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## Introduction

### Exploring Canadian Experiences with Policy Success

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#### **Overcoming the Dominance of Policy Failure in Public Policy Studies**

Through their public policies, governments have enormous potential to shape the lives of their citizens. Much is at stake when new public policies are forged or when established ones are reformed and it behooves governments to learn from past experiences and both avoid earlier errors as well as emulate past successes. Actions taken at any given time can affect both present conditions and future trajectories, and whether or not those actions successfully accomplish government and public goals and aims in an enduring fashion is a critical aspect of policy-making and political life.

In the 1970s scholars produced classic accounts of public policy-making and outcomes, now ensconced in the canon of academic research worldwide and academic curricula in universities everywhere. In part in order to avoid the somewhat Panglossian accounts of a first generation of policy scholars who sometimes over-promised the positive impact of applying cost-benefit calculus and other economics-derived tools to previously highly partisan and political processes of decision-making (Tribe, 1972; Banfield, 1977), these studies often tended to focus on 'negative exemplars' rather than 'positive' ones. That is, they emphasized the lessons that could be derived from avoiding policy failures rather than those which might be gained from efforts to emulate success.

Two well-known foundational works of policy studies in the US, for example, set the tone for the next several decades of research into policy success and failure. Pressman and Wildavsky's (1984) *Implementation* and Peter Hall's (1982) *Great Planning Disasters* showcased and explored high profile public policy failures. They showed that although having seized a much more prominent role in public life following their successful prosecution of World War II, Western governments continued to suffer from internal complexities which, combined with the vagaries

of democratic political decision-making, often operated to thwart their ambitions, despite their best intentions and efforts.

Somewhat unintentionally, subsequent generations of public policy and public administration students became steeped in pessimistic diagnoses of government action and many similar studies followed. They included [Butler et al.'s \(1994\) \*Failure in British Government\*](#), 'Hart and Bovens' (1996) *Understanding Policy Fiascos*, and [Gray and 't Hart's \(1998\) \*Public Policy Disasters in Europe\*](#). More recent works in the same vein are [Allern and Pollack's \(2012\) \*Scandalous!\*](#), [Crewe and King's \(2013\) \*The Blunders of Our Governments\*](#), [Light's \(2014\) \*A Cascade of Failures\*](#), [Schuck's \(2014\) \*Why Government Fails So Often\*](#), and [Opperman and Spencer's \(2016\) \*Telling Stories of Failure\*](#).

These readings and research provide a firm analytical grounding of the institutional, behavioural, political, and media problems and dynamics contributing to the occurrence, framing, and escalation of public policy failure. But they also provided a distorted view of policy-making and policy outcomes as they largely ignored or downplayed the study of the other side of the success/failure coin, namely, policy success, its causes and consequences.

### **The Need to Study (and Learn from) Experiences with Policy Success**

The 'policy failure' discourse has been very influential. Day in, day out, media reports and social media discussions about alleged government failures perpetuate a negative frame on government activity, and much public and electoral discourse and partisan activity is obsessed with the naming, shaming, and blaming activities linked to rooting out and highlighting policy failures big and small. This practice, seen in many countries, was especially prominent in the United States from the Reagan to Trump era. It had significant implications for public perceptions and the lack of or under appreciation of government institutions which accompanied it. Although the success of public-led health efforts to control and stop the Covid-19 coronavirus has shifted some public views of government institutions in some countries, government failure and blame for errors in handling the pandemic has also been a prominent feature of political discourse in many others ([Greer et al., 2020](#); [Capano et al., 2020](#)).

Under the spell of high-profile scandals and other forms of ambulance-chasing, many public and media accounts of public policy still have little to say about instances where governmental steering efforts have been effective, generate benefits for all, remain popular and have stood the test of time, including in areas of activity such as healthcare, pensions, banking regulation, or infrastructure development. But as recent events around the coronavirus response serve to emphasize, such stories of endemic government failure ignore or neglect just as many, if not many more, cases from day-to-day to long-term policy-making where governments

succeed in creating and maintaining projects, programs, and services. In areas such as health, education, and social policy, for example, policies and programs in many countries have performed well, sometimes exceptionally well, often for decades or more, making their study and analysis of the factors driving or leading to success equally if not more important than deriving the negative lessons of occasional failure (see Bovens, 't Hart and Peters, 2001; McConnell, 2010a and 2010b; Moore, 2013; Goderis, 2015; Roberts, 2018).

The 'negativity' bias towards government (Hood, 2010) and related public discourses have continuously focused attention on the politics of blame, engendering and contributing to widespread and undeserved cynicism about the possibility of effective governments and governance. The net impact of the concentration on the downside of government failure and neglect of the 'upside' of government performance is that many observers and members of the public cannot properly 'see' and recall, let alone recognize and explain successful public policies and programs. In some cases these views have helped undermine the legitimacy of representative democratic institutions and contributed to the rise of anti-expert and anti-knowledge 'populist' politics, discourses, and actions (Stoker, 2018; Facchini and Milki, 2019; Moynihan and Roberts, 2021).

What is needed is a more balanced focus on both the 'light' and the 'dark' sides of the performance of our political and public sector institutions. This book is designed to help turn that tide and re-balance these efforts. It accompanies more recent studies of public policy successes such as McConnell's (2010) *Understanding Policy Success*, Compton and 't Hart's (2019) *Great Policy Successes*, and Luetjens, Mintrom and 't Hart's (2019) *Successful Public Policy* which all aim to help reset agendas for teaching, research, and dialogue on public policy performance.

Like those works, the present study systematically examines outstanding cases of policy success, providing a foil to those who neglect these cases and focus overly on errors and mistakes. It offers a series of close-up, in-depth case study accounts of the genesis and evolution of significant public policy achievements, across a range of sectors, jurisdictions, and time periods in Canada: a country generally regarded as having an effective and efficient government which has delivered high quality services to its citizens for over 150 years. By constructing detailed case narratives and overviews while systematically engaging with the conceptual, methodological, and analytical challenges of researching and debating success and failure in Canadian public policy, we hope the chapters in this collection will inspire a generation of teachers and researchers in policy analysis, and the public, to take policy success more seriously.

### The Canadian Case

Since its nineteenth century development as an outpost of the British Empire, successive national and provincial governments in Canada have progressively

carved out independent identities and policies for the populations within their jurisdictions. In so doing they have attained a high level of social and economic development operating within a set of governing institutions and practices envied by many (Lower, 1977; Hodgetts, 1955 and 1973).

Canada has long been regarded as among the world's most stable and progressive countries. Although not seen as a 'radical innovator', it often has been rated as one of the best places to live in the world, with strong governance traditions and public service institutions and a commitment to steady progress in public service delivery and social and economic development (Quirk, 2019; Goderis, 2015). Canadian political leaders and public service institutions are regularly consulted and asked to share insights with governments in the developing world and elsewhere due to the country's rich experience in public policy development and implementation (Dewitt and Kirton, 1983).

Although Canada lacks the strong anti-government sentiments found in neighbouring countries like the United States, as in many other countries, this record or success is often obscured by a focus on scandal and failure. This is especially true of the media and public sentiments which both have focused on scandals and failures, while the Canadian academic policy literature has not grappled directly with the issue of policy success, per se. High profile fiascos and scandals have all been widely covered in the media, been studied, and have entered the Canadian political and policy lexicon (Campbell et al., 2004; Allen and Doern, 2006; Free and Radcliffe, 2009; Trottier, 2018). In the recent past they include the cost overruns of the 1976 Montréal Olympic Games (Roult and Lefebvre, 2010; Todd, 2016); the tragedy of the Westray mine explosion in Nova Scotia (McCormick, 1998); the Mirabel Airport construction (Edwards, 2016); the Sponsorship Affair and 2004–06 Gomery Commission into political corruption in the federal Liberal Party and Prime Minister Jean Chrétien (Ruderman and Nevitte, 2015); the contaminated blood tragedy (Paquet and Perrault, 2016); the appalling treatment of Indigenous children in residential school care and their removal in the 1960s from their families and adoption into predominantly non-Indigenous families (Milloy, 2017); deep scandals in Canadian peacekeeping in Somalia (Dawson, 2007); persistent gender discrimination in the Royal Canadian Mountain Police (Bastarache, 2020); the implementation of the Government of Canada's Phoenix payroll system (Office of the Auditor General, 2018); and the province of Newfoundland and Labrador's investment in the troubled Muskrat Falls dam to name only the latest in a history of problematic resource mega-projects (Mathias, 1971).

Not surprisingly, as in other countries, such examples have contributed to the idea that governments are chronically incompetent, overly politicized, lacking capacity to deliver, and tending towards avoiding accountability (e.g. Scott, 1998; Schuck, 2014; and for Canada, Savoie, 2015). Although Canadians may have a less negative view of government and the public sector than found in some other countries, Canada nevertheless does have a history of neglecting or failing to pay

sufficient attention to many of the successful public policies enacted by its three levels of government.

Notwithstanding the high-profile negative examples cited above, most public projects, programs, and services in Canada perform well, and many are very successful and endure for decades with wide popular support. But these policy success cases are consistently underexposed in public discourses and understudied in the policy literature (see [Little, 2008](#), for an exception).

This volume provides an opportunity to rectify this neglect and analyse what is similar and distinctive about introducing and implementing successful public policies in one of the world's wealthiest economies, one of its most politically decentralized and regionally diverse federations, and one of its oldest continuous democracies.

### **Theoretical Framework: What Is Policy Success?**

In this volume, we adopt as our working definition the description of a successful public policy used by 't Hart and his colleagues in their 2019 volumes ([Compton and 't Hart, 2019](#); [Luetjens et al., 2019](#)). They situate policy success on a continuum between failure and total success. A policy at the success end of the continuum (a) demonstrably achieves highly valued social outcomes and has a broad base of public and political support for these achievements and the associated processes and costs; and (b) manages to sustain this performance for a considerable period of time even in the face of changing circumstances. A policy at the policy failure end of the continuum achieves neither (a) nor (b).

The conceptualization of policy success/failure as a continuum acknowledges that policy success (like policy failure) is not an either/or binary. As [McConnell \(2010b\)](#) notes, there are many 'grey areas' between total failure and complete success in which success is partial or contested and not endorsed or viewed as such by all participants. [Compton and 't Hart \(2019\)](#) and [Luetjens et al. \(2019\)](#) helpfully disaggregate policy success into four dimensions of programmatic, process, political, and temporal success. Their definition of policy success recognizes that many policies, including those which have endured for some time, may accomplish one or more, but not all four of these criteria of success (see [Table 1.1](#)). Some policies, for example, may achieve their identified programmatic goals but never achieve popular acclaim. Similarly, many may be quite popular but fail to be regarded by experts as effective or optimally efficient.

This situation is made more complex, of course, when public or expert opinion is divided on the criteria for judging policy success. Labelling a policy or a programme as successful depends upon the perceptions of the stakeholders involved, the positions they take, and the political environment. Public perceptions, political support, program legitimacy, and institutional reputations all come into play

Table 1.1 Dimensions of Policy Success: A Map for Case Assessment

Programmatic success: Purposeful and valued action	Process success: Thoughtful and effective policy-making practices	Political success: Many winners, firm support and reputational benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A well-developed <i>public value proposition</i> and <i>theory of change</i> underpin the policy</li> <li>• <i>Achievement</i> of (or, considerable momentum towards) the policy's intended and/or of other <i>beneficial social outcomes</i></li> <li>• The pleasure and pain resulting from the policy are <i>distributed fairly</i> across the field of institutional and community stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The design process ensures carefully considered <i>choice of policy instruments appropriate to context</i> and in a manner perceived to be correct and fair</li> <li>• The policy-making process offers reasonable opportunities for <i>different stakeholders to exercise influence</i> and <i>different forms of expertise</i> to be heard, as well as for <i>innovative practices and solutions</i> to be attempted before key policy choices are made</li> <li>• The policy-making process results in <i>adequate levels of funding, realistic timelines, and administrative capacity</i></li> <li>• The delivery process effectively and adaptively deploys (a mix of) policy instrument(s) to <i>achieve intended outcomes with acceptable costs, and with limited unintended negative consequences</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A <i>wide array of stakeholders</i> feel they could advance their interests through the <i>process and/or outcomes</i> of the policy</li> <li>• The policy enjoys relatively high levels of <i>social, political, and administrative support</i></li> <li>• Being associated with the policy <i>enhances the reputations</i> of the actors driving it (both inside and outside government).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Success over time: Consolidation and endurance</b></p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>High levels of programmatic, process, and political efficacy are maintained over time</i></li> <li>• <i>Stable or growing strength of social, political, and administrative coalitions favouring continuation</i> of the policy over time</li> <li>• Emerging narratives about the policy's success <i>confer legitimacy on the broader political system</i></li> </ul>		

in shaping whether a government policy, programme, or governance initiative is judged successful or not.

In short, ‘success’, like ‘failure’, is usually not a matter of indisputable fact. We can try to monetize or otherwise standardize costs and benefits of policy processes and outcomes, and we can set time frames and construct comparators across time and space to document our assessments. But there are also the lived realities and situated perceptions which mean that ‘where you stand depends on where you sit’, in the sense that different actors and stakeholders have different needs, desires, goals, and expectations and may disagree fundamentally—or marginally—about what a policy has achieved or failed to achieve. Moreover, the perspectives of actors on a policy may also vary greatly from a more macro ‘helicopter’ (e.g. ‘net benefits to society’) perspective to the more granular (‘inequitable distribution of costs and benefits to different groups in society’) vantage point. Such differences, of course, may also lead to stark differences in assessments and interpretations of policies and program outcomes (McConnell, 2010a and 2010b).

Thus, as McConnell, Grealy and Lea (2020) remind us, case studies of policy outcomes should go beyond ascertaining whether a particular program is viewed as successful from the point of view of the government that undertook it, to include the extent to which key actors within and outside government have been successful in shaping the program and reaping its benefits. In that sense, all policies and programs harbour particular configurations of success and failure depending on which and whose vantage points one uses in assessment.

In each case examined in this collection, then, many questions abound about policy processes, actors, and outputs. Successful in what regard, for whom, at which point in time, and relative to what benchmark? Successful in actually ‘doing better’ to achieve public purposes, or primarily in making the public ‘feel better’ through more effective framing? How do luck (context, zeitgeist, chance events, crises) or skill (political and public service craftsmanship in design, timing, political management, public relations) each play their part, and how do they affect one another?

## **Within Canada Case Selection and Volume Outline**

The aim of the book is to see, describe, acknowledge, and promote learning from past and present instances of highly effective and highly valued public policy-making, drawing on examples from Canadian experiences. Through detailed examination of 22 case studies of policy success that span different eras, governments, and policy domains in Canada, we hope to contribute to the broader literature on the conceptualization of policy success and to draw attention to how endogenous country-specific factors affect the prospects of policy success.

The case studies of highly successful public policy-making in Canada were chosen after canvassing dozens of public policy experts and former officials across the country, who were asked to identify cases they considered exemplary examples of successful Canadian public policies. These policy experts were provided with the definition of what constituted a successful policy and shown the lists of cases covered in [Compton and 't Hart \(2019\)](#) and [Luetjens, Mintrom and 't Hart \(2019\)](#) in order to promote possible comparative case selections where possible.

Following this process, the editorial team compiled a long list of well over a hundred suggestions for cases. This list was reduced by virtue of the requirement for policy successes to meet the consolidation and endurance dimension; public policy cases that were 'too recent' to be certain of their trajectory and fate were eliminated. The list of policy success cases was then further refined in order to attain variation between degrees of success: with some high-profile cases included where public policies persisted seemingly effortlessly over long periods, while other policies were included which were considered successes overall but nevertheless were contested, frayed, and required significant adjustments over time. We also decided to focus predominantly on national cases although many of these have a very strong provincial or regional dimension. However, given Canada's decentralized federal system of government, wherein provinces enjoy extensive autonomy and independence in many major areas of social and economic life, we also included examples of solely provincial, and in one case, municipal, policy success. More inevitably and pragmatically, the cases included in this collection were ones where Canadian policy experts were willing to author a chapter.

In each case study included in the book, the authors provide narratives and analyses using the same framework adapted by [Compton and 't Hart \(2019\)](#) and [Luetjens et al. \(2019\)](#) in their studies of Australia and New Zealand and other countries. This requires them to consider several factors and employ certain analytical perspectives in designing and reporting their findings.

Despite their differences in subject matter, approach, and coverage, two assumptions underpin each case study. First, building on [Bovens and 't Hart \(1996\)](#) and [McConnell \(2010\)](#), each author presupposes that balanced evaluation of policy success requires a multi-dimensional, multi-perspectivist, and multi-criteria approach to assessment. Second, following other longitudinal research in the policy sciences ([Sabatier, 1988](#)) each presumes that the success or failure of a public policy program or project cannot be properly assessed unless one looks at its evolution and impact over a period of at least a decade since it came into being.

The 22 cases found in the book can be grouped into six sectoral or thematic areas based on their central policy focus or topic. Three cases deal with *health policy successes*—from the nation's premiere flagship success in national health insurance or Medicare, to successful efforts to reduce tobacco use and municipal initiatives to deal with drug use in Canada's cities through supervised injection sites for hard drug users.



Four cases deal with *education policy successes* ranging from the development of the now standard system of Kindergarten to Grade 12 public schools to province-wide subsidized daycare and early childhood education, to the country's well-known and much admired post-secondary education system of Universities and Colleges.

Four other cases deal with *social policy successes*. These include the linked system of immigration and multiculturalism for which the country is often celebrated, as well as older programmes establishing effective pensions and schemes and the financial wherewithal to fund them through equalization payments and federal-provincial sharing of their costs.

Another four cases deal with successes in the *economic and industrial realm*. These include studies of the country's well-known highly stable and well-organized banking system and its lesser known but sometimes contentious system of agricultural marketing boards in key areas such as poultry and dairy products. It also includes two cases of successful government-initiated or supported product innovation in its world leading canola crop and similar, if smaller scale, efforts currently underway in the wine industry.

Three case studies examine *environmental policy successes*. They examine one of the oldest enduring and popular successes in the country's unparalleled system of national and provincial parks and its pioneering efforts, with the United States, to preserve and protect the water quality of the Great Lakes, and the more recent climate change mitigation measure of phasing out of coal-fired electricity generators in Ontario.

Each of these areas and subjects is more or less amenable to standard treatment applying the PPPE framework to a government policy effort within a given policy sector. However Canada, like some other countries, also has featured a series of successes within its *constitutional and administrative system of governance*, an area which has largely escaped detailed analysis in previous studies of policy success. These kinds of constitutional and governance-related policy successes include efforts with respect to claims of Indigenous Nations to lands and resources which predate the country. They also include federal government systemic efforts to reduce deficits and streamline the public sector ('programme review') including the 'privatization' of the country's main airports (and harbours). In the past decade, as well, Canadian administrative policy success was tested by the government of Canada's response to the economic and social fallout of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), and more recently, by ongoing efforts to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic.

In each case study the authors set out what the case is about and why the topic—whether a policy or program or project—should be included in the volume. In other words, they explore was its fundamental 'claim to success' in terms of the definition and the four assessment dimensions of Table 1 set out above.

Following the PPPE framework, the authors then examine the *programmatic* component of success by setting out what social, political, and institutional contexts are relevant to understand the framing, design, and execution of the policy. In providing a chronology of how the policy developed, they examine the history, fault lines, alliances, and opportunities that played into its origins and evolution. Authors also address what specific challenges the policy was seeking to tackle and what, if any, specific aims it sought to achieve.

Authors also address the ‘who’ of the programme, or its *political* dimension. Which actors were principally involved in the policy process, and which were most affected by its enactment and implementation? Who were the policy’s main advocates, entrepreneurs, and stewards? What drove them to take up these roles? How did they raise and maintain support for the policy? And which actors were opposed to it, skeptical about it, or trying to get it amended or terminated? What tactics did these actors/coalitions use? What if any ‘counternarratives’ to the success assessment have been offered?

The authors also look at the *process* dimension of success. How did the policy design process—the progression from ambitions and ideas to plans and instruments—unfold? What role did evidence/analyses play in this process? What, if any, innovative practices were employed and to what effect? How did the political decision-making process leading up to its adoption—the progression from proposals to policy decisions to budgets—unfold? And, in this constellation of actors, interests, design practices, political moves, and countermoves, when and how did a supporting coalition that helped carry the policy forward come into being?

Finally, each author also examines the *endurance* dimension of success by examining how the implementation process unfolded, and how it shaped the eventual reception and impact of the policy. Did the policy’s key components (goals, objectives, instruments, delivery mechanisms) remain intact over time? If not, what level of change (or abandonment) ensued, and how did it come about? How did the political and public support for the policy evolve over time? And, to what extent did the original coalition driving its adoption remain intact (or expand, or contract) and how did this affect its continuing success?

In their examination of the multiple dimensions of policy success, the chapters in the book comprise a salient mix of examples of successful public policy in Canada covering at least a decade or more. Each case study in its own right offers a powerful story about when governments get things right in important areas, and how this often happens. As such, each case study presents an instance of actors, institutions, and processes of public policy-making coalescing to positive effect. In our concluding chapter, we draw together the broader lessons that can be learned from the 22 case studies and which can help to offset the neglect of policy success and the over-emphasis of scandal and failure discussed at the outset of this chapter.

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