Great Policy Successes
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How to ‘See’ Great Policy Successes

A Field Guide to Spotting Policy Successes in the Wild

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Abstract and Keywords

In this chapter, the editors make the case for positive policy evaluation. They survey classic and contemporary public policy and governance research and debates to demonstrate how they are slanted towards fault-finding, the language of disappointment, failure and crisis. They reflect on the contributions and the limitations of this state of the art and argue that it needs to be complemented by a more sustained and systematic conceptualization and empirical study of highly (and perhaps improbably) successful public policy endeavours. This chapter ends by outlining the analytical protocol used in this project, and debating the methodological strengths and limitations of the brand of positive policy evaluation applied in this volume.

Keywords: positive policy evaluation, public policy, governance research, debates, policymaking

Shifting Focus

For those wanting to know how public policy is made and how it evolves from aspirations and ideas to tangible social outcomes, the 1970s produced some classic accounts, which became established in academic curriculums and part of the canon of academic research world-wide. The two best known works from this era are Pressman and Wildavsky’s *Implementation* (whose iconic epic subtitle inspired ours) and Peter Hall’s *Great Planning Disasters* (the inspiration for our book’s main title). Pressman and Wildavsky wrote a book-length intensive case study revealing how a federal employment promotion policy, which was launched

with a great sense of urgency and momentum, played out on the ground with very limited effect in Oakland, California. Hall presented gripping accounts of public policy failures from around the Anglosphere: ‘positive’ planning disasters (planning projects that ran into cost escalation, underperformance, withdrawal of political support, or unintended consequences so big as to completely dwarf the intended aims), and ‘negative’ planning disasters (instances where plans made in response to pressing public problems never got off the drawing board due to political stalemate).

Taken together, these studies were emblematic of an era in which the alleged ‘ungovernability’ of Western societies and their welfare states was a dominant theme (Crozier et al. 1975; Rose 1979; Offe 1984). Having seized a much more prominent role in public life following the Second World War, Western governments were ambitious to achieve planned change, but internal complexities and vagaries of democratic political decision-making often thwarted those ambitions. Generations of public policy and public administration students were steeped in pessimistic diagnoses from these classic studies. Waves of similar studies in the 1990s (Butler et al. 1994; Bovens and ‘t Hart 1996; Gray and ‘t Hart 1998) and the 2010s (Allern and Pollack 2012; Crewe and King 2013; Light 2014; Schuck 2014; Oppermann and Spencer 2016) followed. These works further imply that governments are up to no good, incompetent, politically paralysed, and/or chronically risk overreach much of the time (e.g. Scott 1998; Schuck 2014).

(p.2) And yet in many parts of the world, across many public policy domains, the bulk of public projects, programmes, and services perform not so badly at all, and sometimes even quite successfully (Goderis 2015). These realities are chronically underexposed and understudied. Major policy accomplishments, striking performance in difficult circumstances, and thousands of taken-for-granted everyday forms of effective public value creation by and through governments are not deemed newsworthy. They cannot be exploited for political gain by oppositions and critics of incumbent office-holders. Curiously, academic students of public policy have had almost nothing to say about them (cf. Bovens et al. 2001; McConnell 2010; Moore 2013), despite vigorous calls to recognize the major and often hidden and unacknowledged contributions of governments to successes claimed by and widely attributed to now revered companies like Google (Mazzucato 2013).

We cannot properly ‘see’, let alone recognize and explain, variations in government performance when media, political, and academic discourses alike are saturated with accounts of their shortcomings and failures but remain nearly silent on their achievements. Negative language dominates: public and academic discourse about government, politics, and public policy is dominated by disappointment, incompetence, failure, unintended consequences, alienation, corruption, disenchantment, and crisis (Hay 2007). On the contrary, the manner

in which we look at, talk about, think, evaluate, and emotionally relate to public institutions risks creating self-fulfilling prophecies. The current ascent of ‘anti-system’ populists speaks volumes, and the message is hardly reassuring. The ‘declinist’ discourse of the current age has permeated our thinking about government and public policy. It prevents us from seeing, acknowledging, and learning from past and present instances of highly effective and highly valued public policymaking.

With this book we want to shift the focus. We aim to infuse the agenda for teaching, research, and dialogue on public policymaking with food for thought about what goes well. We do this through a series of close-up, in-depth case study accounts of the genesis and evolution of stand-out public policy accomplishments, across a range of countries, sectors, and challenges. With these accounts, we engage with the conceptual, methodological, and theoretical challenges which have plagued and constrained researchers seeking to evaluate, explain, and design successful public policy.

There are many ways to ‘get at’ these questions. Existing conceptual and comparative studies of public policy success (Bovens et al. 2001; Patashnik 2008; McConnell 2010) suggest that achieving success entails two major tasks. One entails *craft work*: devising, adopting, and implementing programmes and reforms that have a meaningful impact on the public issues giving rise to their existence. The other entails *political work*: forming and maintaining coalitions of stakeholders to persuasively propagate these programmes. This political work extends **(p.3)** to nurturing and protecting elite and public perceptions of the policy’s/programme’s ideology, intent, instruments, implementation, and impact during the often long and tenuous road from ideas to outcomes. Success must be experienced and actively communicated, or it will go unnoticed and underappreciated. In this volume, we aim to shed light on how these two fundamental tasks—programme and process design; and coalition-building and reputation management—are taken up and carried out in instances of highly successful public policymaking.

Following in the footsteps of Pressman and Wildavsky and Hall, this volume contains in-depth case studies of prominent instances of public policymaking and planning from around the world. By offering insight into occurrences of policy success across varied contexts, these case studies are designed to increase awareness that government and public policy actually work remarkably well, at least some of the time, and that we can learn from these practices. Before we get into these cases, however, it is necessary to equip readers of this book and future researchers of policy success with a guide on how to go about identifying and analysing instances of policy success. The chief purpose of this chapter is to offer researchers, policy-makers, and students a field guide to spotting great

policy successes in the real world—in the wild—so that we can begin to analyse how they came about and what might be learned from them.

How Do We Know a ‘Great Policy Success’ When We See One?

Policy successes are, like policy failures, in the eye of the beholder. They are not mere facts but stories. Undoubtedly ‘events’—real impacts on real people—are a necessary condition for their occurrence. But in the end, policy successes do not so much occur as they are made. To claim that a public policy, programme, or project X is a ‘success’ is effectively an act of interpretation, indeed of framing. To say this in a public capacity and in a public forum makes it an inherently political act: it amounts to giving a strong vote of confidence to certain acts and practices of governance. In effect it singles them out, elevates them, validates them.

For such an act to be consequential, it needs to stick: others must be convinced of its truth and they need to emulate it. The claim ‘X is a success’ needs to become a more widely accepted and shared narrative. When it does, it becomes performative: X looks better and better because so many say so, so often. When the narrative endures, X becomes enshrined in society’s collective memory through repeated retelling and other rituals. Examples of the latter include the conferral of awards on people or organizations associated with X, who then subsequently get invitations to come before captive audiences to spread the word; the high place that X occupies in rankings; the favourable judgements of X by official arbiters of public value in a society, such as audit agencies or watchdog bodies, not to mention the court of public opinion. Once they have achieved prominence, **(p.4)** success tales—no matter how selective and biased critics and soft voices may claim them to be (see Schram and Soss 2001)—come to serve as important artefacts in the construction of self-images and reputational claims of the policy-makers, governments, agencies, and societal stakeholders that credibly claim authorship of their making and preservation (Van Assche et al. 2012).

We must tread carefully in this treacherous terrain. Somehow, we need to arrive at a transparent and widely applicable conceptualization of ‘policy success’ to be deployed throughout this volume, and a basic set of research tools allowing us to spot and characterize the ‘successes’ which will be studied in detail throughout this book. To get there, we propose that *policy assessment is necessarily a multi-dimensional, multi-perspectivist, and political process*. At the most basic level we distinguish between two dimensions of assessment. First, the programmatic *performance* of a policy: success is essentially about designing smart programmes that will really have an impact on the issues they are supposed to tackle, while delivering those programmes in a manner to produce social outcomes that are valuable. There is also the political *legitimacy* of a policy: success is the extent to which both the social outcomes of policy interventions and also the manner in which they are achieved are seen as appropriate by

relevant stakeholders and accountability forums in view of the systemic values in which they are embedded (Fischer 1995; Hough et al. 2010).

The relation between these two dimensions of policy evaluation is not straightforward. There can be (and often are) asymmetries: politically popular policies are not necessarily programmatically effective or efficient, and vice versa. Moreover, there is rarely one shared normative and informational basis upon which all actors in the governance processes assess performance, legitimacy, and endurance (Bovens et al. 2001). Many factors influence beliefs and practices through which people form judgements about governance. Heterogeneous stakeholders have varied vantage points, values, and interests with regard to a policy, and thus may experience and assess it differently. An appeal to ‘the facts’ does not necessarily help settle these differences. In fact, like policymaking, policy evaluation occurs in a context of multiple, often competing, cultural and political frames and narratives, each of which privileges some facts and considerations over others (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). It is inherently political in its approach and implications, no matter how deep the espoused commitment to scientific rigour of many of its practitioners. This is not something we can get around; it is something we have to acknowledge and be mindful of without sliding into thinking that it is *all and only* political, and that therefore ‘anything goes’ when it comes assessing the success or otherwise of a policy (Bovens et al. 2006).

Building upon Bovens and ‘t Hart’s programmatic–political dichotomy, McConnell (2010) added a third perspective, process success, to produce a three-dimensional assessment map. We have adapted this three-dimensional assessment for our purposes (see also Newman 2014) and added an **(p.5)** additional—*temporal*—dimension. Assessing policy success in this volume thus involves checking cases against the following four criteria families:

Programmatic assessment—This dimension reflects the focus of ‘classic’ evaluation research on policy goals, the theory of change underpinning it, and the selection of the policy instruments it deploys—all culminating in judgements about the degree to which a policy achieves valuable social impacts.

Process assessment—The focus here is on how the processes of policy design, decision-making, and delivery are organized and managed, and whether these processes contribute to both its technical problem-solving capacity (effectiveness and efficiency) and to its social appropriateness, and in particular the sense of procedural justice among key stakeholders and the wider public (Van den Bos et al. 2014).

Political assessment—This dimension assesses the degree to which policy-makers and agencies involved in driving and delivering the policy are able to build and maintain supportive political coalitions, and the degree to which

policy-makers’ association with the policy enhances their reputations. In other words, it examines both the political requirements for policy success and the distribution of political costs/benefits among the actors involved in it.

Endurance assessment—The fourth dimension adds a temporal perspective. We surmise that the success or otherwise of a public policy, programme, or project should be assessed not through a one-off snapshot but as a multi-shot sequence or episodic film ascertaining how its performance and legitimacy develop over time. Contexts change, unintended consequences emerge, surprises are thrown at history: robustly successful policies are those that adapt to these dynamics through institutional learning and flexible adaptation in programme (re)design and delivery, and through political astuteness in safeguarding supporting coalitions and maintaining public reputation and legitimacy.

Taking these dimensions into account, we propose the following definition of a (‘great’) policy success:

> *A policy is a complete success to the extent that (a) it demonstrably creates widely valued social outcomes; through (b) design, decision-making, and delivery processes that enhance both its problem-solving capacity and its political legitimacy; and (c) sustains this performance for a considerable period of time, even in the face of changing circumstances.*

Table 1.1 presents an assessment framework that integrates these building blocks. Articulating specific elements of each dimension of success—programmatic, process, political, endurance—in unambiguous and conceptually distinct terms, this framework lends a structure to both contemporaneous evaluation and dynamic consideration of policy developments over time. All contributing authors have drawn upon it in analysing their case studies in this volume. **(p.6)**

Table 1.1 A policy success assessment map

Programmatic assessment: Purposeful and valued action	Process assessment: Thoughtful and fair policymaking practices	Political assessment: Stakeholder and public legitimacy for the policy
• A well-developed and empirically feasible *public value proposition* and *theory of change* (in terms of ends–means relationships) underpins the policy • *Achievement* of (or considerable momentum towards) the policy’s intended and/or other *beneficial social outcomes* • Costs/ benefits associated with the policy are *distributed equitably in society*	• The policy process allows for *robust deliberation* about *thoughtful consideration* of: the relevant values and interests; the hierarchy of goals and objectives; contextual constraints; the (mix of) policy instruments; and the institutional arrangements and capacities necessary for effective policy implementation • Stakeholders overwhelmingly experience the making and/or the delivery of policy as *just and fair*	• A relatively broad and deep political *coalition* supports the policy’s value proposition, instruments and current results • Association with the policy *enhances the political capital* of the responsible policy-makers • *Association with the policy enhances the organizational reputation* of the relevant public agencies
Temporal Assessment		

Programmatic assessment: Purposeful and valued action	Process assessment: Thoughtful and fair policymaking practices	Political assessment: Stakeholder and public legitimacy for the policy

• Endurance of the *policy’s value proposition* (i.e. the proposed ‘high-level’ ends–means relationships underpinning its rationale and design, combined with the flexible adaptation of its ‘on-the-ground’ and ‘programmatic’ features to changing circumstances and in relation to performance feedback).
• Degree to which the policy’s programmatic, process, and political *performance is maintained* over time.
• Degree to which the policy confers *legitimacy on the broader political system*.

Studying Policy Success: Methodological Considerations

Now that we have a working method of ‘seeing’ policy success in operational terms, the next step is to apply the concept in studying governance and public policymaking. Before we do so, however, it is important to point out that there are range of methods which researchers have employed in this task. These efforts can be grouped into three types of approach.

At the *macro-level*, studies of overall government performance usually take the form of cross-national and cross-regional comparison of indicators published in large datasets. Some researchers focus on the inputs and throughput side of government. A prominent example is the Quality of Government dataset that captures cross-national difference in the trustworthiness, reliability, impartiality, **(p.7)** incorruptibility, and competence of public institutions (Rothstein 2011). Of more direct relevance from a policy success point of view are datasets and balanced scorecard exercises focusing on aggregate governance outputs, outcomes, and productivity in specific domains of government activity, performed and propagated by e.g. the World Bank, the OECD, and many national audit offices and government think tanks (Goderis 2015).

At the *meso-level*, social problems, policy domain, and programme evaluation specialists regularly examine populations of cases to identify cases and areas of high performance. For example, common areas of focus include crime prevention programmes, adult literacy programmes, refugee settlement programmes, and early childhood education programmes. With this method, scholars examine ‘what works’ and assess whether these programmes or key features of them can be replicated and transferred to other contexts (e.g. Light 2002; Isaacs 2008; Lundin et al. 2015; Blunch 2017; Weisburd et al. 2017).

Finally, at the *micro-level*, researchers probe deeply into the context, design, decision-making, implementation, reception, assessment, and evolution of single or a limited number of policies or programmes. Both Hall’s and Pressman and Wildavsky’s seminal studies are examples of micro-level studies.

Each of these three approaches has a distinctive set of potential strengths and weaknesses. Macro studies offer a view of the big picture, with a helicopter perspective of linkages between governance activities and social outcomes. They lend insight into the social and economic consequences of institutional design and the effect of public spending patterns. This approach generally offers little or no insight into what occurs in the ‘black box’ in which these linkages take shape. Meso-level studies, on the other hand, drill down to the level of programmes and come closer to establishing the nature of the links between their inputs, throughputs, outputs, and outcomes. Structured and focused comparative case designs which control for institutional and contextual factors can yield richer pictures of ‘what works’. A limitation of these population-level comparisons is the consequence of parsimony, which limits the depth of attention paid to context, chance, choice, communication, cooperation, and conflict within each unit in the sample. As a result, it often proves difficult for meso-level studies to convincingly answer *why* things work well or not so well.

The latter is the main potential strength of micro-level, single, or low-n case study designs. This approach offers the greatest leverage in opening the black box, and examining the stakeholder interests, institutional arrangements, power relationships, leadership and decision-making processes, and the realities of front-line service delivery involved. This gives analysts in this tradition a better shot at reconstructing the constellations of factors and social mechanisms that are at work in producing policy successes. The chief limitation of micro studies of policy success lies in the limited possibilities for controlled hypothesis testing and the impossibility of empirically generalizing their findings. This volume is set in the **(p.8)** micro tradition. We hope to deliver on its potential strengths while responsibly navigating not only its inherent limitations but also its methodological challenges.

Case Selection

Conceptual definition of the outcome of interest—policy success—is just the start of the battle for valid inference. With defined concepts in hand, a researcher must next choose an appropriate sample from which to draw conclusions. If the first lesson in any undergraduate research methods course is that ‘correlation is not causation’, the second is sure to be in the spirit of ‘thou shalt not select on the dependent variable’. Though criteria for sample selection vary across the quantitative–qualitative divide (Mahoney and Goertz 2006), it is agreed that ‘the cases you choose affect the answers you get’ (Geddes 2003). The message is hammered into the minds of young scholars that, for well understood reasons, selecting cases based on the value of the dependent variable can profoundly bias

statistical findings, fouling generalization and average effect estimation (Heckman 1976). And yet, how a researcher selects their cases should be principally driven by the research question. Case selection should be a deliberate and well-considered procedure tailored to the specific research question at hand and type of explanation sought (Brady and Collier 2010; King et al. 1994). There are defensible reasons to violate the dependent variable rule and select only or mostly ‘positive’ cases (Brady and Collier 2010). In this multiple-cases project, we are *not* seeking causal explanation or formal comparison. Nor do we endeavour to arrive at universal (or even external) generalizability or estimation of average effects, let alone aim to identify (probabilistic) empirical regularities. We are, instead, interested in documenting, understanding, and problematizing the actors, contexts, ideas, and institutions that interact to produce the outcome of (intrinsic and theoretical) value: successful public policy. Our case selection decisions were made with that chief goal in mind.

Our main concern was that each case be identified as a ‘great policy success’ by expert scholars in the relevant policy domain along more than one but preferably all of the four success dimensions distinguished above: procedural, programmatic, political, and endurance assessment. Complete success on all four dimensions is unusual; these are the truly exceptional accomplishments. We sought cases of *seen successes*, which are not only successful (which we might posit is a more common condition than is popularly acknowledged), but also *recognized* as such. To find these gems, we as editors consulted with experts and academics in a range of policy domains (environmental, public works or infrastructure, social welfare, healthcare, technology, and economic policy) to identify cases meeting our criteria for ‘policy success’. In the event of disagreement between experts on a case’s level of success, the case was removed from our long list.

(p.9) We also paid attention to both the policy domain and diversity of national institutional context in finalizing our set of cases. Though our sample is quasi-homogeneous in terms of the ‘dependent variable’ (success), we explicitly aimed for variation in the factors which might play an important explanatory role—including, but not limited to problem types policy sectors/subsystems, nature and strength of political institutions, levels of economic development, and administrative capacity (Bovens et al. 2001; Lodge and Wegrich 2014). Because this research project is primarily pedagogical and exploratory rather than explanatory and predictive, we do not test hypotheses or conclude with any certainty about the causes of success. Our aim is to bring to life cases of unusual policy success and get readers to consider (a) the dimensions along which each case is most and somewhat less successful; (b) how and why success was achieved in each of these instances, taking into account the context in which

they arose and evolved, and the roles of particular institutions, actors, and practices in bringing them about.

Temporal Complexity

In assessing policy outcomes, what you see often depends upon when you look, and with what kind of temporal perspective in mind. With the passing of time, public and political perceptions of the processes and outcomes of a public can shift. A case in point is the construction of the Sydney Opera House (1954–73). During the conflict-ridden and traumatic implementation phase of this highly adventurous architectural project, it was considered a major fiasco. Construction took ten years longer than initially planned and the costs exploded from the 1954 tender of 7 million A$ to well over 100 million A$ upon completion in 1973. Significantly, the architect had walked out midcourse following a series of confrontations with the minister of public works whose party had won the New South Wales election that year promising to rein in the ‘out of control’ Opera House project. Not surprisingly, Hall dutifully included the Opera House project in his *Great Planning Disasters*, published in 1981.

This perspective of failure was short-lived, however. During the 1980s the unique design of the Opera House became a global architectural icon and tourist attraction. Its growing fame and the cash it generated eclipsed the original budget overruns, political controversies, and functional limitations of the building complex. The fact that most of the building costs had not come from the public purse but from a series of designated public lotteries, long wilfully overlooked in the political debate, made a comeback. Over time, the weight accorded to ‘project management’ criteria—where success is defined as delivery according to specifications, on time and within budget—receded. The dominant evaluative lens became strategic, macro-economic, and symbolic.

(p.10) This is an example of how policy assessment can be fundamentally shaped by variation in time horizons and the realization of various policy effects over time. Policy objectives may vary in temporal scope (in economic policy planning, a differentiation between short-term, medium-term, and long-term policies is quite common) and temporal quality (unique/non-recurrent versus permanent/iterative policies). This affects the timing and nature of assessments of their effects. Policy-makers are in fact continuously vacillating between different time horizons in setting priorities, allocating budgets, and making decisions. At the same time, many elected officials and others subject to the vagaries of the electoral cycle will be predisposed to judge policy proposals or feedback about past policies first and foremost in terms of their short-term political implications.

Short-term effects are also more easily registered than long-term effects, which are likely to become intertwined with other phenomena in complex and often unintended ways. Moreover, short-term and long-term effects may in some cases

be at odds with one another, the latter reversing or neutralizing the former. In general, the longer the time frame used for the assessment of policy outcomes, the bigger the scope for controversy about their meaning and evaluation is likely to be. Similarly, the processes and outcomes of one-off policies (such as the construction of a building, the security measures surrounding a global summit conference, or the response to a natural disaster) tend to be more easily grasped than those of policies with iterative objectives which are constantly being renegotiated and adapted by different participants and in the face of changing circumstances (such as urban planning strategies, fiscal and monetary policies, or social security policies). In evaluating efforts to significantly change the behaviour of large numbers of people (such as reducing smoking, drunk driving, or domestic violence) in particular, a limited time frame is inappropriate because it neglects both the severity of the initial administrative problems and the possibility of learning by doing. For example, US president Franklin Roosevelt’s resettlement programme for black agricultural labourers failed to meet its short-term political objectives, yet it had the latent effect of generating a black middle class which later would become the backbone of the civil rights movement (Salomon 1979).

Conversely, consider the example of the American energy policy, which shows yet another way in which time horizons can considerably change the evaluation of outcomes. In many respects this policy was very successful in the 1960s. Through price controls, allocation schemes, and the non-inclusion of external costs, consumers were provided with inexpensive petroleum products. But seen from the perspective of what happened in the next decade, the picture became less sanguine: ‘These benefits created incentives to rely on the automobile for transportation, and oil and natural gas for heating, while ignoring mass transit and coal. The success of one policy has now led to the realisation of its harmful consequences: a nation shackled to oil and natural gas and unprepared to pay **(p.11)** the real costs that such dependence demands, i.e. subservience to foreign producers and the costs they impose’ (Ingram and Mann 1980: 14).

And then there is what Wildavsky so aptly called the paradox of time: past successes lead to future failures. To illustrate this, he provides the example of the ironies of achieving success in public healthcare which come to haunt policy-makers a decade or so later. The essay’s title reflects the sense of despair policy-makers may feel when they understand the paradox of time. It is called *Doing better, feeling worse*: ‘As life expectancy increases and as formerly disabling diseases are conquered, medicine is faced with an older population those disabilities are more difficult to defeat. The cost of cure is higher, both because the easier ills have already been dealt with, and because the patients to be treated are older. Each increment of knowledge is harder won; each improvement in health is more expensive. Thus, time converts one decade’s achievements into the next decade’s dilemmas’ (Wildavsky 1987: 283).

There is no hard and fast, universally applicable way of dealing with temporal complexity in policy evaluation. Overall, however, analysts are probably best off if they consciously employ both short-term and long-term perspectives, and empirically examine if and how the (mix of) criteria which policy-makers, stakeholders, and the public employed to ascertain the performance of a policy changed over time in the case they study. This is the principal reason for including an endurance dimension in the policy assessment framework depicted in Table 1.1.

Outline of This Volume

Since the mid-1990s there has been a strong interest in tracking ‘good/best’ practices with an aim towards customizing and transplanting them to other contexts. The literature on policy transfer shows that this has met with limited success. Much of this work lacks a systematic analysis of the constructed, potentially contested, and dynamic nature of these ‘best practices’. Nor has it drilled down deeply and methodically into the roles of chance and choice, structure and agency, institutions and people, politics and professions in producing these performances.

In this volume, we try to address both these limitations by offering a series of grounded, in-depth, and reflective case studies. It features cases deliberately chosen to cover a broad range of issues and policy sectors. These include cases of different modes (from top-down central steering to open, deliberative, and collaborative processes) and levels (from urban to the global) of governance. Though somewhat skewed to countries consistently ranking among the best governed in the world, the volume includes cases of federal and unitary, parliamentary and presidential, and Westminster and consensual systems of government. Short descriptions of the fifteen cases are included here. **(p.12)**

Great policy successes: cases in this volume

Brazil’s Bolsa Família scheme—How Brazil built the world’s largest conditional cash transfer scheme to lift millions out of extreme poverty.

Remarkable healthcare in Singapore—How policies have been continuously calibrated to adapt to new challenges while keeping costs low in Singapore.

Cutting waiting times in the NHS—How classic top-down political leadership and judicious policy analysis got Britain’s revered but monolithic National Health Service to process its millions of clients much more quickly.

The transformation of UK tobacco control—How the UK designed and implemented innovative policies which framed tobacco as a health concern to successfully build support around the initially unpopular tobacco ban.

The GI Bill—How the United States provided social support to soldiers returning from the Second World War to ensure macro-economic security, and had the unintended consequence of building social capital.

Finland’s education system—How a small nation on Europe’s northern periphery built a school system that became a global brand in ‘how to do public education’.

Estonia’s digital transformation—How a post-communist state forged a global reputation as a leader in digital government.

The Alameda rail corridor project—How through balanced governance and a creative financing arrangement a tangled web of rail lines was transformed into a single corridor that relieved traffic congestion and reduced air and water pollution in the Los Angeles region.

‘Marvellous Melbourne’—How the once staid and struggling state capital of Victoria, Australia, transformed itself into a cosmopolitan metropolis named ‘The World’s Most Liveable City’ six times in a row (from 2011 to 2017) by *The Economist*’s Intelligence Unit.

The new Dutch Delta strategy—How a nation in which two-thirds of the population live below the current sea level secures its future by reinventing its famed water management strategy so as to enable proactive and creative adaptation to the effects of climate change.

Copenhagen’s Five Finger Plan—How the Danish capital successfully avoided urban sprawl and overly dense and chaotic urbanization through early adoption and sustained adaptation of a comprehensive urban planning regime.

Norway’s Petroleum Fund—How Norway’s policy-makers purposefully dodged the bullet of the ‘resource curse’ and channelled its oil revenues into what has become the world’s biggest national pension fund.

(p.13) *New Zealand’s economic turnaround*—How a country at the brink of economic collapse in the 1980s transformed its fortunes through a radical, consistent, and impactful suite of reform strategies.

Germany’s labour market reforms—How Europe’s biggest but notoriously rigid and sluggish post-reunification economy was lifted into the economic powerhouse it has since become.

The Montreal Protocol—How the world managed to negotiate and implement a global regulatory regime that helped the stratospheric ozone layer recover from the damage sustained by decades’ worth of ozone depleting substances.

These case studies provide readers with an insight into ‘how successful the policy really was’ and ‘how success happened’ in each of these instances. We ask readers—as we did our fellow researchers when we commissioned the case studies—to consider the following guiding questions when working their way through each case:

1. What is this case about and to what extent can it be assessed as a ‘great policy success’ (in terms of the definition and the assessment above)?
2. What was the social, political, and institutional context in which the policy (programme, project, initiative) was developed?
3. What specific challenges was it seeking to tackle, and what if any specific aims did it seek to achieve?
4. Who were the policy’s main drivers and stewards, and how did they raise and maintain support for the policy?
5. How did the policy design process—the progression from ambitions and ideas to plans and instruments—unfold, and what (f)actors shaped it most?
6. How did the political decision-making process leading up to its adoption—the progression from proposals (bills, proposals) to commitments (laws, budgets)—unfold, and what (f)actors shaped it most?
7. How did the implementation process unfold, and what (f)actors shaped it most?
8. How did the legitimacy of the policy—the political and public support garnered—unfold, and what (f)actors shaped it most?
9. How did changes over time in the operating or political context (such as government turnover, fiscal positions, critical incidents) affect:
    a. the policy’s central features
    b. levels of popular support, or perceived legitimacy?

(p.14) 10. What, overall, can policy analysts and policy actors (of different ilk) learn from this instance of policy success?
    a. How likely is this case to remain a ‘success’ in the future? What are potential future problems with this policy case, or a similar class of cases?
    b. What unique factors may limit how broadly the lessons from this case can be applied (in terms of political, social, or economic context, or policy domain, etc.)?

The authors of the case studies you are about to read have all worked with these conceptual tools. That said, authors have come to this project with their own preconceptions, and they have relied on textual and human sources in their research that are part of the political fray of the case at hand. We advise readers therefore not to take any of the labels and interpretations concerning a policy’s alleged ‘great success’ and its key drivers for granted, but to constantly question

what frames—and whose frames—are at work here and examine by what evidence they are underpinned.

Exploring Policy Successes: Pointers about the Landscape Ahead

While providing a detailed template for assessing the success or otherwise of a policy, we do *not* offer a similarly general framework to explain policy success. No such framework currently exists, and it is unlikely that one singular framework will ever be able to do so comprehensively, given the number of (f)actors involved and the complexity of their interactions (see also McConnell 2010). General frameworks of public policymaking which do exist are either primarily descriptive or are designed to explain the content and timing of policies or the occurrence of policy stability and change over time (Weible and Sabatier 2017). Progress in explaining policy success is more likely to occur through middle-range theories focused on explaining the presence and absence of policy success in specific clusters of cases, such as particular types of governance challenges and policy domains (Bovens et al. 2001; Patashnik 2008) or in particular jurisdictions (Light 2002; Scott 2014).

It may be possible to treat our fifteen cases as such a cluster and use pattern-finding techniques such as Process-Tracing and Qualitative Comparative Analysis to tease out configurations of factors that may explain common or different outcomes. This will be a complicated endeavour given the limited size of our sample and the profound temporal, sectoral, institutional, and contextual differences between the cases. In keeping with the purpose and design of this volume, we will not venture down this path. Instead we draw upon the case studies as well as existing research to offer a few themes for classroom discussion and, **(p.15)** possibly, more focused future research—these are our pointers about the landscape ahead.

Opportunity and Necessity

What triggers policymaking activity may matter. Quite a few of the cases in our set were driven by the desire to move away from problems: existing or impending adversity, danger, or disadvantage. This is where the Melbourne and Singapore cases align, along with several others such as the Dutch Delta programme (preventing potentially devastating impacts of sea level rises), Brazil’s *Bolsa Família* scheme (reduction of abject poverty), the German labour market reforms (reigniting a stagnant economy), and the Montreal Protocol (restoring dangerous damage to the ozone layer). By contrast, Norway’s Petroleum Fund was triggered by a windfall (the discovery and subsequent exploitation of considerable oil reserves); Estonia’s digital strategy was born out of zest and drive to modernize on the wings of the country’s liberation from Soviet rule. Finnish education policy was quietly built not in response to some felt problem but in fulfilment of pedagogical aspirations.

Pro-action and Re-action

The Dutch, Danish, and Norwegian cases are the exemplars of governing by foresight and for the long range. The essence of their success is about bringing about desired futures through pro-active policy planning. To some extent, the GI Bill fits this mode as well, although much of its initial time horizon was much shorter and much of its impetus was provided by the desire to avoid repetition of the failure of the country’s return to peace following the end of the First World War. In contrast, some of the policy successes were fundamentally reactive, driven by events producing cumulative negative consequences that eventually created political windows of opportunity: recession-busting in New Zealand, stagnation-busting in Germany, poverty-busting in Brazil. Problems had already occurred and government responses to them were expected if not already overdue.

Concentrated and Shared Power

The drive to reduce NHS waiting times provides a classic instance of top-down leadership, in this case provided by an activist prime minister supported by an equally activist (and controlling) group of enforcers of his will at ‘Number 10’. The sheer depth and consistency of New Zealand’s economic reform programme was another case of unilateral imposition by a united and institutionally unfettered **(p.16)** government, as were Singapore’s healthcare reforms. In countries and sectors where the institutional rules of the game are predisposed towards power-sharing between multiple parties, such top-down policymaking is politically infeasible and culturally inappropriate. As the German, Dutch, Danish, and both US cases show, success in these systems is to be achieved through extensive consultation, bargaining, and negotiation: painstakingly massaging different actors’ moods and stances, cobbling together societal and parliamentary coalitions for policy initiatives, and creating platforms where collaboration can be stimulated and solidified.

Making Progress: Miles and Inches

Pacing the work of change is a fine art. Looking at the speed of policymaking, we again can identify big differences between the cases in our set. The Dutch are taking fifty years to ‘climate proof’ their water management arrangements. Copenhagen’s urban planning regime has evolved over half a century. Britain’s successful efforts to curb smoking were the product of a protracted war of attrition against the tobacco industry. The revitalization of Melbourne took shape over two decades. German governments dithered for many years before defying the unions’ veto-playing propensities and finally tackling the country’s ossified labour markets. The *Bolsa Família* scheme took about as long to rise up to the federal level and become the law of the land. In contrast, in institutionally simpler jurisdictions such as pre-MMP (mixed member proportional representation) New Zealand and post-communist Estonia ambitious policies were largely conceived and executed within the life of one government.

Politicization and Depoliticization

Tony Blair’s public commitment and personal resolve to reduce waiting times for NHS patients provides a clear example of politicization of the status quo in a policy domain providing momentum for change. What the system had previously normalized and expected its clients to bear, had now become exposed and problematized. Likewise, the move to comprehensive schools in Finland was not just a pedagogical endeavour but part of the Left’s ideological project of a universal welfare state. The fragmented suite of conditional cash transfer programmes in Brazil could only be galvanized into the national *Bolsa Família* scheme on the wings of the Lula government’s firm political commitment to the Workers’ Party’s long-standing but hitherto largely symbolic Zero Hunger Strategy. At the other end of the spectrum, the Dutch government turned depoliticization of a potentially fractious wicked problem—how to ensure there is still a country left to inhabit as sea levels rise and the rivers swell—into an art form by appointing and empowering a studiously **(p.17)** non-political authority figure to operate as a ‘consensus architect’. In other cases, such as New Zealand economic reforms, the key to success lay in the firm alliance between strong political leadership by the tandem of prime minister and treasurer and equally strong policy leadership from the ‘econocrats’ at the Treasury.

Inclusion and Exclusion

In consensual democracies such as Denmark and the Netherlands, creating ‘big tents’—inclusive structures and processes of consultation, deliberation, and co-design—is second nature to its public policy-makers and in the cases presented here was considered a key building block to success in what otherwise could easily become political deadlocks. But even in not traditionally consultative political systems such as Australia, it was the astute incorporation of grassroots voices and initiatives into the Melbourne regeneration policy mix that enriched its substance and helped broaden its support base. In contrast, in the Alameda corridor project the ‘big boys’ (the cities of Los Angeles and Long Beach) took legal action to remove the veto-playing six mid-corridor cities from the Authority running the project: using hard power to narrow the decision-making arena and thus rob smaller players of their blocking power enabled the corridor’s main supporters to keep the show on the road. Likewise, realpolitik in the US Congress resulted in a GI Bill whose administration was left to the states. The price paid was the exclusion of minority veterans from the pool of beneficiaries, especially in the Southern states.

If nothing else, these fifteen cases show that there are many pathways to policy success. Consider the instances where the policymaking process came close to the rational-synoptic ideal type, such as Singapore’s health policy: evidence-based, meticulously designed, carefully executed, and systematically evaluated. And then consider contrasting cases where success emerged out of the synergistic confluence of a number of seemingly disparate initiatives across different domains, such as Melbourne’s revitalization. The key challenge for both

students and practitioners is to figure out what combinations of design practices, political strategies, and institutional arrangements are both effective and appropriate in the context at hand. We hope that the case studies presented in this book prove to be a good place to inspire their thinking.

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