Why Do Policies Fail? A Starting Point for Exploration

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Introduction

Governments throughout the world seem cursed to suffer periodic policy failures. A modest list would include the Poll Tax and Child Support Agency (UK), home insulation program (Australia), response to the global financial crisis (Iceland), ‘No Child Left Behind’ (USA), Guantanamo Bay detention camp (USA) and Public Health Records reform (Canada).

Yet avoiding such apparent policy failures is a tricky issue for governments. Policies often have multiple and potentially conflicting goals to satisfy. For instance, government austerity measures such as public spending cutbacks and additional taxes marshalled towards the goal of reducing debt, may create high risk of failure to build a viable coalition of support behind the measures. Furthermore, designing policies is not an exact science and involves some degree of judgement on level of resources needed, feasibility and clarity of goals, most appropriate measures needed for implementation and more. Misjudgements at the policy design stage can create risks of future policy failures (Schneider and Ingram, 1997). Also, policies are designed without precise foreknowledge of how a policy will perform when subject to the multiple and interacting forces (economic, political, social, media, technological, demographic and climatic) that will shape its implementation (Hill and Hupe, 2009).

Indeed, sometimes policy can be derailed by a coalescence of crisis-type forces beyond the control or imagining of policy makers e.g. the raft of public infrastructure projects cancelled in the wake of the global financial crisis.

Understanding policy failure, therefore, is a hugely significant issue because inter alia policy failures prevent governments from achieving their policy goals and can involve the economic costs of trying to ‘fix’ problems through (often fruitless) reform initiatives; consume inordinate amounts of agenda time that might be better spent by politicians, media and citizens on other issues of greater public concern. Policy failures can also cause electoral and reputational damage to governments, and even lead to the downfall of public officials, politicians, governments and regimes.

In reality, however, understanding policy failures is something of an enigma. Researchers seem bedevilled by the fact that there is no accepted definition of policy failure nor any modicum of agreement on what causes such failures. Disputes over whether a policy has actually ‘failed’ are commonplace. Allegations of policy failure from opposition parties, the media and others, typically produce multiple discourses from supporters attempting to shore up support for policies that are framed as ‘successful’ rather than having failed. Post-failure blames games over what caused failures are little different. For example the failure of UK banking regulation in the lead up to the global financial crisis has been attributed to multiple factors, ranging from ‘greedy bankers’, to ‘poor regulation’ and ‘unethical market capitalism’.

In this context, the purpose of this paper to provide analysts with a heuristic roadmap which directly addresses the two interconnected issues raised here; the nature and causes of policy failure. The underlying logic, given a paucity of literature on the topic, is to help develop our understanding and analytical capacities in approaching this topic and any particular instance of failure, rather than to provide an objective definition or causal mechanisms.

The paper is structured as follows. First, it identifies a number of key methodological difficulties in any attempt to comprehend the nature and causes of policy failure.
Second, it examines public policy writings on policy failure – most of which tackle the topic indirectly. Third, it sets out a heuristic framework to help understanding the nature of policy failure, including its many grey areas and ambiguities. Fourth and finally, it provides a roadmap to help approach an understanding of the causes of failure, while being able to accommodate vastly different narratives and their underlying assumptions about the source and significance of failure. It concludes by emphasising the political and messy nature of policy failure, in contrast to the neatly packaged accounts that often appear in the media.

**The Methodological Difficulties of Defining Policy Failure and Identifying its Causes**

It is important to identify such difficulties upfront. The nature of policy failures and their causes are related but will be dealt with separately for the moment. As will be argued, they may seem on first impression to present insurmountable problems for any analysis of policy failure. I will argue the opposite. The difficulties in pinning down these key aspects of policy failure help illuminate our understanding.

**Defining Failure: Methodological Problems**

Newspaper headlines, political party press releases and even at times academic books and articles, tend to treat the matter of a policy having ‘failed’ as self-evident. It is as though the controversy generated and promises broken are sufficient in themselves to warrant the term ‘failure’. Yet there are very many reasons why we should be wary of the view that failure is self-evident. The reasons are rooted not only in the phenomenon of failure itself, but also in the contested, idiosyncratic and methodologically pluralistic nature of the social and political sciences.

**Differing perceptions:** In essence, what one individual perceives as a failure, may be viewed by another as ‘not a failure’ or even a ‘success’. Such issues get to the heart of the methodological diversity of political science and the social sciences more generally (Hay, 2002; Marsh and Stoker, 2010; Cairney, 2013). Political life, whether it be the health of democratic systems or changing policy agendas, is studied from an array of assumptions around ontology (what is the true nature of the phenomena we are studying?), epistemology (how do we know that this is the true nature?) and methodology (how should we study this phenomenon?). Needless to say the multiplicity of fine-grained debates and philosophical reflections cannot be dwelt on here, but for present purposes we should recognise two counter tendencies. The first, we can call the rational scientific tradition, which in terms of ‘failure’ translates into the assumption that failure is an objective fact (see e.g. Gupta 2001 and Davidson 2005 on evaluation). A counter-tendency is the interpretivist, constructivist and discursive tradition, which views the world very much as contingent on individual perceptions, which typically vary, depending on who is ‘perceiving’ (see e.g. Edelman 1988; Fischer 2003; Stone, 2012). In any quest to understand policy failure, therefore, there is a real difficulty in reconciling two competing phenomena with seemingly equal plausibility. It would be difficult to dispute the fact that a government failing to implement a controversial ‘rendering’ policy (terrorist suspects being sent overseas for interrogation) constitutes a failure when matched against originally government intentions, but equally the outcome may be seen as a success for those argue that rendering poses high risks of human rights violations.
Differing benchmarks: the word ‘failure’ has negative connotations (even if we think some positive benefits might ensue) and brings to the fore a relational issue i.e. failure in relation to what? Once we unpack this issue, there are a host of different, non–mutually exclusive possibilities. They include failure to:

- meet original objectives e.g. to reduce alcohol-related crime by 10%
- be implemented as intended e.g. establish a new agency for Food Safety
- benefit the intended target group e.g. women over the age of 55
- provide benefits that outweigh the costs e.g. lasting peace vs. loss of lives in military intervention
- satisfy criteria that are highly valued in that policy sector e.g. national security in the intelligence sector
- meet legal, moral or ethical standards e.g. protecting human rights
- garner support from key stakeholders in that sector e.g. farmers, small businesses
- improve on the previous state of affairs e.g. incidences of corruption down since creation of new anti-corruption watchdog
- improve by comparison to a similar jurisdiction e.g. one provincial government improving educational performance relative to a neighbouring provincial government

Understanding failure would be straightforward if there was universal agreement on failures being defined by breach of a universally agreed benchmark of X, but this is simply not possible, given the propensity of policy opponents to emphasise those aspects that have failed to be achieved, and for policy supporters to emphasise those that have. For example, a government’s defence that its investment in education has increased by 10% over the previous five years, could be countered by critics who argue that funding is still lower than competitors and is failing to translate into improved educational standards for students.

Grey Areas: Differing perceptions aside, failure is rarely ‘all or nothing’. Typically there are shades of grey, where judgement is needed in terms of the interpretation and significance that should be given to shortfalls, lack of evidence and conflicts. There is a certain logic, even without adopting a rational-scientific perspective, to the view that we should identify what goal or objective was set, and then ascertain if it was in fact met. But what if that goal was only partially fulfilled? If for example a government’s anti-drink driving campaign aims to reduce offences by 50% but the reduction is only 40%, does this mean the policy has failed? Do the shortfalls negate the success, or should we weigh up each. Of course the issue then becomes one of where we draw the line. There is no scientific formula for making such decisions.

We may also not have sufficient evidence to make a judgement on policy failure. Appropriate information may simply not be available (on patient care, or the extent of child abuse) or may even be hidden from view in the sense that a policy may have failed against a hidden agenda goal, but we will never know because that goal is not in the public domain e.g. a ‘placebo’ policy designed in part to manage a wicked issue off the political agenda, regardless of its impact on welfare outcomes (McConnell, 2010a). Furthermore, policies often have multiple goals, and so a further and exceptionally difficult issue is how we weigh up and prioritise failure in one goal, against success in another. For example, New York’s Family Rewards Scheme which provided financial incentives for the very poorest families subject to them undertaking
certain activities and attaining particular outcomes, failed to make any difference to school attendance or academic performance but was successful in increasing families’ use of medical care and reducing hardship (Miller and Riccio, 2011). Such grey areas pose serious difficulties for analysts in terms of whether they can say with any degree of comprehensiveness that a policy has ‘failed’.

Failure for whom? Public policy is manifested practically in policy instruments which, among other things, creates financial rewards and penalties, regulates behaviour and provides services (Hood and Margetts, 2007; Howlett, 2010). Public policies often have ‘target groups’ (such as smokers or young drivers under-25) and policy makers hope that the circumstances and/or behaviour of these groups will be altered by the requisite policy. At times a policy may be designed to limit the rights/rewards of a target group (those convicted of fraud unable to keep the proceeds of crime) but on other occasions a policy made provide or expand the benefits to a particular group (the right to same-sex marriage).

Crucially, therefore, the issue of ‘failure for whom?’ adds further complexity. A policy that failed to encourage parents to provide healthier lunches for their children when attending school, would make no difference to families with no school-age children. In fact, a policy that failed to deliver benefits for one group may be successful for another. A failed attempt by a local government to build a waste facility next to a local community, would also be a failure for the commercial contractor specialising in waste removal, but a success for local residents who campaigned against the project. If a policy fails some groups but brings successes for others, there is a real difficulty in weighing-up these complex outcomes and ascertaining which matters most.

Variance over time: Attributing the word ‘failure’ to a particular set of policy outcomes seems definitive, as though policy is irredeemable from that point onwards. Yet in addition to the ‘grey areas’ identified previously, a further challenge in ascertaining policy failure is the time period being evaluated. A policy that failed in the short term may yield successes in the long term. An often cited example is the planning disaster (Hall, 1982) of Sydney Opera House which was over a decade late and fourteen time over budget, but has since become one of the world’s top tourist attractions. Even policies that ‘failed’ can help open policy windows for further reform. The highly controversial poll tax in the UK between 1989-93 (in effect a per capita tax on the right to vote), paved the way for a reformed property tax (Council Tax), addressing many of the deficiencies of a local tax system that had been resistant to serious reform over the previous century. Weighing up a period of ‘failure’ against a period of ‘success’ seems an almost intractable issue, taking us even further away from the idea that failure is defined by a clear and constant set of undesirable circumstances.

Overall, therefore, understanding what constitutes policy failure is beset by a series of methodologically difficulties that seem to make the challenge insurmountable. Understanding the causes of failure creates additional impediments that seem, at least initially, to thwart our analytical ambitions.

Identifying the Causes of Failure: Methodological Problems

Imagine a government that introduces a new system to ensure that when parents separate or divorce, the non-custodial parent (often the father) continues to financially
provide for the child or children until they reach a specified age. Imagine then that this new system worked out badly indeed, with numerous problems such as exceptionally long processing times, high number of assessment errors, ineffective follow-up to pursue non-payers, low levels of trust and reputational damage to the agency involved and so on. Imagine then we wanted to identify the causes of this failure? Are they the product of the ministers and public officials who thought this was a good idea in the first place? The political system that didn’t provide sufficient checks and balances at the policy proposal stage? The design of the policy itself, with insufficient attention paid to detailed implementation issues? The implementing agency and that way it was run? Dominant governing ideas that thought it feasible to reduce welfare benefits for single parents and enforce financial responsibility on the non-custodial parent? There is no single, scientific or quasi-scientific answer to the question of what causes this or any other policy failure. Several reasons are particularly important.

The Myth of the Single Causal Factor: All policies are formed and decided upon by individuals, but they are produced and enacted in broader institutional context, which in themselves operate in broader societal context of governing ideas, powerful groups, changing technologies, global interdependencies and so on. To say therefore, that one factor alone is the cause of a failure, would be to neglect the range of individual, institutional and societal factors that interacted to produce that failure – as well as the their complex interdependencies. The aforementioned child support example is in fact a real example: The Child Support Agency (CSA) in the UK. A recent detailed study in a book of ‘policy blunders’, cites multiple causes of failure, including cultural disconnect on the part of ministers who were unaware that family and parental relationships were much more complex than classic ‘nuclear family’ assumptions, and contradictory goals of revenue raising and child welfare which translated into a policy design that was unworkable (King and Crewe, 2013).

Degrees of Causality? Second, and related, we might want to conceive of degrees to which different factors are causes, organising the analysis (for example) around primary, secondary and peripheral causal factors. This might make instinctive sense, for example. However, it is difficult to do so rigorously, because it assumes (a) that there is some kind of scientific means of ascertain causal priority factors and (b) that these causal factors operate in some kind of hierarchical ways, rather than in a complex, mutually reinforcing ways that are not easily amendable to investigation. Public policies operating in complex social conditions cannot be modelled retrospectively under laboratory-type conditions to find out what we wrong, in the same way as can be done for air accident investigations.

The Bias of Hindsight: Policy failures are viewed in hindsight, with the knowledge that ‘failure’ has occurred and with typical intents to backward map’ and construct a narrative which begins with warning signs that were ignored, and culminates in failures that could have been prevented (Boin and Fishbacher-Smith, 2011). Yet such narratives are easy to construct in hindsight but do not usually take into account the prior historical context (at policy making stage) where policy makers anticipated (or ‘forward mapped’) a successful policy and perhaps even perceived the risk for failure to be either negligible or risks worth taking. For example, despite a common cause of the global financial crisis being attributed as the failure by politicians, public officials and regulators to see and act on warning signs, an alternative and more mundane explanation (at least part of the explanation) is that in the context of high growth and
significant returns from market-driven financial sectors, a dominant market ideology perceived supposed ‘warning signs’ as small acceptable risks that would be corrected by market mechanisms (Hindmoor and McConnell, 2013). Methodologically, therefore, we face real difficulties in ascertaining the causes of failure, because we need to juggle the hindsight biases of warning signs ignored and ‘accidents waiting to happen’, to the more context sensitive stories of negligible or low risk factors being considered unproblematic in the quest for greater successes.

The Role of Judgement: A common thread running through all of the above, is that judgement is required to privilege some causal factors over others. In a world where public policies typically generate debate, often vociferous, over the means and ends of policies, it is unsurprising to find analysts (including members of governing and opposition parties) disagreeing over what caused policy failure.

Overall, therefore, identifying the causes of failure (as with its nature) seems to be so complex as to be almost impossible. In some sense, therefore, it is easy to place these issues into the ‘too hard’ basket. Understanding policy failure cannot be absolved from contending with seemingly never ending ‘it depends on your point of view’ issues, as well as ‘what came first – the chicken or the egg’ conundrums. However, I would argue that neglecting policy failure for reasons such as these, is akin to refusing to engage in political analysis because we do not have a ‘theory of everything’. Public policy is indeed complex, contested and at times seemingly analytically impenetrable. We can advance our understanding by embracing its vagaries and recognising that ‘policy analysis in the real world’ (to coin Hogwood and Gunn) does not need perfect answers to advance our understanding. The policy sciences discipline have always proceeded incrementally (deLeon, 1988). In this spirit, let us consider the strengths and limitations of what the public policy literature has to offer in understanding policy failure.

The Public Policy Literature on Policy Failure

Failure is more newsworthy than success, and political analysis is generally more interesting when it includes (at least to some degree) strong aspects of failure: whether it be perverse policy outcomes, corrupt practices, or public officials in the spotlight for misjudgement. Policy analysis itself is a diverse practice, with varying traditions and purposes from the provision of advice to policy makers in the interests of societal betterment (Lasswell, 1971) to critique and the highlighting of social injustices (Dryzek, 2006). Surprisingly, there is a paucity of writings on policy failure. Perhaps one main reason is that deep analysis requires confronting the near intractable methodological issues mentioned previously. Studying failure, therefore, is often a means to and end rather than end in itself e.g. studying Guantanamo prison as a human rights issue, rather than as policy failure per se. Nevertheless, to varying degrees there are broad groupings of policy literature which provide us with some insights, and despite limitations, into the phenomenon of public policy failures.

The first category is single case studies – the studying of failure as a means to a broader end. The single case study is a classic mode of policy analysis. The study of single cases usually assume a priori that the case is a ‘failure’ and concentrating on aspects of what went wrong and the political impact of failure. Examples include Hurricane Katrina, anti-money laundering policies, the ‘war on drugs’, Australian asylum seeker policy, childcare provision, US Department of Homeland Security,
housing reform in Scotland, nuclear regulation in Japan (see e.g. Buchanan 2010; Dyson 2006; Kearns and Lawson 2009; Kettl 2004; Kingston 2011; Lewis 2012; Marr and Wilkinson 2004; Sharman 2011). Such cases almost exclusively lack a framework to conceptualise policy failure, although they do provide useful illustrations of some failures and a range of potential causes. For example a recent case-oriented book on ‘policy blunders’ in the UK addresses a series of failures from Britain’s exit from the European Exchange Rate Mechanisms to the public private partnership for upgrading the London Underground. It identifies causes ranging from panic that ‘something must be done’ with high ministerial turnover and a lack of ability to gain expertise and command authority in relatively short periods of time (King and Crewe, 2013).

The second category refers to diverse groups of largely unconnected literature, dealing in some way with ‘why things go wrong’ in the public sphere. The tendency here is to make the occasional passing commentary on ‘policy failure’, but not doing so in any systematic or conceptually structured manner – again largely because studying failure is a means to an end. Important strands of the literature address:

- Crises and disasters, dealing with issues such as the role of human error, organisational capacities to recognise and respond to threats, blame games for failures, leadership types and their fallibilities (Hood 2002; Dekker 2006; Kapucu and Van Wart 2008).

- Policy makers’ perceptions of risk, dealing with magnitude of risk, the role of subjectivity and instinct in assessing the possibility of failure (Althaus 2008; Renn 2012).

- Policy formation and design processes, addressing issues such as why some policy options are included in decision making processes while others are excluded (Schneider and Ingram 1997; Stone 2012).

- The dynamics of policy sectors, focusing on issues such as the role of powerful actors/stakeholders in helping push through (unpopular) policies (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Grant 2012).

- Policy agendas, addressing issues such as how governments mobilise the apparatus of government to dampen criticism of their proposals and policies (Bachrach and Baratz 1970; Cobb and Ross 1997).

- Configuration of political systems, dealing with how power is distributed within different political systems, and the degree to which ‘checks and balances’ exist on governing ideas and proposals (Lijphart 1999; Tsebelis 2002).

- Policy Success, this refers largely to my own work regarding issues such as what constitutes successful policy, and whether successful policies cultivate further success (Marsh and McConnell 2009; McConnell 2010a; 2010b; McConnell 2012).

Various aspects of these diverse writings help provide the basis for fashioning the intellectual tools to grapple particularly with the causes of failure, including decision making pathologies, skewed policy design processes, institutional biases and risks associated with governing ideas. The literature on success is also important in its
examination *inter alia* of how failure may be risked, tolerated or even cultivated by policy makers as a means to achieving ‘bigger’ and more desirable ‘successes’.

The third and final category is a handful of works explicitly on policy failure. They have varying foci. For example, one focuses on the context of the 1970s, unrealizable policy aims that cannot be afforded, putting pressures on implementation (Ingram and Mann, 1980). Another uses a medical metaphor to equate policy failure with the types of pathologies which beset the human body such as starvation and overindulgence (Hogwood and Peters 1985). Another focuses on the ways in which failures are framed by different actors (Bovens and ‘t Hart 1996) while another adopts a quasi-mathematical approach to assessing in advance whether a policy will fail (Wallis 2011). None provide what might be described as a comprehensive heuristic for understanding failure but there are many insights to be gained, from the tendency of all activities of government to have pathological counter-reactions, to the existence of different types of failure, framed in different ways by a multiplicity of political actors who have can have more, or less optimistic views on the depth of the roots of failure.

In sum, literature on policy failure is remarkably thin on the ground, but various secondary literature (single case studies, tangential concepts and thinking) as well as a few texts which have a primary focus on failure, create the capacity to inform a rich and extended examination of the under-researched and poorly understood phenomenon of policy failure.

**Moving Forward: A Heuristic Framework for Understanding the Nature of Policy Failure**

An analytical anchor is needed if we are to make sense of the messiness and contestability of failure. For such purposes I adopt the following definition from one of my previous works on policy success:

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A \text{ policy fails if it does not achieve the goals that proponents set out to achieve, and opposition is great and/or support is non-existent (McConnell 2010b: 357)}
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There are several practical advantages to this definition. It reconciles, at least for the purposes of a heuristic framework, the quasi-scientific, objectivist aspects of failure (e.g. policies failing to meet their objectives, not benefitting implemented as intended) with the reality that political actors may have different views on that failure, depending on their core values and the means of achieving them. If for example a government abandons its widely unpopular policy of school closures in areas where there is low need (the alternative being pupils travelling longer distances to larger schools), then clearly the government has failed to do what it set out to do, as well as attracting widespread opposition and little or no support. Therefore, the abandoned and unpopular policy would conform to the broad definition of policy failure.

The definition can also accommodate governmental failure to achieve some goals but not others. For instance, it in effect separates programme outcomes from support or otherwise for these outcomes. This point will be examined shortly in more detail. Furthermore, the definition is not normative. It simply uses government goal as an analytical reference point, while recognising that political and civil society may contain a multiplicity of views on whether the failure was a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ thing. We now need to unpack this definition and provide a usable analytical framework to assist
analysts seeking to understanding policy failure. We can do so by mapping out three forms of failure and setting a framework that allows us to cope with and indeed utilise, all the grey areas and methodological complexities identified previously.

Three Forms of Failure: Process, Programmes and Politics

Definitions of public policy abound, but that of Dye (2012: 12) encapsulates the essence of most: ‘whatever governments choose to do or not do’, If we know what governments ‘do’, we are well placed to understand ‘failures to do’. There are certainly many ways of dissecting the roles of government. I argue here for three types of ‘doing’. They are inextricably linked, but it is useful to separate them analytically because they draw on different traditions within the policy sciences and provide us with an understanding of different ways in which government may fail to do what it intended. This in turn opens the door for us to develop an understanding of some of the internal tensions of policy failure, with governments succeeding in some respects but not others. Table 1 summarises.

First, governments engage in processes to produce policy decisions. The policy sciences since its origins in Lasswell and others in the aftermath of World War II, and with ambitions for a ‘better society’, has been preoccupied with policy making processes, focusing on factors ranging from problem definition and consultation, to options appraisal and policy design (see e.g. Lerner and Lasswell, 1951; Lasswell, 1956, 1971)) as well as deeper political issues on the issue of who holds power in the policy formation process (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970; Cobb and Ross, 1997). During the policy making process, therefore, governments may fail to achieve their intended goal of gaining authoritative approval for a particular policy. Process failure can be dissected further in order to help us grasp key aspects of such failures, as well as providing us with standard criteria for assessment. Therefore, policy making process failure can comprise of policymakers to varying degrees being unable to fashion the type of policy that had hoped for, being considered illegitimate in terms of the processes used, being unable to build a sustainable coalition of support and attracting widespread criticism (and little or no support) for the process itself.

Second, governments produce policies, but here they can be called programmes, simply to avoid clashing with the broader phenomenon of policy failure. Such programmes, designed to address goals and underpinned by assumptions about appropriate levels of government intervention in society, may range from persuasive policy instruments such as public information campaigns, to financial subsidies, incentives and penalties, as well as the regulation of behaviour ((Hood and Margetts, 2007; Howlett, 2010). Programmes failure, can be characterised by varying degrees of failure to be implemented as intended, achieve desired outcomes, benefit target groups, meet criteria which are highly valued in that policy domain (e.g. efficiency in public budgeting) and attract opposition to, and little or no support, for either the policy goals and/or the means of achieving them.

Third, governments ‘do’ politics, because amid the multiple conflicts in society over the making, shaping and enacting of public policies, the play powerful roles in inter alia shaping debates, managing conflicts, attending to the business of governing and establishing visions. Public policies can shape and be shaped by politics, from the careerism of public officials to the pursuit of ideologies. Governments, therefore, can
fail to achieve their intended political outcomes, with impacts including reputational damage, out of control agendas, damage to core governance values and opposition to any small political benefits that may remain.

Although the process, programmatic and political aspects of policies are inextricably linked, it is useful to separate them analytically because doing so helps developing of our understanding of some of the internal tensions of policy failure, with governments succeeding in some respects but not others. To explore this issue further, we need to explore the relationship between success and failure, as well as the grey areas in-between.

**Conceptualising Grey Areas: A Spectrum from Success to Failure**

We know already that success isn’t ‘all or nothing’. Failure can occur in some of the three realms mentioned above but not others and/or can be a matter of degree, as well as being interspersed with success(es). We cannot capture such complex and intertwined phenomenon in scientific formula, given the role of judgement and interpretation in policy analysis, as encapsulated in Wildavsky’s (1987) *The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis*. However, Table 2 specifically identifies criteria (across the process, programme and political dimension) to help us think about degrees of failure and their relationship to success. While it is a refinement and adapation of a framework to understand policy success which in itself also dealt with failure, I have supplemented the original categories with ‘failure’ terminology. Doing so helps us grasps the real politick of failure, that some failures are survivable and others not, while failure in some realms may actually be a consequence of success in others.

Leaving aside outright ‘policy success’ which is mapped out in Table 2 and has been examined in detail elsewhere (esp. Marsh and McConnell, 2009, McConnell 2010a, 2010b, 2012), as well as outright failure (as per Table 1) we can conceive of:

**Tolerable Failure (Resilient Success):** Small failures that are outweighed by successes. Such failures would in an ideal world be unwanted, but practical politics (once described as the ‘art of the second best’) are such that a policy is resilient enough to cope with modest failures and modest (and not untypical) political criticism.

**Conflicted Failure (Conflicted Success):** Successes and failures in fairly equal measures, often attracting strong criticism and strong defence. Such policies are quite persistent and achieve many goals, but they are often dogged by periodic controversy that is never quite enough to act as a fatal blow to the policy, but insufficient to seriously damage its defenders.

**Borderline Failure (Precarious Success):** Failures outweigh success, but there is just enough of the latter to ensure that the policy hangs on the edge of failure, but still persists. Sometimes this persistence is only temporary, en route to outright failure, and is often a serious political liability for government.

[Insert Table 2 about here]
Placing aspect of failure in these categories should be considered something of an intellectual mapping exercise involving judgement in order to get a sense of the forms, strengths and interconnections of failure. There will always be unique configurations and elements of apparent randomness, but in the disciplines of political science and policy analysis, some of the most studied phenomena (such electoral preferences, path dependency, incremental policy change) concern patterns of behaviour, often stable over time. It would not be particularly surprising to find patterns of policy failure. As an analytical starting point, three such patterns can be flagged:

1. Process Success and Programme/Political Failure: Government succeeds in the policy making phase by getting authoritative approval for the decision or decisions it sought, but the very means of doing so (such as rushing a bill through a legislature, ignoring consultation feedback about potential implementation problems, marshalling evidence to legitimise the proposed policy) can create risks – which may come to fruition, that the programme fails to achieve its goals and results in political backlash which proves unmanageable. Peace agreements are an example. Only about 50% survive five years and more, because the very circumstances that are conducive to compromise (lack of detail, ambiguity, vague aspirations) are the stuff of implementation nightmares and create huge space for each faction to withdraw if they feel politically and militarily vulnerable in comparison to the other (Bekoe, 2008).

2. Political Success and Programme Failure: Colloquially, this would refer to ‘good politics but bad policy’. For example, Government may succeeds in perpetuating its governance ideas by initiating policy with a high placebo content, demonstrating that a policy is in place to tackle a particular ‘wicked problem’, but which fails to actually deliver on programme goals because of the complexity and intractability of problems with multiple individual, institutional and societal causes. Sharman (2011) in his study of anti-money laundering (AML) policies demonstrates precisely this issue, arguing that a diffusion of westernised norms and policies in AML have spread rapidly, not because they solve the problems of criminals abusing financial systems, but because weaker, developing nations must appear modern and progressive in the face of international donor communities, the World Bank and the IMF. The small island of Naura (pop. 11,000) has adopted a state-of-the-art AML policies, despite having no financial sector and no banks!

3. Programme Success and Political Failure: Government’s succeeds in implementing unpopular programme measures, but leads to political failure. Austerity measures such as those in Greece, Spain and Ireland are a classic example, implemented with efficiency but producing damage to governments’ key political success aspirations e.g. reputational protection, control of policy agenda, promotion of governance ideas.

A Roadmap for Understanding Different Approaches to the Causes of Policy Failure

Table 3 provides a summary of a number of different ways in which failures can be understood. Its starting point is whether causal explanations are rooted in the failures
(intention and/or unintentional) of actors, institutions or society more broadly. It then drills down into each and identifies typical causal narratives, and assumptions about both the foreseeability and preventability of the failure, as well as deeper assumptions about whether failures are exceptions in fundamentally ‘good societies’, or are perennial features of deeper pathologies inherent in ‘flawed societies’. I would argue that the framework has several key merits.

It advances our thinking without getting caught in the trap of saying definitively that failure has a single cause. The approach here allows for a more context-sensitive understanding of failure, even if we have different views and differing assumptions about the deeper nature of society. It should be noted that we can judge a single factor to be a primary cause, but that we should be wary of it being the sole cause. One only needs to look at the literature on the ‘No Child Behind’ legislation in the US to improve educational standards, to find different assumptions on the key causes of failure, from poor policy design and the lack of an appropriate evidence base (Guisbond and Neill, 2004) to the rise of neo-liberal educational agendas which are out of touch with the complex needs of schools, teachers and students (Hursh, 2007).

[Table 3 about here]

The organisng basis of the framework (actors, institutions/processes, societal governing ideas and interests) engages with the language of the policy sciences and indeed political science more generally. For example, it allows us to engage in the structure vs agency debate, where ‘agency’ equates broadly with the capacity of individuals to bring about change, and ‘structure’ approximates to the institutional, ideational and power contexts in which they operate. So for example, Dunleavy (1995) in his analysis of the UK’s propensity for policy disasters, focuses primarily on institutional and policy process factors (a tradition of speedy and partisan law making, a ministerial ‘can do’ culture’, an ‘arrogant’ Whitehall lacking the specialist skills to understand risk and costs, limited checks and balance on executive power, the strong ‘statist’ British tradition). In this account of failure, the ‘agency’ capabilities or intentions of individual factors are peripheral to the broader structures and culture of Westminster and Whitehall which are considered to be the key causal factors. Arguably, Dunleavy’s institutional/process account of failure also has deeper roots in the history and traditions of the British state.

The framework also allows analysts to conceive of primary, secondary and peripheral causes of failure. This may not produce common agreement on the causes of failure but it does allow for a way or organising what are considered to be the most important and least important factors. We find many different approaches, explicit and implicit, across a range of literature. An example which straddles different layers of explanation is that of Parker et al. (2009) in their examination of failures in response to Hurricane Katrina. They identify three sets of causal explanation i.e. individual-psychological (overvaluation, overconfidence, insensitivity, and wishful thinking), bureau-organizational (organizational fragmentation and complexity) and agenda-political (including a skewed political agenda focused on the main external threats being of a terrorist nature). Various studies of Hurricane Katrina have attributed each of these factors as key causes of failure.

The framework can also accommodate intentional and non-intentional causes of failure. We may not always be able to provide adequate proof, but we can at least
advance our thinking – particularly by recognising that failure is not always something to be avoided at all costs by policy makers. Many policies carry inherent risks (Althaus, 2008, Vis, 2010) and such risks may be classified by policy makers as ‘acceptable risks’ which need to be taken in order to satisfy broader policy goals e.g. the risk that banning certain drugs will drive their use underground. Stronger still, failure in some regards may be tolerated in an attempt to achieve broader success or even be actively pursued e.g. government closing down a separate women’s unit within the executive on the basis that it is seeking to mainstream issues of gender equity across all departments.

The framework can also be used to help us think about the three forms of failure: process, programme and political. Imagine for example, a government minister who introduces a major legislative bill but it is defeated on the floor of Parliament and fails to be enacted. This process failure could be attributed to actors (the lack of astuteness on the part of the minister), institutions and processes (the legislative system of checks and balances that rightly or wrongly terminated the bill) or societal factors (the plural nature of the political system and the ‘voice’ that is given to the populace, through their elected representatives). The framework can also be used to conceive of the causes of different types of failure as being caused primarily by different factors. Had this piece of ‘legislation’ been enacted and lead to a failed programme and damage to government’s reputations, we would have a framework capable of linking process success to programme and political failure.

‘Grey areas’ can also be encapsulated by the framework. Indeed they are integral to it. There is recognition that understanding the causes and consequences of failure is not an exact science. Differing views and understanding can result in many different assumptions on the causes of failure, depending on the significance given to shortfalls, and lack of evidence, as well as conflicts between degrees of failure and degrees of success.

Finally and importantly, the framework helps us understand deeper assumptions surrounding failures and society’s capacities to avoid them in the future. Following Bovens and ‘t Hart (1996), Gray and ‘t Hart (1998) and Bovens, ‘t Hart and Peters (2011), substantially different assumptions may emerge from the same set of failure phenomena.

Optimistic accounts tend to see the ideological and institutional foundations of society as fundamentally solid (e.g. a belief in the benefit of free markets, or plural political systems) and when policies fail, they are unfortunate and considered the product of individual misjudgement or inappropriate behaviour, but they should not shatter our understanding of the deeper ways in which we are governed.

By contrast, pessimistic accounts perceive policy failure to be the near inevitable product of societal contradictions (e.g. capitalism being unable to fund the very welfare states need to ensure a healthy and educated labour market). Policy makers in this account tend to be distant players/pawns and even institutional structures are a product of broader societal contradictions. In this view, ongoing failures are inevitable unless there are drastic change (or a revolution in) the fundamental organising principles of society.

Realistic accounts may have elements of all three dimensions of causality (actors, institutions/processes, societal governing ideas and interests). They are not optimistic
enough to exclusively blame individuals for failure because there is an awareness that their flawed decision making is enabled by an institutional context (e.g. a ‘can do’ culture or a policy process that can be heavily steered towards a desired decision outcome) but neither are they so pessimistic that broader societal forces have over-determined policy failures.

Realistic accounts tend to focus on institutional and process flaws, as well as what can realistically be achieved to prevent failures in the future. It should be understood, of course, that optimistic, pessimistic and realistic accounts are ‘idealised’, in the sense that they epitomise different assumptions about failure, even although the boundaries between them can be blurred and judgement is involved in locating any particular causal story within any particular category or categories.

Conclusion

Despite the standard assumptions of media headlines and much academic analysis, policy failures do not come neatly packaged with clear labels and an authoritative version of where they came from. Policy failures are intensely political because of conflict over whether a particular set of policy outcomes constitutes failure, and what (if anything) caused failure in the first place. The very messiness and ambiguities of policy failure, create space for the construction of often wildly different narratives. Yet this does not mean to say that failures are purely a matter of perception. While it is important to recognise that disentangling ‘objective’ aspects of failure from ‘constructed’ factors, speaks to broader and ongoing debates at the heart of social and political sciences, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion the ‘real’ factors may also be at work in defining policy failure (such as promises that simply did not happen) or in causing it (such as directly contradictory goals of absence of new funds for costly reforms). Such matters cannot be resolved in one short paper, or perhaps not at all in the plural discipline of political science with multiple and legitimate assumptions and methodologies. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the framework presented in this paper is a starting point which helps analysts to navigate the mysterious and unsteady terrain of policy failure.

Bibliography


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process Failure</th>
<th>Program Failure</th>
<th>Political Failure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government unable to produce its desired policy</td>
<td>Not implemented in line with objectives.</td>
<td>Damages electoral prospects or reputation of governments and leaders,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>goals and instruments</td>
<td></td>
<td>with no redeeming political benefit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy process illegitimate</td>
<td>Desired outcomes not achieved</td>
<td>Policy failings so high on the agenda that they are damaging government’s capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>to govern.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No building of a sustainable coalition.</td>
<td>No benefit for target group.</td>
<td>Unequivocally damages the broad values and direction of government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition to process is virtually universal and/or</td>
<td>Inability to meet criteria highly valued in that</td>
<td>Opposition to any political benefits for government is virtually universal and/or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>support is virtually non-existent</td>
<td>policy domain.</td>
<td>support is virtually non-existent.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opposition to program aims, values, and means of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>achieving them is virtually universal, and/or support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>is virtually non-existent.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Adapted from McConnell 2010a Tables 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3; McConnell 2010b: Tables 1, 2 and McConnell 2012
Table 2: Degrees of Policy Failure Across Process, Programme and Politics

### Policy as Process: From Success to Failure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process Success</th>
<th>Tolerable Failure</th>
<th>Conflicted Failure</th>
<th>Borderline Failure</th>
<th>Process Failure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preserving</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>government policy goals and instruments.</td>
<td>Policy goals and instruments preserved, despite minor failure to achieve goals</td>
<td>Preferred goals and instruments proving controversial and difficult to preserve. Some revisions needed.</td>
<td>Government’s goals and preferred policy instrument hangs in the balance.</td>
<td>Government unable to produce its desired policy goals and instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conferring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>legitimacy on the policy.</td>
<td>Some challenges to legitimacy but of little or no lasting significance.</td>
<td>Difficult and contested issues surrounding policy legitimacy, with some potential to taint the policy in the long-term.</td>
<td>Serious and potentially fatal damage to policy legitimacy.</td>
<td>Policy process illegitimate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sustainable coalition.</td>
<td>Coalition intact, despite some signs of disagreement.</td>
<td>Coalition intact, although strong signs of disagreement and some potential for fragmentation.</td>
<td>Coalition on the brink of falling apart.</td>
<td>No building of a sustainable coalition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>process is virtually non-existent and/or support is virtually universal.</td>
<td>Opposition to process is stronger than anticipated, but outweighed by support.</td>
<td>Opposition to process is and support are equally balanced.</td>
<td>Opposition to process outweighs small levels of support.</td>
<td>Opposition to process is virtually universal and/or support is virtually non-existent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Policy as Programme: From Success to Failure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Success</th>
<th>Tolerable Failure</th>
<th>Conflicted Failure</th>
<th>Borderline Failure</th>
<th>Program Failure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Implementation in line with objectives.</td>
<td>Implementation objectives broadly achieved, despite minor failures and deviations.</td>
<td>Mixed results, with some successes, but accompanied by unexpected and controversial failings.</td>
<td>Minor progress towards implementation as intended, but beset by chronic failures, proving highly controversial and very difficult to defend.</td>
<td>Not implemented in line with objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement of desired outcomes.</td>
<td>Outcomes broadly achieved, despite some shortfalls.</td>
<td>Some successes, but the partial achievement of intended outcomes is counterbalanced by unwanted results, generating substantial controversy.</td>
<td>Some small outcomes achieved as intended, but overwhelmed by controversial and high profile failure to produce results.</td>
<td>Desired outcomes not achieved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating benefit for a target group.</td>
<td>A few shortfalls and possibly some anomalous cases, but intended target group broadly benefits.</td>
<td>Partial benefits realised, but not as widespread or deep as intended because of substantial failings.</td>
<td>Small benefits are accompanied and overshadowed by damage to the very group that was meant to benefit. Also likely to generate high profile stories of unfairness and suffering.</td>
<td>No benefit for target group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meets policy domain criteria.</td>
<td>Not quite the outcome desired, but despite flaws, close enough to lay strong claim to</td>
<td>Partial achievement of goals, but accompanied by failures to achieve, with possibility of</td>
<td>A few minor successes, but plagued by unwanted media attention e.g.</td>
<td>Inability to meet criteria highly valued in that policy domain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition to programme aims, values, and means of achieving them is virtually non-existent, and/or support is virtually universal.</td>
<td>Opposition to programme aims, values, and means of achieving them is stronger than anticipated, but outweighed by support.</td>
<td>Opposition to programme aims, values, and means of achieving them is equally balanced with support for same.</td>
<td>Opposition to programme aims, values, and means of achieving them, outweighs small levels of support.</td>
<td>Opposition to programme aims, values, and means of achieving them is virtually universal, and/or support is virtually non-existent.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Policy as Politics: From Success to Failure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Success</th>
<th>Tolerable Failure</th>
<th>Conflicted Failure</th>
<th>Borderline Failure</th>
<th>Political Failure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing electoral prospects or reputation of governments and leaders.</td>
<td>Favourable to electoral prospects and reputation enhancement, with only minor setbacks.</td>
<td>Policy obtains strong support and opposition, working both for against electoral prospects and reputation in fairly equal measure.</td>
<td>Despite small signs of benefit, policy proves an overall electoral and reputational liability.</td>
<td>Damages electoral prospects or reputation of governments and leaders, with no redeeming political benefit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling policy agenda and easing the business of governing.</td>
<td>Despite some problems in agenda management, capacity to govern is unperturbed.</td>
<td>Policy proving controversial and taking up more political time and resources in its defence than was expected.</td>
<td>Clear signs that the agenda and business of government is struggling to suppress a politically difficult issue.</td>
<td>Policy failings so high on the agenda that they are damaging government’s capacity to govern.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustaining the broad values and direction of government.</td>
<td>Some refinements needed but broad trajectory unimpeded.</td>
<td>Direction of government very broadly in line with goals, but clear signs that the policy has promoted some rethinking, especially behind the scenes.</td>
<td>Entire trajectory of government is being compromised.</td>
<td>Unequivocally damages the broad values and direction of government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition to political benefits for government is virtually non-existent and/or support is virtually universal.</td>
<td>Opposition to political benefits for government is stronger than anticipated, but outweighed by support.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Original table, adapted from McConnell 2010a Tables 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3; McConnell 2010b: Tables 1, 2 and McConnell 2012
| Table 3: A Framework for Understanding Different Approaches to the Causes of Policy Failure |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **ACTOR CENTRED** | **INSTIUTION/POLICY CENTRED** | **SOCIETAL CENTRED** |
| **Intentional Cause** | **Unintentional Cause** | **Intentional Cause** | **Unintentional Cause** | **Intentional Cause** | **Unintentional Cause** |
| Typical Causal Narrative | Deliberate cultivation of failure, reckless self-interest | Bad luck, negligence, incompetence, poor judgement | Institution or process (e.g. department or policy making process) was deliberately set up in such a way that failure was cultivated, or allowed to happen in order achieving other institutional/pr process goals | Institution or process (e.g. department or policy making process) was inappropriately geared for decision making and hence produced failure through e.g. institutional complacency, blind spots, inadequate process | Ruling ideas/governing ideas/powerful interests create failure in order to thrive – particularly to the detriment of those less powerful |
| Forseeability of Failure | High. Individuals knew what they were doing | Medium/High except which more capable individuals should have recognised, or Low in the case of bad luck | High Failures are foreseeable, but the institution or process was set up in such a way that some failures are accepted or even cultivated | High. Failures are foreseeable, but the institution or process was designed properly, limiting its capacity to foresee | High. Failure is built into, necessary and cultivated for the ongoing survival of ruling ideas/governing ideas/powerful interests |
| Capacity to Prevent | High. Failure could easily have been avoided | Medium/High except which more capable individuals had been place a position of responsibility, or Low except in the case of bad luck | Medium. Better institution or design of policy process could have prevented failure. | High. Better institution or policy process design of policy process have prevented failure | Low. Failures are symptomatic of deeper ideologies and systems of power |
| Deeper Assumptions About the Connections Between Failure and Society as Whole | Optimistic. The problem is 'bad' individuals and we can be confident that their removal from office (or making them subject to stringent controls) can help avoid policy failure | Realistic/Optimistic. Either bad luck or individuals 'not up to the job' are the problem. We can't do much about bad luck but we can help avoid policy failure by removing them from office/provide them more training or subject them to greater regulation. | Realistic/Realistic/Optimistic. Reform may be very difficult because aspects failure are almost a necessary part of institutional and policy design processes | Realistic/Optimistic. Reform might be difficult but is possible and failure can be avoided | Pessimistic. The causes of failure are deeply embedded in dysfunction al systems of power |

Forseeability of Failure

Ruling ideas/governing ideas/powerful interests do produce failures but are small in comparison to greater benefits for the ongoing survival of ruling ideas/governing ideas/powerful interests.

Forseeability of Failure

High. We know that failures happen as an unfortunate by-product of the way society works.

Capacity to Prevent

Low. Failures are deeply embedded in the ideas and interests which govern society, but such ideas and interests bring greater benefits.

Deeper Assumptions About the Connections Between Failure and Society as Whole

Realistic/Optimistic. While causes of failure are deeply embedded in the nature of society, the failures are outweighed by the broader successes they bring.