

## NUMBERS, FACTS, AND 'OBJECTIVE' MEASURES: PEER REVIEWS, RANKINGS AND THE POLITICS OF INFORMATION IN THE OECD

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### Abstract

Peer reviews and rankings have become widely used instruments of global governance. Their key feature is the collection of information on state performance in a given policy area and the assessment of this information in the light of common standards. Two rationales for these governance techniques exist: First, states and the wider public may learn from experiences and “best practice” in other states. Second, publicly known assessments and clear policy recommendations are expected to generate pressure by other states or by domestic audiences on states and their governments that are found to be underperforming or to follow inappropriate policy paths. In both cases, the quality of the information used for peer reviews and rankings and the strict neutrality of policy assessment are key preconditions for these governance techniques to function satisfactorily.

In more abstract terms, two crucial qualities of information and of the process of information production are first, standardization, and second, authority. *Standardization* denotes the use of similar indicators and reporting templates across different states in order to facilitate comparison and benchmarking. The *authority* of peer reviews and rankings denotes the extent to which reviewers and reviewed alike can put trust in the process of knowledge production. This relates both to the compilation of information and to the neutrality of assessment and the resulting policy recommendations. The key problem here is institutional: Through what mechanisms or safeguards can it be ensured that information production and performance assessment are not politically biased or flawed? This is especially critical in peer reviews and rankings among states and their governments which may compete with one another for economic shares and the trust of investors and who have a vested political interest in receiving favorable and thus potentially skewed performance assessments.

The proposed paper offers a comparative study both of the standardization of information and of attempts to make this information an authoritative source of policy assessment in three different OECD peer reviewing and ranking mechanisms. Empirical cases are the fields of economic, health, and education policies. We show how the scientific neutrality and expert authority on which the OECD's legitimacy claims rest are at least potentially contradicted by the continued need for political support and financing from the member states as well as the OECD's attempts to defend its position as “ideational arbitrator” against other international organizations. The politics of information – defined as contestation about the policy focus of peer review and ranking, about the use of specific indicators and benchmarks, and about the procedures through which information is collected and policy is assessed – are a recurring issue in all three policy fields. The proposed paper highlights the different interests and strategies involved in the production of seemingly neutral information and assessment of individual states' policy performance and thus contributes to the critical analysis of informational governance.

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