

What is Policy Failure and Why Do Governments Get it So Wrong (Sometimes)?

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Methodological Problems



Multiple benchmarks

- Failure to achieve the goals of government
- Failure to benefit particular interests or groups
- Failure to produce benefits greater than the costs
- Failure to match moral, ethical or legal standards
- Failure to improve on what went before
- Failure to do better than others dealing with similar issues
- Failure to garner sufficient support from those actors and interests who matter

Methodological Problems cont....

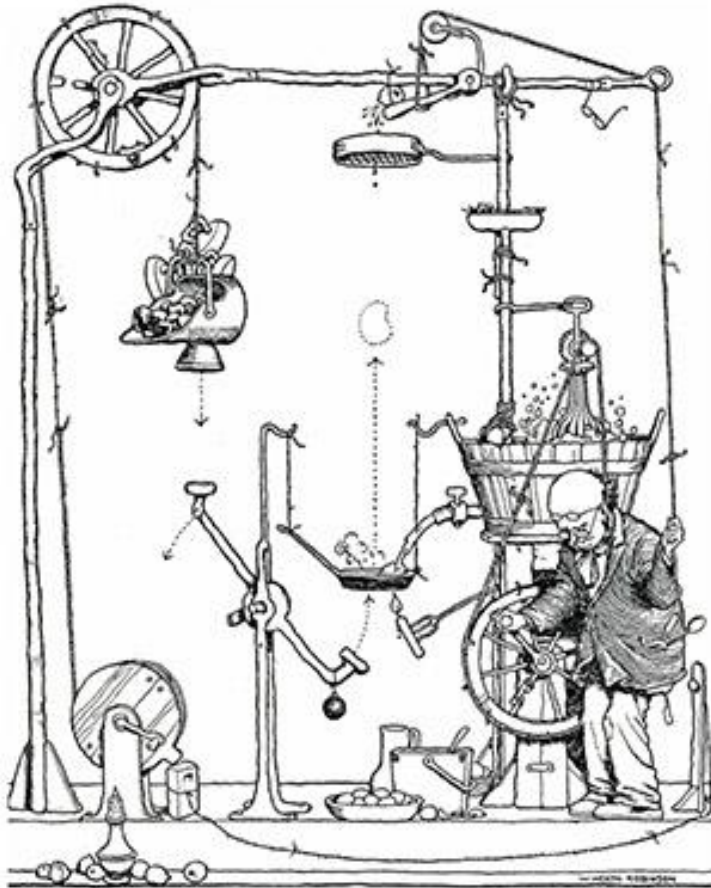


- Differing perceptions
- Grey areas
- Failure for whom?
- Variance over time
- Myth of the single causal factor
- Degrees of causality?
- Bias of hindsight

Failure: A Working Definition

A policy fails, even if 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.

Three Forms of Failure....



(Policymaking) Process Failure

- Government unable to produce its desired policy goals and instruments
- Policy process illegitimate
- No building of a sustainable coalition
- Opposition to process is virtually universal and/or support is virtually non-existent

Three Forms of Failure

Programme Failure

- Despite minor progress towards implementation as intended, programme is beset by chronic failures, proving highly controversial and and very difficult to defend
 - Some small outcomes achieved as intended, but overwhelmed by controversial and high profile failure to produce results
 - 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
 - A few minor success in meeting criteria highly valued in that policy domain, but plagued by unwanted media attention
 - Opposition to programme aims, values and means of achieving them outweighs small levels of support
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Political Failure



- Despite small signs of benefit, policy proves an electoral/reputational liability
 - Clear signs that the agenda and business of government struggles to suppress a politically difficult issue
 - Entire governing trajectory and values in danger of being compromised
 - Opposition to political benefits for government outweighs small levels of support
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<i>Policy as Programme</i>			
	<i>Tolerable Failure</i>	<i>Conflicted Failure</i>	<i>(Outright) Failure</i>
<i>Implementation in line with objectives</i>	Implementation objectives broadly achieved, despite minor failures and deviations.	Mixed results, with some successes, but accompanied by unexpected and controversial failings.	Despite minor progress towards implementation as intended, programme is beset by chronic failures, proving highly controversial and very difficult to defend.

Thinking About Framing the Causes of Failure

- Actor, Institution/Process or Social Centred?
 - Intentional or Unintentional?
 - Sub Frames
 - Causal narrative
 - Forseeability of failure
 - Capacity to prevent
 - Deeper connections between failure and society i.e. optimistic, realistic or pessimistic view of causes.
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Table 3: A Framework for Understanding Different Approaches to the Causes of Policy Failure

	ACTOR CENTRED		INSTITUTION/POLICY PROCESS CENTRED		SOCIETAL CENTRED	
	<i>Intentional Cause</i>	<i>Unintentional Cause</i>	<i>Intentional Cause</i>	<i>Unintentional Cause</i>	<i>Intentional Cause</i>	<i>Unintentional Cause</i>
<i>Typical Causal Narrative</i>	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/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	Ruling ideas/governing ideas/powerful interests do produce failures but are small in comparison to greater benefits
<i>Foreseeability of Failure</i>	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	High. We know that failures happen as an unfortunate by-product of the way society works
<i>Capacity to Prevent</i>	High. Failure could easily have been avoided	Medium/High, if more capable individuals had been placed 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	Low. Failures are deeply embedded in the ideas and interests which govern society, but such ideas and interests bring greater benefits
<i>Deeper Assumptions About the Connections Between Failure and Society as Whole</i>	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/Pessimistic. 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 dysfunctional systems of power	Realistic/Optimistic. While causes of failure are deeply embedded in the nature of society, the failures are outweighed by the broader successes they bring.

Tensions Between Failure and Success



- Process Success vs. Programme/Political Failure e.g. government bill pushed through, storing up problems for the future
- Political Success vs. Programme Failure e.g. ‘placebo’ policy help manage an issue down/off the agenda
- Programme Success vs. Political Failure e.g. well executed austerity measures, risking political backlash



- Failure is tolerated
- Failure is masked
- Failure is risked
- Failure is created/cultivated/exploited