of similar conditions of living *across* national boundaries may be a motive (cf. NOU 1972:16). Standardization may also be interpreted as the political organizing of economic markets (cf. St.meld. nr. 39, 1975–76).[5]

As mentioned above, a factual, if not formal, standardization of public tasks within international regions takes place through organizational processes of search and exposure. The routine of copying neighbouring countries when preparing public tasks seems to be a rather common one. About 70 percent of the ministerial administrators and executive officers are reported to copy other countries now and then, or more often. (26 percent are reported to copy other countries *often* when preparing public tasks.) Besides the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this procedure can most easily be observed in the Ministry of Justice and in the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, where the percentage is 83 and 85 percent respectively. Only in the Ministry of Fisheries and in the Ministry of Agriculture does the procedure of copying not deserve the term 'routine'. In general, those concentrating on preparing laws and rules, coordinating their colleagues, and informing the public most often copy other countries.

An observation from our study of economic interest organizations (cf. note 3) also deserves mentioning. Three out of four administrators from Norwegian economic interest organizations are reported to copy other countries now and then, or more often, when preparing new tasks. In particular, those involved in the (political) legislative process follow this procedure (82 percent). Bearing in mind the above-mentioned observations from the ministerial study, it is rather difficult to imagine how the contents of laws and rules are to be explained without considering the legislative process as a multi-level process that also involves a fourth level of public policy-making.

The routine of copying other countries when preparing new tasks ap-

pears to be related to political-administrative networks including Nordic as well as non-Nordic countries. However, compared to standardization as formal harmonization of laws, standardization as copying does not presuppose *specialized* organizational structures; for instance committee systems (cf. Appendix).

Through political-administrative networks across national boundaries, policy standardization may take place even when formal harmonization or copying cannot be observed. Some standardization may be the result when identical problems are put on the agenda of different governments at the same time, when related solutions are worked out and diffused, and when information about policy impact is fed back through international networks. One-third of the ministerial administrators and executive officers designate international governmental organizations as *initiators* now and then, or more often, when new tasks are to be prepared. About the same proportion finds these organizations to be of some importance when information about policy impact is fed back.

3. Some Further Questions

Within the OECD-area public policies are increasingly characterized by common properties across national boundaries. A central argument in this paper has been that this tendency only to a very modest degree can be explained by intra-national variables. The standardization of public policy observed has to be related to international political-administrative networks that are increasingly more complex, a fourth level of government, and public policy-making. This standardization and coordination takes place without majority rule and hierarchical implementation; that is without supra-national institutions, judicially speaking. Thus, it is important to notice that coordination and standardization can also be reached through other forms of organization, as for instance bargaining, consultation and autonomous adjustment. However, this observation also holds to a great extent for the national level. Even at this level political organization can not be adequately described as majority rule and hierarchy. Bargaining, consultation, and autonomous adjustment have to be added as major organizational forms.

Data from only one country are of course inadequate when the fourth level of public policy-making is to be analyzed. However, some available descriptions of international political administrative networks from other contexts show the same patterns as the Norwegian data (Hopkins 1976, Lintonen et al. 1978, Karvonen 1979, Blix 1964). Compared to other

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regions, the OECD area constitutes by far the most tightly woven network, both with regard to public and private organizational links (Wallace & Singer 1970; Skjelsbæk 1972; Hallenstvedt et al. 1975; Sundelius 1978; Soltvedt 1978; Wallace et al. 1977). At the same time, international treaties are more readily signed by countries within this area than by other countries (Nandrup Dahl 1968).

This paper has concentrated on the relationship between international (regional) political administrative networks and the *content* of public policy in general. However, policy content is also influenced in a more *indirect* manner by the fourth level of government. We also must expect *patterns of organization, conflict, and attitudes* at lower levels of government to be increasingly exposed to change. It is, for instance, generally assumed that organizations involved in complex external networks are facing increased costs of internal coordination. This challenge tends to be met by changes in the forms of organizational coordination (Aiken & Hage 1976). Grønnegaard Christensen (1978) observed, for instance, a tendency towards more non-hierarchical forms of coordination in Danish administration as a response to EC membership. A fourth level of public policy-making also seems to place some constraints on corporative patterns of representation at the national level. Representation tends to be more concentrated, resulting in a more central position to peak organizations and groups rich in resources (e.g. administrative, economic etc.) (Buksti 1979).

Since lines of conflict and cooperation are expected to be found across as well as along national boundaries, *coalition*-building will also be assumed to take place *across* national boundaries (Haas 1962; Keohane 1978). Thus, a given distribution of power at the national level may be challenged. Finally, *attitudes* of administrators and executive officers seem to be influenced by international networks. Data from the above mentioned survey (cf. note 3) show a rather high positive correlation between participation at the fourth level and a desire for strengthening the same level of government. But with regard to the relationships between the fourth level and organizational structures, patterns of coalition behaviour, and attitudes, our knowledge today is very limited.

NOTES

1. Cf. the reviews of literature offered by Collier and Messick (1975) and Østerud (1978). Collier and Messick stress a diffusion perspective.
2 A central argument of this theoretical reasoning is that political power and influence have something to do with formal decision-making, but also with taking initiatives, elucidating solutions, implementing policies, and interpreting consequences (Olsen 1978).

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3 The empirical material used was gathered by the Norwegian Power Study. Questionnaires were circulated among ministerial administrators and executive officers, and among comparable position holders in a sample of economic interest organizations. The number of ministerial respondents is 784 (71.5 percent), and organizational respondents make up 536 (72.4 percent). Considering the limited use of data analysis in this paper, a further elaboration of the data material will not be given here. Discussions of sampling and representativity etc. are to be found in Lægreid and Olsen 1978, and Gaasemyr 1979.

4 According to directives from the Prime Minister's Office, dated 20.10.72 and 25.08.75.

5 Considering issues of a more *technical* character, however, an element of 'pure system coercion' may explain standardization. For instance air transport, railway transport etc. presuppose equal technical standards across national boundaries.

APPENDIX

Administrators and executive officers in Norwegian Ministries (N = 784):
Involvement in international harmonization of laws and rules

BY:

	eta	beta
Nordic contacts	.37	.24
participation in committees of International Governmental Organizations	.38	.25
written correspondence or telephone calls with International Governmental Organizations	.31	(.06)
written correspondence or telephone calls with governments of non-Nordic countries	.18	(.00)
perception of the importance of other countries	.16	(.01)

Copying other countries when preparing public tasks
BY

	eta	beta
Nordic contacts	.21	.11
participation in committees of International Governmental Organizations	.18	(.03)
written correspondence or telephone calls with International Governmental Organizations	.19	(.01)
written correspondence or telephone calls with governments of non-Nordic countries	.21	.09
perception of the importance of other countries	.30	.24

( ) = p > .05

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3 The empirical material used was gathered by the Norwegian Power Study. Questionnaires were circulated among ministerial administrators and executive officers, and among comparable position holders in a sample of economic interest organizations. The number of ministerial respondents is 784 (71.5 percent), and organizational respondents make up 536 (72.4 percent). Considering the limited use of data analysis in this paper, a further elaboration of the data material will not be given here. Discussions of sampling and representativity etc. are to be found in Lægreid and Olsen 1978, and Gaasemyr 1979.
4 According to directives from the Prime Minister's Office, dated 20.10.72 and 25.08.75.
5 Considering issues of a more *technical* character, however, an element of 'pure system coercion' may explain standardization. For instance air transport, railway transport etc. presuppose equal technical standards across national boundaries.

APPENDIX

Administrators and executive officers in Norwegian Ministries (N = 784):
Involvement in international harmonization of laws and rules

BY:

	eta	beta
Nordic contacts	.37	.24
participation in committees of International Governmental Organizations	.38	.25
written correspondence or telephone calls with International Governmental Organizations	.31	(.06)
written correspondence or telephone calls with governments of non-Nordic countries	.18	(.00)
perception of the importance of other countries	.16	(.01)

Copying other countries when preparing public tasks
BY

	eta	beta
Nordic contacts	.21	.11
participation in committees of International Governmental Organizations	.18	(.03)
written correspondence or telephone calls with International Governmental Organizations	.19	(.01)
written correspondence or telephone calls with governments of non-Nordic countries	.21	.09
perception of the importance of other countries	.30	.24

( ) = p > .05

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