Special Issue Introduction: Policy Failure

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Understanding the persistence of policy failures: The role of politics, governance and uncertainty

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Abstract

The persistence of policy failures is a recognized but not well-understood phenomenon in the literature of the policy sciences. Existing studies offer only limited insights into the persistence of policy failures as much of the literature on the subject to date has focused on conceptualizing the topic and differentiating between different types of failures. Much less attention has been paid to systematically examining the sources of the problems which lead to recurrent failures. Collectively, the articles in this issue move this discussion forward and show the persistence of policy failures can be better understood by examining a wide range of factors both within and beyond a policy subsystem, especially the nature of the political system and its influence on decision making, governance capacity and the impact of its limitations on the chances for policy success, and levels of uncertainty in policy knowledge and practice, which continue to plague decision making and decision makers.

Keywords

Administrative theory, decision making, good governance, planning, policymaking, public administration, public management

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Introduction: The persistence of policy failures

The persistence of policy failures is a widespread phenomenon, which has not yet been paid sufficient attention in the policy sciences. Such persistence can be observed in the same type of policy failures being repeated across time periods, policy sectors and countries, despite the availability of many opportunities for policy learning and despite the very detrimental consequences of such failures to government longevity and political and administrative careers (Moran, 2001). It is not hard to identify circumstances, for example, where a policy failure or scandal linked to one administration is exploited by its opponents in winning election only for the new incumbents to find themselves falling prey to the same type of policy failure with the same electoral consequences several years later (Schultz, 2007). Why this happens and why the potential for learning the lessons of policy success and failure is often not realized in practice (Bennett and Howlett, 1992; Howlett, 2012) are significant questions, which reveal a great deal about overall policy-making process and dynamics (Hindmoor and McConnell, 2013).

As is discussed below, much of the existing literature on policy failures has focused on conceptualizing the topic and differentiating between different types of failures, with less attention paid until recently to systematically examining the factors which lead to recurrent or persistent failures (McConnell, 2010a). Many studies, for example, have emphasized technical considerations, such as resource limitations or issues at the individual level – such as poor leadership – as factors which have contributed to policy failure (Bovens and 't Hart, 1996). But such factors are always idiosyncratic and mask ongoing social, political and other such problems which can cause repeated failures over time.

Another common theme in the literature is that failures occur due to poor implementation or other technical considerations in policy design and delivery (Kerr, 1976; Wolman, 1981). But again, the persistence of policy failures across both time and space suggests the sources of policy failures lie not only beyond idiosyncratic elements such as the background and composition of policy decision makers but also beyond technical considerations in policy design or implementation, which are fairly easily amendable for correction (Howlett, 2012).

This is both because learning may be more difficult to accomplish in practice than often surmised – overall governance arrangements and interactions among political institutions and actors, and the public, may impose significant barriers to the conduct of proper analysis required to avoid certain policy failures (Little, 2012; Wilkinson, 2011) – and also because problems with governance capacities (Borrás, 2011; Wellstead et al., 2011; Williams, 2012) may constrain the ability of government to identify or tackle the root causes of policy failures. Incorrect lesson-drawing, that is, engaging in learning but drawing the wrong lessons from it, is also a problem (Moynihan, 2006; Radaelli and Dunlop, 2013) and one which is exacerbated by the inherent uncertainty posed by creating present day solutions to future problems (Morgan and Henrion, 1998; Walker and Marchau, 2004).

The articles included in this special issue aim at addressing this critical gap in the literature on policy failure and examine the roles played by politics, governance

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and uncertainty in causing and perpetuating persistent failures. The articles in this issue ultimately argue the persistence of such failures may be addressed through enhancing the capacity of policy actors and better designing policy processes and institutions to recognize and overcome common sources and types of failures (Howlett, 2012, 2014b, 2014c). Better understandings of these 'meta' factors can offer policymakers critical insights about institutional design and the reforms needed in order to avoid consistently poor policy outcomes.

A brief review of the existing literature on policy failures

The earliest writing on the subject of policy failure conceived of policy success and failure either as purely technical issues amenable to easy solution (Kerr, 1976; Wolman, 1981), as highly complex politico-administrative phenomena resistant to change (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973), or as purely relativistic constructions or interpretations impossible to address in any meaningful way (Edelman, 1964; Ingram, 1980). Each of these lenses on failures has been highly influential but not always helpful in moving thinking on the subject forward.

The technical approach, for example, has minimized the difficulties involved in dealing with the subject, while the politico-administrative one has included too many variables and promoted a highly contextual and idiosyncratic view of failures. The relativistic approach has been particularly problematic as it conceptualizes failures not as objectively assessable outcomes of policy-making but rather as constitutive of the inherently subjective and/or self-interested judgments made by policy actors. This represents failures as interpretative phenomena lying in the eyes of the beholders, coloured by their preferred state of affairs, making it difficult for analysts to analyse them much less draw general conclusions about their nature, causes and remedies (Howlett et al., 2009).

Recognizing the limitations of overly simple or overly complex explanations and definitions, and of defining policy failures based solely on subjective judgments about policy outcomes, scholars in the 1980s and 1990s attempted to be more systematic in their analyses. Although examples of all the early approaches continued to be found in this literature, most of this later work tended to combine elements of the earlier three approaches, rejecting purely technical or relativistic conceptions of policy failures while acknowledging their importance as partial explanations or descriptions of failures and of the political and policy behaviour associated with them. Similarly, as discussed above, efforts were also made to move beyond idiosyncratic contextualization and identify commonalities in the sources and drivers of both policy success and failure (McConnell, 2010b).

Significant progress was made by such work. First of all, policy failures were defined in more substantive ways than was often traditionally the case, arguing that objective or intersubjectively verifiable judgments of success or failure can be made based on independently verifiable claims made by various parties about specific aspects of policy outcomes (McConnell, 2010b). These include measures such as whether or not original objectives have been achieved, whether the policy has had a

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Table 1. Criteria for policy success and failure

Basis of claim	Claim of success	Claim of failure
Original objectives	Achieved	Not achieved
Target group impact	Positive impact	Negative impact
Results	Problem improvement	Problem worsening
Significance	Important to act	Failing to act
Source of support/opposition	Key groups support	Key groups oppose
Jurisdictional comparisons	Best practice or superior performance	Someone is doing this better elsewhere
Balance sheet	High benefits	High costs
Level of innovation	New changes	Old response
Normative stance	Right thing to do	Wrong thing to do

Adapted from: McConnell (2010a: 106, 108).

positive or negative impact on target groups, whether the problem it was intended to address has receded or not, and several other key dimensions of a problem area (for examples of such measures identified by McConnell (2010a), see Table 1).

Second, such work also brought some clarity into considerations of defining and differentiating policy failures. It gave rise in the 1980s and 1990s to the emergence of a set of new concepts attempting to more precisely define the "dependent variable" of policy failure; identifying such variants as "policy fiascos" (Bovens and 't Hart, 1996); "governance failures" (Vining and Weimer, 1990; Wolf 1979, 1987); "policy accidents" (Cobb and Primo, 2003; Kingdon, 1984); "policy disasters" (Dunleavy, 1995); "policy catastrophes" (Moran, 2001); and "policy anomalies" (Hall, 1993), among others.

Third, it also attempted to group these different kinds of failures into larger types or "classes". Much early work on the subject, for example, differentiated failures based on how they were linked to either problems in policy formulation or implementation. In this work, four main types of failures were identified (see Table 2). These included situations whereby good plans are not executed properly; those where good execution is wasted on poorly developed plans; those where poor planning and poor execution lead to very poor results and those where even the most rigorous analysis and execution still did not result in the achievement of goals, against all reasonable expectations, due to limitations in the existing policy paradigm.

The contemporary literature goes beyond the analysis of only two stages of policy-making – formulation and implementation – to examine failures at all levels and stages of policy-making (Howlett et al., 2009). Failures also occur in agenda setting where an over-reaching government establishes or agrees to establish over-burdened or unattainable policy agendas; at the stage of decision making when governments fail to properly anticipate the consequences of their proposed

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Table 2. Early policy failure designations

	Theory and evidence used in formulation	
	Rigorous/well-accepted	Flimsy/disputed
Policy execution		
Effectively executed/ best practices	Policy anomalies	Policy mistakes
Ineffectively executed	Policy accidents	Policy fiascos

Source: Howlett (2012).

courses of action or the general susceptibility of their policy or administrative systems to catastrophic and other kinds of collapse, and they also occur in policy evaluation when governments and policymakers fail to effectively evaluate policy processes and outcomes and/or fail to learn the appropriate lessons from their own and other government's previous experiences (Howlett et al., 2009; Matthews, 2011) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Stages of the policy process and associated policy failures

Agenda setting	Over-reaching governments establishing or agreeing to establish over-burdened or unattainable policy agendas.
Policy formulation	Attempting to deal with wicked problems without appropriately investigating or researching problem causes or the probable effects of policy alternatives.
Decision making	Failing to anticipate adverse and other policy consequences or risk of system failures.
Policy implementation	Failing to deal with implementation problems including lack of funding, legitimacy issues, principle-agent problems, oversight failures and others.
Policy evaluation	Lack of learning due to lack of, ineffective or inappropriate policy monitoring and/or feedback processes and structures.

Source: Howlett et al. (2009).

Further in this direction, more recent studies have attempted to improve on such two-dimensional models by identifying as many as six dimensions of failures. These include its *extent* (Hood, et al., 2000), as sometimes an entire policy regime can fail, for example, though it is often the case that only specific programs or particular aspects of the policy are designated as successful or unsuccessful (Cobb and Primo, 2003); and *duration,* with some failures being gradual and long lasting and others short and sharp in nature, such as the "events" like soccer riots or fireworks explosions that Bovens and 't Hart (1995) were most concerned with in their work. "Publicness" or *visibility* of failures is a third dimension as *prima facie*, programmes

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and events which are less visible to the public are much less likely to earn public approbation than those which are highly visible (Schudson, 2006). A fourth dimension is the element of *avoidability* in the sense that blame and the attribution of failure is greater the more it might have been avoided, an aspect of the subject upon which Weaver (1986, 1987) and Hood (2010) focused attention. "Unpredictable" and "unavoidable" events can generate more sympathy for policymakers – and hence can be seen less as a failure – than those which could have been easily predicted, and especially those which could have been easily predicted and averted (Brandstrom and Kuipers, 2003). Fifth, this work also highlighted the need for some aggregate level of agreement within a "community" on the assessment of failure. This presupposes that such assessments are not necessarily unanimous and the level of agreement of various actors about the extent and degree of policy failure will cause them to vary in *intensity* (Howlett, 2012). Finally, a sixth aspect implicit in this definition is that any government action can fail due to malfeasance, fraud, criminal activity, ideological intentions, conspiracies and other kinds of self-defeating behaviour on the part of government officials and decision makers. Many of these kinds of actions can be termed *intentional* failures – whereby, for example, members of an opposition party in a legislature introduce bills they fully expect to fail in order to embarrass a government – rather than *unintentional* or "accidental" ones, whereby an otherwise well-intentioned effort to promote improved childcare, for example, may be de-railed by fraudulent misappropriation of funds (Howlett, 2012). These six dimensions of policy failures/successes are summarized in Table 4 below.

This work also emphasized the significance of factors such as politics and political variables to the discussion of policy failure. That is, it was recognized that policy outcomes have political consequences affecting the ability of parties and individuals to obtain or retain their positions in government and elsewhere in the political system, and that designations of policy success and failure are semantic or 'discursive' tools themselves used in public debate and policy-making processes in order to seek political, partisan, and often electoral advantage. Policy failures easily translate into declines in electoral support and legitimacy and can result in

Table 4. Six dimensions of policy failures

Attribute	Range
Extent (Size)	From large (regime) to small (event)
Avoidability	From low to high
Visibility	From low to high
Intentionality	From low to high
Duration	From long to short
Intensity	From low to high

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the growth and success of rival parties and contestants for office even in non-democratic systems (Hood, 2010; Howlett, 2014a).

Contemporary studies of policy failure

These studies thus identified three sets of meta-variables as involved in designations and occurrences of policy failure: political institutions and practices, governance capacities, and problems with knowledge or uncertainties underlying policy processes and practices.

While most early studies of policy success and failure focused almost exclusively on the programmatic aspects of designing and implementing policies, later work identified at least two other significant dimensions of policy failures which had to be taken into account if the phenomena was to be thoroughly understood: the "process" failure and the "political" one (McConnell, 2010a, 2010b). Policies were now seen as not only as capable of failing in substantive, technical terms (objectively or subjectively) as not being able to accomplish the goals set out for them – as is typically the case with programme failures – but also in process terms; as simply being unable to proceed from idea to reality through the successful completion of the policy process. The same is true of policies which fail less through programme- or process-related issues but for political reasons when a proposed policy is distorted for electoral, legislative, or other partisan reasons (McConnell, 2010a).

Contemporary studies of policy failure like the ones contained in this issue wish to build upon and go beyond these insights and apply these three factors to the study and understanding of the causes and consequences of *persistent patterns* of failure.

This is key subject, which is recognized but not well understood in the older literature on the subject and is the subject the articles in this special issue. Discussions in the issue examine the extent to which policy failures are amenable to correction via technical learning and which are not; why some policy failures persist despite vigorous attempts to correct them and why some failures may be in a sense, inevitable and unavoidable, but possibly mitigated.

This issue: Understanding the persistence of policy failures

Collectively, the articles in the issue argue the persistence of policy failures can be better understood by examining a range of factors both within and beyond the policy subsystem, including the nature of the political system, governance capacity, and levels of uncertainty in policy knowledge and practice identified in earlier studies.

In his contribution, Allan McConnell sets out the basic problematic of repetitive policy failures. He looks at how governments throughout the world seem cursed to suffer periodic policy failures. Avoiding such failures, McConnell argues, is a tricky issue for governments. A major problem, for example, is that policies often have

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multiple and potentially conflicting goals to satisfy. For instance, public spending cutbacks coupled with additional taxes deployed for the purpose of reducing debt may create high risk of failure due to difficulties in building the necessary coalition of support for the measures. Furthermore, designing policies is not an exact science and involves a high degree of judgement on the level of resources needed, feasibility and clarity of goals and the measures needed for effective implementation. Building on his framework of three realms of policy failures, that is, policy failures which take the forms of program, process and political failures, McConnell sets out a heuristic under which failure can occur in some of the three realms but not others and/or can be a matter of degree, as well as being interspersed with success(es). The application of his framework suggests policy successes are restrictive and understandably rare, as they require success in each of the three realms. Policy failures on the other hand, are much more common as it only takes failure in one dimension for a policy to fail. This framework helps us navigate the messy, ambiguous and realpolitik of policymaking by differentiating paths leading to perception of policy failures.

Philippe Zittoun continues this re-assessment of the causes of policy failures, noting that different authors and different studies have defined public policy failure in varying ways. He asks if an objective and apolitical concept of failure, distinct from the subjective and political one used by stakeholders, exists? Public policy failure is frequently denounced during political clashes which structure partisan life for instance, but it is also a concept regularly used by experts, bureaucrats, the media or interest groups. The purpose of his article is to reiterate that the researcher interested in the subject must focus on failure as a concept that stakeholders use, rather than as a purely subjective or relativistic concept (Ascher, 1999; Bond and Tait 1997; Mucciaroni, 1990).

B. Guy Peters then notes in his article the presence of a large literature – in political science, policy studies, in public administration and in the real world of government – on the reasons for the failure of governance and public policies. Leaving aside the question about why we tend to be more interested in failures than success (but see Kerr, 1976; Light, 2002; McConnell, 2010a; Schwartz, 1983), Peters notes the literature on failures raises fundamental questions about our collective capacity to make and implement public policy in an efficient and effective way (Painter and Pierre, 2005). He argues approaches to failure in the public sector that focus less on the details of each individual policy and more on structural determinants of action within the public and private sector, as well as on the interactions among policies, are superior for both understanding individual and persistent failures.

Peter May continues this discussion, revisiting the literature on policy implementation which so heavily influenced early thinking about policy failures and re-examining the role of governance variables in persistent policy failures. He notes the cataloguing of failures when putting policies in place has been the hallmark of implementation studies since the emergence of this area of scholarly inquiry in the early 1970s. The extensive body of research undertaken since then

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continues to depict various gaps such as poorly designed or under-resources administrative entities within government, and the presence of actors from different levels of government and third-party organizations as barriers which can negatively affect the attempt to translate the intent of policies into practice. May argues the numerous lessons from this research can be distilled into guidance about improving policy design to improve implementation prospects. At issue is the strength of a given regime as reflected by the resonance of the core idea behind the regime that motivates common purpose, the ability of relevant institutional structures to channel energy and attention, and the creation of constituencies in support of a given set of policies. These effects, in turn, May argues, shape the legitimacy, coherence, and durability of policies.

Bali and Ramesh continue this line of thought, addressing the persistent failure of India's healthcare system to deliver on its promises and expectations due to a mismatch between the policy tools utilized and the problems encountered. India's first health policy document in 1946 envisaged an ambitious health system comprising delivery of public health programs by the national government and primary and secondary care by the state governments. Yet nearly seven decades later, the delivery of public health programs remains limited and uncoordinated, whilst primary and especially secondary care is of poor quality and unaffordable to the bulk of the population. The authors argue this is because the policy instruments utilized in India have always been inconsistent with the goals it was trying to achieve. The meagre funds allocated to public health programs and the unwillingness and inability of state governments to shoulder responsibility for primary and secondary care led to the dominance of the private sector in delivery, out-of-pocket financing, and fee-for-service payment to providers. Recent reforms have made some progress in addressing the lacunae but continue to be handicapped by the pervasive dominance of the private sector which severely limits the choice of policy tools available to the government.

Martijn van der Steen, Jorren Scherpenisse, Paul 't Hart and Mark van Twist push this analysis of governance capacities and policy tools to discuss how policymakers must now often deal with knowledge uncertainty and the principal-agent problems involved in policy-making not directly as in the past through governmental goods and service delivery but indirectly through various non-governmental agencies increasingly involved in this process. They note in many areas of contemporary public policy how governments now articulate ambitious aims but largely rely on devolved, semi-autonomous institutions to deliver them. For the delivery of many policy results, governments have become heavily dependent on semi-public organizations over which they have little direct control. Governments plan, regulate and fund, but the success or failure of policy is now ultimately determined by the "front line" performance of schools, hospitals, and prisons and other highly autonomous semi-public or private organizations. Politicians and civil servants, they argue, must learn to live with the uncertainty and incomplete knowledge that this entails and develop a tolerance for the incomplete control they have over what actually happens in the domains for which they are responsible.

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They note, however, that the problem becomes more pressing when the performance of arm's length agents of implementation is problematic. They provide instructions on what governments can do when agents delivering critical educational, healthcare, custodial or other vital public services do not meet policymakers' expectations and standards, experience business continuity problems, or otherwise get into trouble.

Joshua Newman and Brian Head then present a behavioural explanation of why many policy failures may endure and persist even despite broad agreement about their presence and the existence and knowledge of potential remedies such as those articulated by van der Steen and his colleagues. Examining policy-making dealing with climate change in Australia, they argue a focus in the literature on policy success and failure has been to treat these concepts as discrete, and often terminal, nodes in the policy process. According to this perspective, policies progress through iterations of the policy cycle until they fail, in which case they are expected to be replaced (Hall, 1993; May, 1992), but Newman and Head note that for political reasons governments are often hesitant to correct their own failures, as vote-conscious politicians are likely to seek to avoid blame for errors at all costs (Balla et al., 2002; Howlett, 2012). Hence, government actions in the face of policy failure are frequently designed to downplay failure or to assign blame to other actors. Often, this can amplify policy failures rather than correct them, as energy and resources are spent on avoiding blame, denying the existence of failure, and protecting the reputation of the government, rather than on improving policy outcomes by adjusting existing policies or programs.

All of this implies that once a policy has descended into failure, recovery may not be possible without a change in government. However, because policy failures punish political actors so severely, even a change of government is not always a sufficient condition for the correction of a failure. A government that attempts to address a policy or program that is perceived to be a failure risks taking ownership of the issue and can thereby be assigned blame for the failure even when it preceded the ascension of that government to power. Risk-averse governments are therefore often wary of even addressing a predecessor's failures and such failures may persist well beyond an initiating government's mandate or lifespan.

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