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A public policy approach to understanding the nature and causes of foreign policy failure

Allan McConnell

ABSTRACT All governments are vulnerable to policy failure but our understanding of the nature and causes of policy failure is highly underdeveloped. This contribution, written from a public policy perspective, sets out a framework for understanding these issues as applied to foreign policy. In doing so, it seeks a cross-disciplinary fertilization of thinking that uses the messy and contested reality of policy failure as fundamentally a key – rather than a barrier – to advancing our understanding of a phenomenon referred to variously as policy fiascos, policy disasters, policy blunders and policy failures.

KEY WORDS Fiascos; foreign policy; policy evaluation; policy failure.

INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the extent of evidence, modelling, projections, risk assessment, expert advice and political skills that contribute to policy design and decision-making, no government is immune to the risk of policy failure (Althaus 2008). Allegations abound of policies that have failed for one reason or another. In the field of foreign policy, for example, there are seemingly never-ending allegations of failed military action, peacekeeping initiatives, troop deployment, diplomatic agreements, economic sanctions, trade agreements, aid to other nations and more.

Failures can consume huge amounts of government agenda time, create bigger problems than they seek to solve, provoke media feeding frenzies, provide ‘gifts’ to political opponents, damage political careers and lead to the downfall of governments. They can also wreak damage – at times fatal – to people, property, economic prosperity and nation-building. Yet, despite many case studies of failure and a small number of grander incursions into understanding ‘policy fiascos’ (Bovens and ‘t Hart 1995), ‘policy disasters’ (Dunleavy 1995) and ‘policy blunders’ (King and Crewe 2013), we know remarkably little about what actually constitutes ‘policy failure’ or what causes it. This gap in our understanding is compounded by the routine politics of failure which is replete with blame games, wildly different perceptions and *post-hoc* inquiries often accused of politicization and bias (Boin *et al.* 2008; Brändström and Kuipers

2003; Hood 2002). Such tendencies are hugely significant. If governments and societies have a poor understanding of *if* and *why* policies fail, there is significant risk that they will continually make the same ‘mistakes’ again, pursuing policies vulnerable to failure with a high risk of political backlash.

In this context, the present article focuses essentially on two separate but related sets of issues. The first is what *is* policy failure and the second is what *causes* policy failure. It presents a framework and argument to assist academic analysts seeking to tread on the ‘quicksand’ of both issues. Some qualifying points can be made before proceeding.

First, the key analytical value of the article can be explained with reference to Ostrom (2007), who makes the distinction between three types of intellectual contributions: (1) frameworks which address the main elements, relationships and variables that one needs to consider in approaching a problem; (2) theories which focus on explaining and predicting outcomes; and (3) models which operationalize precise assumptions about certain parameters and variables. The article provides a *framework* to advance our understanding, in the hope that it will pave the way for theoretical development and operationalization through case studies (see Bovens and ‘t Hart 2016). If we can gain deeper insights into policy failure and place less store, for example, on often crude arguments which oversimplify failure (e.g., ‘it was a total policy fiasco’ or ‘the president is totally to blame for this policy disaster’), then we are better placed to reduce the likelihood of policy failures/fiascos/disasters in the future.

Second, it should be noted that the word ‘fiasco’ is something of a pejorative term. As Bovens and ‘t Hart (1996: 9) argue in their seminal work *Understanding Policy Fiascos*: ‘To call something a fiasco is to impress on it a powerful negative label, and effectively to engage in an act of allegation.’ In effect, ‘fiasco’ implies that political agents are the causes of farce-like outcomes. In this contribution, I use instead the term ‘policy failure’ because it does not come primed with assumptions that individual actions (or inactions) are in effect the causes of failure.

Third, while being informed at the margins by a strand of international relations which focuses particularly on decision-making failures and aspects of their causes (e.g., Edelstein 2008; Fleitz 2002; Janis 1972; Jervis 1976; Mearshaimer 2013), the article is written from a public policy perspective by a public policy scholar. This sub-discipline of political science focuses on ‘whatever governments choose to do or not to do’ (Dye 2012: 12). In adopting this approach, and against the grain of policy studies where foreign policy is generally left to scholars of international relations, comparative politics and area studies, examples are drawn exclusively from foreign policy. I define this field broadly to cover multiple ways in which governments form policies that engage with others beyond state borders. It includes, but is by no means limited to, military engagements, peacekeeping missions, troop deployments, diplomatic accords, sanctions, trade deals and overseas aid. It is hoped that a by-product of this contribution is the building of some bridges across these various sub-disciplines of political science.

DEFINING POLICY FAILURE: CHALLENGES AND A WAY FORWARD

The many methodological difficulties of defining policy failure

The word ‘failure’ has an air of completeness about it, as though a policy either fails or doesn’t fail, and that we can have access to this fact through research. Yet, there are many reasons why we cannot and should not think of policy failure as an indivisible and wholly objective phenomenon.

The existence of multiple standards for failure

The word failure implies undesirability and the breaching of a goal, aspiration or value. Defining failure would be quite straightforward if analysts could agree on such a ‘standard’. In reality, however, we immediately confront an array of failure criteria. The outline below is neither exhaustive nor are the categories mutually exclusive, but it does provide a flavour of the apparent elusiveness of policy failure.

Failure to achieve the goals of government. Evaluation against what government set out to do is a standard feature of much policy analysis – especially of the rationalist–scientific tradition (e.g., see Gupta 2011), and it is the default of most intra-governmental assessment of policies. It is also a common feature of academic analysis. Pressman (2009), for example, assesses the G.W. Bush administration’s goals in Iraq in precisely this manner, arguing that it did not achieve the three key goals of defeating terrorism, promoting democracy and blocking nonconventional proliferation among adversaries.

Failure to benefit particular interests or groups. At times policies may have failed to benefit the particular target group or groups that were, in theory, the formal target of the original policy design (Schneider and Ingram 1997). One of the key criticisms of foreign aid from a libertarian perspective is that it has little impact on poverty (and indeed can make the poor poorer) unless countries have in place, good governance procedures (Booth 2012).

Failure to produce benefits greater than the costs. Cost–benefit analysis is a standard tool of economic analysis (Gupta 2011), but can also be used in political discourse and often in policy evaluations, via a weighing-up of positive and negative outcomes. *De facto*, a policy is considered to fail if the costs exceed the benefits. Edelstein (2008), in his evaluation of 30 military occupations, adopts this approach, weighing up accomplishments such as mitigating threats from an occupied territory, against costs such as lives lost, financial resources deployed and damage to political reputation.

Failure to match moral, ethical or legal standards. Regardless of what government sets out to do or what it claims to have achieved, many protagonists

claim policy failure to be a breach of deeper values. It may be breaches of the law (the ‘legal black hole’ of Guantanamo Bay has led to arguments that numerous procedures fail to comply with international law) or a policy failing to live up to some higher ethical or moral standards. A report by the UN Human Rights Committee (2013) found Australia to have breached a series of human rights Articles in its detention of refugees.

Failure to improve on what went before. A common feature of ‘failure’ discourse is that we are ‘worse off’ as a result of what government has done (or failed to do). The benchmark here is how policy outcomes compare to a prior state of affairs. Most judgements of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement and the signing of the Munich Agreement in 1938 saw this move as paving the way for war rather than avoiding it (McDonough 1998).

Failure to do better than others dealing with similar issues. The benchmark here is government doing worse in addressing a problem than another jurisdiction (usually a nation) addressing a broadly similar problem, e.g., threat from global terrorism.

Failure to garner sufficient support from those actors and interests who matter. Policies may be considered a failure because they were unable to command sufficient support from those who either played a strategic role in the implementation process, or whose support was vital in legitimisation of the policy. Policy proposals may also fail to gain approval at the executive decision making stage, e.g., 2013 defeat in the House of Commons on a government motion for the UK to join United States- (US) led air strikes on Syria (Gaskarth 2016).

The existence of multiple standards for policy failure seems to be a major barrier to our understanding. One hundred civilian casualties in a military intervention could be considered a failure if we assess this outcome against certain standards (for example, failure to produce benefits greater than the costs and failure to match moral, ethical or legal standards). Yet, such deaths may be perceived as regrettable but nevertheless successful if they contribute to broader standards, such as achieving government goals (helping restore democracy in another nation), improving on what went before (ousting a dictator) and even producing benefits greater than the costs (the long-term benefits of peace and democracy being considered more important than the lives lost regrettably along the way). I will return to such methodologically difficult issues shortly.

Ambiguities, contradictions and the relationship of failure to success

There are additional challenges to understanding what constitutes policy failure. For example, virtually every policy in the world produces some ‘achievement’, from the very minor to the substantial, just as there are always some ‘failures’,

from the minor and inconsequential to the major. Failure is not ‘all or nothing’. For example, the benefits to donors of providing overseas aid are often accompanied by a degree of fraud, with estimates cited in one study as varying between 0.85 per cent and 1.27 per cent (Button *et al.* 2012). A difficult analytical task, therefore, given the perennial entwining of varying degrees of ‘successes’ and ‘failures’, is ascertaining what matters most.

Policies also, and typically, have multiple goals, often changing over time, and with tensions between them (Bardach 2011). Baldwin (2000) identifies seven US foreign policy goals in the 1991 Gulf War, from forcing Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait to discouraging other nations from seeking to emulate Iraq. It is, of course, not uncommon for governments to deliver in some respects but not others. We are then faced with the task of weighing up which failures matter most. This is particularly difficult if goals are contradictory. A government paying money behind the scenes to kidnappers can succeed in freeing hostages but fail against a promise not to do deals with terrorists.

Producing unambiguous ‘evidence’ of failure can also be challenging. As Head (2008) argues, there are many different evidence bases (science, politics, bureaucracy), and a policy that fails the test of gaining approval from experts in the field may be politically expedient. Evidence may also point in different directions, becoming entwined with politicization and argument, and ultimately requiring a high degree of interpretation (Majone 1989). We may not even have sufficient evidence to assess. Heine-Ellison (2001), in her study of sanctions in Iraq, the former Yugoslavia, Angola and Sierra Leone, found that lack of effective monitoring in the latter two cases seriously hampered a strong judgment on the (in)effectiveness of targeted sanctions.

In sum, despite the existence of multiple standards for failure, numerous ambiguities, contradictions and disputes over what constitutes ‘evidence’ of failure, I would argue that we should not bemoan such difficulties or seek instead a rational scientific measure of policy failure. Our understanding of the nature of policy failure can actually be enhanced rather than hampered once we accept and work with the various standards for policy failure and the numerous methodological difficulties. As Wildavsky (1987) famously argued, in a world of complexity, uncertainty and competing moral values, we should accept that our understanding of policy (in our case policy failure) requires creativity, judgement and innovation.

Defining policy failure: a way forward

Here I modify an earlier definition (McConnell, 2010: 357) and suggest that:

A policy fails, even if it is successful in some minimal respects, if it does not fundamentally achieve the goals that proponents set out to achieve, and opposition is great and/or support is virtually non-existent.

This definition is able to accommodate the numerous methodological challenges identified above. It is not predicated on accepting or rejecting the normative aims

of government and its policies (or the normative claims of policy failure by any actor). The definition is simply an analytical anchor for the framework being proposed here to help us approach this complex and difficult topic.

To advance the analysis I have divided the phenomenon of ‘public policy’ in a manner reflecting significant strands of policy literature, and helping capture ‘what governments do’. We can conceive, therefore, of governments engaging in three types of ‘doing’, i.e., seeking to (1) steer processes to produce policies, (2) enact programmes/decisions which they seek to put into practice, and (3) impact on ‘politics’. They can overlap and compete (as I will argue), but of fundamental importance is that government can ‘fail’ in each of these three realms (see Table 1), and we can incorporate degrees of contestation to governmental norms and goals. Doing so allows us to build competing views into our understanding, with different political actors using aspects of policy ambiguity such as mixed results, competing goals, and variable evidence in ways that reflect their own, differing perspectives.

Process failure

Governments engage in the process of producing programmes and taking authoritative decisions. This process involves multiple activities from defining problems, narrowing down options for appraisal, deciding on who/when/if to consult, and so on (Althaus *et al.* 2013; Howlett *et al.* 2009). While they ‘may’ fail in any of these tasks, a more useful and aggregated way of thinking about the process of policy production is to conceive of several aspects of process failure.

We can conceive of failure to preserve government goals and instruments in the policy-making process, to the extent that government is either defeated in its quest to obtain authoritative approval (e.g., legislative approval to cut military funding) or the policy-making process has diluted its aspirations and the programme/decision bears little relation to its original intentions, e.g., one member fails to gain United Nations (UN) support for economic sanctions against another member state. There may also be failure to attract a viable level of legitimacy for the way government produced the policy, e.g., lacks a strong evidence base; is declared unconstitutional; in breach of norms/agreements (such as the Geneva Convention). Failure may also be an inability to build a sustainable coalition of interests during the policy-making process, e.g., inability to get warring interests to sign a peace agreement. There may also be failure to attract broader support for the way in which the policy was produced (or attempted to be produced) to the extent that opposition to the policy-making process is virtually universal and/or support is virtually non-existent, e.g., a government not only failing to gain legislative approval to send troops overseas, but in the process of doing so it is on the receiving end of a political backlash.

Programme/decision failure

Government produces *inter alia* programmes (often conventionally referred to as ‘policies’) and decisions. There are several ways in which they may fail. One

Table 1 Forms of policy failure

	Success criteria	Failure characteristics
Policy-making process failure	Preserving goals and policy instruments	Government unable to produce its desired policy goals and instruments
	Securing legitimacy	Policy process illegitimate
	Building sustainable coalition	No building of a sustainable coalition
Programme failure	Attracting support for process	Opposition to process is virtually universal and/or support is virtually non-existent
	Implementation in line with objectives	Despite minor progress towards implementation as intended, programme is beset by chronic implementation failures
	Achieving desired outcomes	Some small outcomes achieved as intended, but overwhelmed by failure to produce results
	Benefitting target group(s)	Small benefits are accompanied and overshadowed by damage to the very group that was meant to benefit
	Satisfying criteria highly valued in policy domain	A few minor successes, but plagued by inability to meet criteria highly valued in that policy domain
Political failure	Attracting support for programme	Opposition to programme aims, values, and means of achieving them, outweighs small levels of support
	Enhancing electoral prospects/ reputation	Despite small signs of benefit, policy proves an overall electoral and reputational liability
	Easing the business of governing	Clear signs that the agenda and business of government struggles to suppress a politically difficult issue
	Promotion of government's desired trajectory	Entire trajectory of government in danger of being compromised
	Providing political benefits for government	Opposition to political benefits for government outweighs small levels of support

Note: Original table, substantially adapted from McConnell (2010)

aspect is failure to be put into practice, to the point that despite some progress towards implementation as intended, the programme is beset by chronic

implementation failures. Sharman (2011), in his study of the multiple errors produced by states in copying tax blacklists from other countries, reveals multiple failures – even to the extent that Venezuela copied a list from Mexico and blacklisted itself. Another aspect is failure to achieve the desired outcomes. Some small outcomes may be achieved as intended, but these are overwhelmed by failure to produce results, e.g., the United Kingdom’s (UK’s) unsuccessful application to join the three European Communities in 1961, despite the small benefit of paving the way for a further successful application lodged in 1967. There may also be failure to benefit the intended target group(s) to the point that small benefits are accompanied and overshadowed by damage to the very group(s) that was/were meant to benefit, e.g., Dutch peacekeepers and the deaths of 300 Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica. Failure may also be an inability to meet a criterion that is highly valued in the policy sector in question, to the extent that despite a few minor successes it is plagued by an inability to meet this criterion, e.g., new intelligence agency failing to protect national security because of a series of missed warning signs. There may also be failure to attract broader support for the programme/decision, to the degree that opposition to programme aims, values, and means of achieving them outweighs small levels of support, e.g., economic sanctions not working and government under attack for pursuing this policy in the first place.

Political failure

Policies have political repercussions. Different conceptual frameworks imply different forms of impact, e.g., policy cycle implications that policy outcomes prompt policy-makers to reflect and learn (Althaus *et al* 2013), path dependency and the inference that policies generally help reproduce dominant ideological pathways (Pierson 2000). The common theme is that policy is not produced or enacted in a vacuum (Cairney 2012b). What governments ‘do’ has political repercussions. Again, we can capture failures in several ways.

The first and perhaps most obvious is failure to enhance electoral prospects/reputation, to the point that, despite small signs of benefit, the policy proves an overall electoral and reputational liability, e.g., extended and messy war damages government’s standing in opinion polls. Perhaps less obvious but no less important is failure to ease the business of governing, to the extent that that the agenda and business of government struggles to suppress a politically difficult issue, e.g., free trade agreement leaves out a major farming producer and this industry runs a relentless and effective lobbying campaign that government cannot escape or quell. There may also be failure to promote the government’s desired trajectory, to the degree that the entire trajectory of government is in danger of being compromised, e.g., ‘hawkish’ administration sanctions the invasion of another nation in the name of promoting democratic freedoms, only for the move to be widely criticized even by its own supporters as dictatorial and undemocratic. Finally, there can be failure for government in the sense that any political benefits it may have accrued are outweighed by substantial opposition which is critical of government and accuses it of not acting in the public interest,

e.g., European Union (EU) member state promising a referendum on continuing with EU membership, widely criticized as little more than non-serious pre-election positioning to take the heat out of a contentious issue.

There are many implications for the existence of diverse forms of policy failure. I will return to this issue in the conclusion and link it to the causes of failure.

THE CAUSES OF POLICY FAILURE: CHALLENGES AND A WAY FORWARD

The methodological difficulties of ascertaining the causes of policy failure

Notwithstanding the aforementioned difficulties in determining *if* a policy has failed, approaching the issue of what *causes* policy failure brings its own special challenges. The few academic works that have tackled the issue of policy failure lean towards different causes: e.g., Dunleavy (1995) focuses essentially on political systemic issues that create vulnerability to failure; Wallis (2011) focuses on a lack of internal logic in predicting outcomes based on goals; King and Crewe (2013) look broadly but emphasize particularly the role of individual decision makers through their use of the term ‘blunders’ (see also Brummer 2016), and Bovens and ‘t Hart (1996) explicitly reject a rationalist–scientific view of causality and focus instead on differing constructions of causality.

The richest seam of research on the causes of failure tends to come from the organizational studies and decision-making literature, which also crosses over at times into disaster literature. Some of the most prominent contributions address issues such as: the capacity of organizational systems and process to cultivate the conditions of failure (Anheier 1999; Turner 1978); attempts to eliminate failures that create even greater risk of failure (Wildavsky 1988); varieties of human error and the role of organizational context (Reason 1990); cross-system similarities in understanding failure (Fortune and Peters 1995; Toft and Reynolds 1995); and failures across complex systems (Dekker 2011). If there is a common message here for understanding policy failures and fiascos, it is that we need to think of the institutional frameworks and processes within which policy-makers take decisions, rather than assuming that ‘bad’ decisions’ exist independently of the contexts in which they are created.

Such a diversity of potential causes of failure goes against the grain of media perceptions and popular commentary, which often point to a single cause of failure and a single individual who should take the blame. All policies are formed and decided upon by individuals, but they are produced and enacted in broader institutional contexts, which in themselves operate in broader societal contexts of governing ideas, powerful groups, changing technologies, global interdependencies and so on. To say 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 their complex

interdependencies (Jörg 2011). Byman (2008: 601), in his study of the US intervention in Iraq, argues that failure has a ‘thousand fathers’ and cites a plethora of interconnected causes from ‘bad choices’, such as the deployment of insufficient troop numbers, to structural factors such as the divided nature of Iraqi society, torn apart by years on conflict

A related difficulty is how we understand which causes of any particular policy failure are more important than others. It might make instinctive sense, for example, to organize our analysis into primary, secondary and peripheral causal factors. However, it is difficult to do so rigorously because it assumes (a) there is a scientific means of ascertain causal priority factors and (b) that these causal factors operate in some kind of hierarchical way, rather than in a complex, mutually reinforcing way that is not easily amendable to investigation (Cairney 2012a), and indeed may be the product of decisions that are ‘reasonable’ on their own but their interaction within complex systems may produce a drift towards failed outcomes (Dekker 2011). Allison and Zelikow (1999), in their seminal study of the Cuban missile crisis, which approached this critical time period from the different vantage points of rational, organizational and governmental politics, recognized that a multitude of ‘what ifs?’ made it difficult to reconcile competing explanations and causes in a quasi-hierarchical way.

A further challenge in understanding the causes of policy failure is that failures are viewed in hindsight, with the knowledge that ‘failure’ has occurred. This typically leads to the construction of a narrative which begins with warning signs that were ignored, and culminates in failures that could have been prevented (Boin and Fishbacher-Smith 2011). This is exemplified in intelligence failures that emerge in the wake of terrorist attacks, where the ‘bad ending’ to the story leads to a search for unnecessary risks taken and warning signs ignored. While analyses of policy failures after the fact tend to put give the impression of a definitive ‘whole story’, one of the lessons from the methodological issues identified earlier is that a single authoritative narrative of failure is not the only one possible (Boin and Fischbacher-Smith 2011). Hindsight analysis does not often do not take into account the prior historical context (at the policy-making stage) where policy-makers anticipated a successful policy and perhaps even perceived the risk for failure to be either negligible or a risk worth taking (Althaus 2008). McDermott (2001), in her study of risk-taking and presidential foreign policy decisions, explores this issue in detail on the assumption that decision-makers will be more inclined to take risks when they are facing prospective losses. Complicating matters further, as indicated by Kitts (2006) in his work on presidential commission covering Pearl Harbour, the Iran–Contra affair, 9/11, *et al.* as well as Ellis (1994) on ‘lightening rods’ insulating the US president from blame for failures, hindsight evaluations of failures are often highly politicized (from terms of reference to committee composition) (Boin *et al.* 2008).

Methodologically, therefore, we seem to face real difficulties in ascertaining the causes of policy 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. Such methodological challenges mirror classic methodological differences within political sciences – whether the phenomenon being studied is a matter of ‘fact’, interpretation or both (see e.g., Marsh and Stoker 2010). Of course, we do not stop studying political phenomena because of its complexity and methodological challenges, and neither should we stop studying policy failure.

The causes of policy failure: a way forward

I would argue that we should avoid a fruitless search for a definitive, scientifically rational cause of any particular policy failure, or getting caught in the trap of saying definitively that failure has a single cause, isolated from its context. The way to advance our understanding is to consider a range of ways in which political actors frame the causes of policy failure. Doing so provides us with a heuristic framework as summarized in Table 2. The various categorizations are not mutually exclusive but, as per Ostrom (2007), the framework at least allows us to order a range of elements to help prompt deeper and subsequent theorizing and operationalizing.

Policy failure narratives (see Oppermann and Spencer 2016) tend to focus on failure being caused by one or more of three main elements: i.e., individual decision-makers; institutions/policy processes; and deeper societal values and power structures/interests. This tripartite approach allows us to think about the possibility of multiple frames and realms of multiple potential causes. For example, we could place the many analyses of the causes of the Bay of Pigs failure centred on actors (groupthink, individual miscalculations), institutions/processes (over-ambition of CIA and poor intelligence capabilities) and society more broadly (Cold War tensions, Cuba’s economic realignment with the Soviet Union). Additionally, while this framework does not seek to provide definitive answers to the matter of degrees of causality, its tripartite structure does at least allow analysts to think in a more structured way about primary, secondary and peripheral causes of failure.

Some narratives are generally sympathetic and supportive in the face of policy failure, while others are much more critical. We can see these, as in Table 2, through three sub-narratives which are typically embedded (explicitly and/or implicitly) in post-failure framing contests. These relate to the causes of the failure, whether it could have been foreseen/prevented, and what can be done to learn from the failure.

Sympathetic accounts of policy failure are rather forgiving of the ‘causes’ of failure. The arguments proceed along similar lines. Individuals who took ‘bad’ decisions’ were faced with unrealistic pressures or were the victims of bad luck. Institutions/processes did let us down in a small way but nevertheless they are fundamentally robust and have a difficult job to do in balancing priorities in a sometimes uncertain world. Society did drift marginally from core values/interests or fail to put them effectively into practice, but these are

Table 2 Differing frames on the causes and implications of policy failure

	Individual actor centred frame		Institution/policy process centred frame		Societal centred frame	
	Unsupportive	Supportive	Unsupportive	Supportive	Unsupportive	Supportive
What caused the failure?	Reckless self-interest, deliberate cultivation of failure, negligence, incompetence, appalling judgement	Lapse in otherwise good judgement, genuine mistake, bad luck	Institutional self-interest, institutional arrogance, major blind spots, weak capacity for good decision-making	Small weakness in otherwise solid institutions and processes	Core values/elite interests produced policy-making biases and inevitable failures	'Good society' has perhaps drifted slightly from core values and issues
Should decision-makers have foreseen and prevented the failure?	Yes, absolutely, but they pathologically ignored or were incapable of seeing the risks	Ideally yes, but they were faced with difficult circumstances; they may also have been unlucky	Yes, absolutely, but a dysfunctional institution/process, either ignored or wasn't capable of seeing the risks	Ideally yes, but small weaknesses in processes and procedures limited the capacity to foresee and prevent	Yes, in theory, but systematic biases produced a blindness to possibility of failure or even a preparedness to foresee but tolerate	Ideally yes, but in practice we can't foresee and prevent every failure
How can we learn from the failure?	Remove 'bad' individuals from office and replace them with others who are more competent	Do what we can to better train our policy-makers but we shouldn't be too harsh on them	Drastic dismantling or overhaul of institution/process	Minor refinement of institutional policy, procedures and/or processes	Causes of failure are deeply embedded in dysfunctional core values and systems of power. Learning can only happen when there is a paradigm shift	Reflection and perhaps refinement of core values/priorities and how we put them into practice, rather than fundamentally challenging them

marginal shortfalls in a complex society where our values and principles are solid and steadfast. In such accounts, the causes of failure are in essence 'good intentions' or 'good societies' that have gone marginally askew at the periphery. The corollary of such sympathetic tendencies is that we shouldn't have inflated expectations that we can foresee and prevent all failures, but once they happen we can at least reflect, learn and refine.

By contrast, alternative accounts of failure lean towards the deeply critical. Individuals took bad decisions and did so because they are fundamentally reckless, self-interested, ego-driven, incompetent and so on. For example, Glad (1989), in her psychological appraisal of mistakes made by US President Jimmy Carter in managing the Iranian hostage crisis, attributed them to Carter's ego-centric narcissistic tendencies leading to a refusal to consider alternative courses of action. Similarly, institutions and processes at the heart of failure are fundamentally pathological, consumed by empire building, arrogance, biases and more, which reduce the capacity for good decision-making. For instance, Gompert *et al.* (2014) argue that a major explanation for the flawed US 2003 intervention in Iraq was 'dysfunctional' decision-making processes surrounding intelligence, giving privilege to outdated and untrustworthy 'evidence' that Iraq held weapons of mass destruction. By the time we reach deeper core societal values and power structures in this narrative, the flaws are deep, and a severely dysfunctional society is prone to producing destructive policy failures. A detailed study by Gezari (2013: 198) of the failures of US Human Terrain System (designed to increase cultural understanding between US forces and local communities in Iraq and Afghanistan) argued that the policy is an 'expression of the national zeitgeist: American exceptionalism tempered by the political correctness of a post-colonial, globalized age'.

In such narratives, the root causes of failure are essentially dysfunctional people, 'bad' institutions and distorted or inappropriate core values/distribution of power. The corollary of unsympathetic narratives is that we should in theory be able to foresee/prevent and learn from failure, but we can only so if we get rid of bad decision-makers, overhaul our institutions/processes and produce a paradigm shift in our ways of thinking and/power structures.

There is no need in this tripartite framework to present propositions or hypotheses on the causes of policy failure. These are a matter (in the fashion of Ostrom [2007]) for theory and operationalizing. Nevertheless, it is possible to offer some potential analytical avenues that flow from a conception of process, programme and political failure. They start from the assumption that policy-makers typically need to juggle competing priorities. The framework can be used, for example, to help us think about the three forms of failure – process, programme and political – as well as connections and trade-offs between them. A government dispensing with detailed scrutiny and instead rushing through a legislative motion and marshalling all party energies to send troops into battle overseas (process success) is risking both programme failure (that the initiative will not produce the intended outcomes) and political failure (backlash). Furthermore, the prioritizing of political success (pre-election

posturing, token initiatives that manage issues down policy agendas, unwavering promotion of governing ideology) can risk producing failed programme outcomes. Larson (1997: ix), in her work on spirals of mistrust during the Cold War period, argued that ‘For many years I have been trying to determine why foreign policy officials make decisions that result in needless sacrifice of lives and money,’ and found a key explanation in US foreign policy (unlike that of the Soviet Union) being driven by the President’s need to build and reinforce trust with domestic political opponents and citizens.

The causes of policy failure are many in number, often vague, complex in their relationship and often highly contested. The framework presented here and as summarized in Table 2 does not provide definitive answers, but instead seeks to provide a framework to help us approach such issues.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: LINKING THE NATURE OF FAILURE AND ITS CAUSES

The articulation of policies and their outcomes as ‘failures’ is part of the political fabric of societies. The different standards against which to assess policy outcomes are typically diverse, complex and ‘grey’ that, depending on the particular standard chosen, ‘failures’ can be portrayed as ‘successes’ – and *vice versa*. Framing a policy as ‘failed’ is both a judgement and a move to delegitimize the value and veracity of what government is doing. From wars and diplomacy to trade agreements, failure frames are attempts to destroy existing policy interventions (and often the values underpinning them and the reputations of those promoting them) and create political space for new policies to emerge. Defining failure and articulating its causes are inextricably linked. Those arguing, or at least agreeing, that policy has ‘failed’ may articulate different causes of failure, depending on whether they seek to conserve the *status quo ante* or use the failure as a springboard for reform. The more that causes of failure are framed as institutional/process or societal, the greater the case being made that reform is necessary.

Furthermore, not all policy failures are equal. They can have greater/lesser consequences and can be more/less tolerable. Some failures (casualties in times of war, corruption in overseas aid) are seen at times to be an unavoidable consequence of pursuing policy goals. 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 ‘success’ goals. Stronger still, failure in some regard may be tolerated in an attempt to achieve broader success (or even actively pursued). Gilbert and Sharman (2014), in their study of Britain and Australia’s limited compliance with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Anti-Bribery Convention, argue that governments turning a ‘blind eye’ to bribery used by corporate citizens is a product of seeking to protect jobs and promote export success. Policy advocates will often frame such failures as unfortunate but ‘normal’ by-products of pursuing broader goals, rather than being caused by fundamental flaws in the policy itself.

Our attitude to failure also tells us something about our attitude to the society in which we live. Following Bovens and 't Hart (1996), 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 'weak' leaders, misguided diplomacy and so on, 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, whether it is clashes between civilizations/religions or even the expansionist and predatory tendencies of capitalist accumulation. 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 organizing principles of society.

In conclusion: the nature and causes of policy failure may be a methodological minefield, but the analytical framework presented above does allow us to approach this topic in a novel way. The public policy approach adopted here – far from attempting to eschew the politics of policy failure in favour of a rational scientific approach – argues that recognizing political disputes and grey areas is the key to advancing our understanding. The extent to which policy outcomes are considered failures and explanations for the causes of any failures, are interconnected matters of politics. They are fought over by different interests as they seek to confirm or deny whether our governments are indeed acting in the public interest and protecting the rights of citizens – at home and overseas.

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