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The lessons of failure: learning and blame avoidance in public policy-making

Michael Howlett

Abstract

Recent studies by Hood have underscored the significance of the desire of decision-makers to avoid blame for poor policy initiatives, highlighting the importance to policy-making of learning about how best to avoid policy failure. This article examines several different concepts of policy failure in the literature on the subject, such as policy accidents, errors, mistakes, and anomalies, along with recent work by McConnell and his colleagues on the general types and sources of such failures. The article distinguishes between 'thin' (technical-strategic) and 'thick' (political-experiential) policy learning and links them to McConnell's three categories of political, programme, and process failures. The analysis points to the significant and underappreciated roles played by process and political problems in the analysis of policy failure and the need to draw lessons in these areas as well as in more technically oriented programme-related ones if the prospects of policy success are to be enhanced.

Keywords

policy failure, policy success, policy learning, blame avoidance, public policy

Introduction: policy knowledge and policy failure

What kinds of learning contribute to enhanced policy outcomes or 'policy success' and under what circumstances? Despite the plethora of work on policy learning in the policy studies literature over the past several decades, both the independent variables (those factors that drive or contribute to learning and non-learning) and the dependent variable itself (what it is that constitutes learning) are unclear and often mis- or underspecified in many studies on the subject (Radaelli, 2009). This has led to some confusion and, especially, some difficulties in compiling the results of various studies of policy learning into a coherent and consistent set of principles that can be applied to specific problem areas in order to develop better policies, that is, ones more likely to succeed.

Evaluating the existing literature on these two subjects (policy learning and policy success and failure) and better integrating them is the main purpose of this article. It moves the discussion of both subjects forward by examining and clarifying the logic and rationales behind several different

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conceptions of policy success and failure found in the contemporary policy literature and relating them to the different kinds of learning identified in that same literature and to the motivations of key actors and decision-makers in the policy process.

After identifying several common types of success and failure highlighted in existing case studies and comparative treatments, following McConnell (2010b) the article distinguishes between failures in terms of their source in the different political, programme, and process activities of government. Following Hood's conceptions of 'blame-avoidance' as a key motivator of decision-maker behaviour (2002, 2007, 2010) these three potential sources of policy failure are then linked to two different types of policy learning set out in the literature on the subject (Bennett and Howlett, 1992; May, 1992): 'thin' (technical-strategic) and 'thick' (political-experiential).

Linking policy learning and blame avoidance to the different dimensions of policy failure helps bring clarity to the discussion of these subjects and helps to situate policy learning better both as an exercise in technical knowledge acquisition and its application and as a 'deeper' phenomenon centred on drawing lessons about the policy process and political aspects of policy-making in order to enhance the potential for policy success.

Policy learning and blame avoidance

Studies of policy learning address the questions of 'who learns[?]', 'learns what[?]' and 'with what effect[?]' (Bennett and Howlett, 1992), but different theorists put these aspects of the learning process in government together in different ways. One common way in which learning has been conceived, for example, has been to assume that 'who learns' are government decision-makers, that 'what they learn' is scientific or social scientific knowledge of the objective nature of policy problems and their solutions, and that 'the effect of this learning' is better policies, that is, ones which are better able to solve the problems they set out to resolve. This is, for example, the 'rationalist' logic found or promoted in many studies of policy analysis and professional analysts in government (Meltsner, 1976); most recently, for example, in studies urging governments to utilize more 'evidence-based' forms of policy-making in order to design policy content better and improve policy outcomes (Nutley et al., 2007).

However, students of policy learning and policy success and failure must also take to heart the lessons of the large literature on knowledge utilization in government which generally downplays the impact of scientific and social science research on government decision-makers and decision-making (Oh and Rich, 1996; Radaelli, 1995; Rich, 1997). Studies of the use of research in policy-making over almost four decades, for example, have examined decision-makers' uses of scholarly articles, research reports, and other sources of technical or scientific knowledge and have found a much less direct role for this knowledge in policy-making than was, and still is, often assumed or expected by adherents to the rationalist 'school' (Landry et al., 2003; Rich, 1981; Shulock, 1999; Weiss, 1977, 1992; Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980). In almost all cases, decision-makers and policy formulators and implementers were found to seek out and use information in order to bolster previously developed arguments and positions rather than new positions or alternative strategies or courses of action (Caplan, 1976; Feldman, 1989; Whiteman, 1985a, 1985b). These findings are highly problematic for theories of policy learning which are based on the idea that the goal and impact of learning is the enhancement of policy outcomes through the systematic utilization of programme-relevant knowledge about natural and social processes (Bennett, 1990; Rose, 1993; Schneider and Ingram, 1988; Tenbensel, 2004).

One way to reconcile this apparent dilemma between policy-making theory and practice, and circumvent a prima facie reading of a simple lack of evidentiary learning on the part of policy-makers

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has been to resurrect Carol Weiss's argument (1977, 1986) that social scientific and scientific knowledge and information should not be construed as directly instrumental in nature, but rather as serving an 'enlightenment' function only indirectly affecting policy content; that is, that learning alters the context of policy-making rather than the specific content of policies themselves. However, evidence supporting this model requires a subtle, multi-year perspective and is difficult to compile. More significantly, in any event, it also suggests only a very weak long-term link between learning and outcomes, without any clear guidelines for specific actions that can be undertaken by a government wishing to enhance the short- or medium-term potential for the success of its policy undertakings.

A better way to reconcile this (non-)utilization dilemma is to embrace findings of the 'strategic' use of knowledge and incorporate them directly into existing models of policy learning rather than to reject them as incompatible with rationalist presuppositions about the proper role of knowledge in the policy process. That is, to suggest that policy learning occurs not on a single instrumental programme level, but on two: one linked to instrumental arguments about policy-programme content while the other is 'deeper' and more political-experiential in nature, affecting overall considerations about knowledge use which affect policy processes and the political components and environment of policy-making.

This conception of 'deep' or 'thick' political and process learning is a long way from Wildavsky's original proposal (1979), coined at the outset of the development of the schools of public policy and the professionalization of policy analysis, that policy analysts should 'speak truth to power' or bring carefully collected and refined programme knowledge to the political table as decision-makers struggle to puzzle their way through public issues and problems and adopt solutions to public problems. However, it is more compatible with the findings of most existing empirical studies into the subject.

As shall be discussed below, this twofold conception of policy learning is particularly congruent with the idea first put forward by Kent Weaver (1986) and more recently taken up by Christopher Hood (2010) that a primary motivator of much policy behaviour is the desire of decision-makers and implementers to emulate positive exemplars of successful policies and avoid negative exemplars of failed ones in a process of risk or 'blame avoidance'. That is, that decision-makers examine the practices of their own and other governments and draw lessons from those experiences about which policy options are most likely to attain success and avoid failure. Learning to avoid blame occurs not just in a technical programme sense of greater efficiency or cost savings or congruence with prevailing policy paradigms, but also in terms of being able successfully to negotiate policy and political decision-making processes. Learning and knowledge acquisition in this 'deeper' sense centres on the attempt to construct policies so that decision-makers may, if not always claim credit for policy successes, then, at least, avoid blame for their failure (Hood, 2002, 2010; Weaver, 1986).

This idea of 'thick' learning linking blame avoidance and policy success stresses and justifies the need for efforts on the part of administrators and decision-makers to develop clear(er) ideas about the sources of policy failure in specific aspects of policy-making activity in order to be able to identify and avoid those with a higher probability for failure, rather than just in the attempt to attain more 'optimal' programme results, the key policy goal behind notions of technical programme-related learning.

Existing conceptions of policy success and failure in the policy literature: subjectivist and objectivist constructions and dimensions

Clarifying the relationships existing between success and failure, and between different failure types in particular, is a necessary first step towards furthering the understanding of their causes and consequences, the impact they have on policy learning, and the ameliorative strategies

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policy-makers can adopt in dealing with their risk or threat. Until recently, however, determining what exactly constitutes policy success and failure has been a subject of some contention in the policy sciences (Grant, 2009), adversely affecting efforts to assess systematically the nature of policy learning directed towards enhanced policy outcomes.

One common thread in the literature, for example, has conceived of policy success and failure as purely relativistic constructions or interpretations. This is to view them not as objectively assessable outcomes of policy-making, so much as judgements which are inherently subjective or 'interest'-inspired statements made by different policy actors about some past, current or future state of affairs which lack the need for any objective status or characteristics which would make them susceptible to classification and further analysis (Howlett et al., 2009).

Other work, however, rejects such a purely relativistic perspective and has tried to differentiate more carefully between different kinds of policy 'success' and 'failure' and, in particular, between different kinds of failures, such as 'policy fiascos' (Bovens and t'Hart, 1996), 'governance failures' (Vining and Weimer, 1990; Wolf, 1979, 1987), 'policy accidents' (Cobb and Primo, 2003; Kingdon, 1984), 'policy disasters' (Dunleavy, 1995), 'policy catastrophes' (Moran, 2001), and policy anomalies (Hall, 1993).[1]

A common way to treat policy failures in this latter literature is as the reverse of policy success: in the sense that whatever does not succeed is a failure, so that observers are seen not as creating their own interpretive or discursive universe in a purely subjective way, but rather are rendering judgements about an actually existing state of affairs. McConnell, for example, defines policy success as the condition which obtains when a policy 'achieves the goals that proponents set out to achieve and attracts no criticism of any significance and/or support is virtually universal' (2010a: 351) and defines policy failure as 'a policy fails insofar as it does not achieve the goals that proponents set out to achieve and no longer receives support from them' (2010b: 62).

Such studies link judgements of success or failure to more or less independently verifiable claims made by various parties about specific aspects or attributes of policy outcomes such as whether the original objectives have been achieved, whether the policy has had a positive or negative impact on target groups, whether the problem it was intended to address has receded, and several other key dimensions of a problem area (see Table 1).

Such conceptions are useful in helping us understand the level of intensity of a perception of a success or failure, but they do not clearly identify the source of a policy failure nor define its content, but rather only the basis for claims which can be made about the nature of policy outcomes

Table 1. Criteria for Policy Success and Failure (after McConnell)

Basis of claim	Claim of success	Claim of failure
Original objectives	Achieved	Not achieved
Target group impact	Positive impact	Negative impact
Results	Problem improvement	Problem worsening
Significance	Important to act	Failing to act
Source of support/opposition	Key groups support	Key groups oppose
Jurisdictional comparisons	Best practice or superior performance	Someone is doing this better elsewhere
Balance sheet	High benefits	High costs
Level of innovation	New changes	Old response
Normative stance	Right thing to do	Wrong thing to do

Source: Adapted from McConnell (2010b: 106, 108).

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and their desirability. Other studies, however, suggest that policies can fail in numerous different ways and that it is important to understand how these failures differ from each other. These approaches have outlined several distinct parameters or components which enter into evaluations of policy outcomes and the factors and processes which lead to them.

Hood et al. (2000) noted, for example, that one important dimension of variation in failures (and successes) concerns its *extent*. Sometimes an entire policy regime can fail, while more often specific programmes or events within a policy field may be designated as successful or unsuccessful (Cobb and Primo, 2003). The most egregious cases are when an entire policy regime substantively fails and is universally acknowledged as such; that is, a failure which is typically very public and obvious to voters and the public at large. 'Extent' is the criterion used by Bovens and t'Hart (1995, 1996) in their studies of 'policy fiascos', for example, which they define in a limited way as related only to 'events' rather than to ongoing sequences of activities or to more systemic or institutional-level failures. For them, a policy fiasco is:

> a negative event that is perceived by a socially and politically significant group of people in the community to be at least partially caused by avoidable and blameworthy failures of public policymakers. (Bovens and t'Hart, 1996: 15)

This definition, of course, also highlights several additional dimensions along which policy failures can be seen to vary. A second, for example, is *duration*, with some failures being gradual and long-lasting and others short and sharp in nature, as with 'events' such as the soccer riots or fireworks explosions that Bovens and t'Hart (1996) were most concerned with in their work. This definition also highlights that there is an element of 'publicness' or '*visibility*' to failures. Prima facie, programmes and events which are less visible to the public are much less likely to earn public approbation than those which are highly visible (Schudson, 2006).

Several other important differentiating criteria are also present in this definition beyond extent, duration, and visibility, however. A fourth dimension, as shall be discussed further below, is the element of '*avoidability*', in the sense that blame and the attribution of failure is greater the more it might have been avoided, an aspect of the subject upon which Weaver (1986) and Hood (2010) have also focused attention. 'Unpredictable' and 'unavoidable' events can generate more sympathy for policy-makers than those which could have been easily predicted, and especially those which could have been easily predicted and averted (Brandstrom and Kuipers, 2003).

Fifth, this definition also highlights the need for some aggregate level of agreement within a 'community' on the assessment of failure. This presupposes that such assessments are not necessarily unanimous and the level of agreement of various actors about the extent and degree of policy failure will cause them to vary in *intensity*.

Finally, a sixth aspect implicit in this definition is that any government action can fail due to malfeasance, fraud, criminal activity, ideological intentions, conspiracies, and other kinds of self-defeating behaviour on the part of government officials and decision-makers as well as non-governmental actors. Some of these kinds of actions can be termed '*intentional*' failures (whereby, for example, members of an opposition party in a legislature introduce bills they fully expect to fail in order to embarrass a government) although many more are unintentional or 'accidental' ones (whereby an otherwise well-intentioned effort to promote improved childcare, for example, may be derailed by the fraudulent misappropriation of funds). Some such events are police or criminal matters, which can sometimes remove government policy-makers from blame, although failures in oversight can create situations for which they are generally held responsible (Merton, 1936; Roots, 2004). These six dimensions of policy failures or successes are set out in Table 2.

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Table 2. Six Dimensions of Policy Failures

Attribute	Range
Extent (size)	From large (regime) to small (event)
Avoidability	From low to high
Visibility	From low to high
Intentionality	From low to high
Duration	From long to short
Intensity	From low to high

Significantly, these six dimensions exist in a nested form, which reduces their variety and complexity. That is, a first, 'outer', level which can be distinguished relates to 'intentionality'. This dimension divides all programme failures into two groups: those caused by ill will or malevolence and those other unfortunate exercises which are a result of goodwill or good intentions turning out badly. While the former is a significant issue in many countries plagued by corruption and various kinds of governance and state failures (see, for example, Ascher, 1999; Brinkerhoff and Crosby, 2002; Eriksen, 2011; Tommasi, 2011), it is not one typically assessed at the level of 'policy' failures in developed countries where the goodwill and good intentions of state actors, or at least their desire to avoid being blamed for failures, is usually assumed and failures generally are seen as unintentional in nature (see, for example, Perrow, 1984). Avoidability is a second key dimension (about which more will be said later), but one which, as Hood, Weaver, and others have argued, continually motivates decision-makers in their efforts to deal with the ever-present risk of failure and which, in a sense, exists 'over and above' the four descriptive dimensions of extent, visibility, duration, and intensity. These latter dimensions are related to the temporal and spatial magnitude of a failure ('extent' and 'duration') and its salience ('intensity' and 'visibility'), allowing us to identify four basic types of unintentional and potentially avoidable failures which bedevil decision-makers and providing a good general taxonomy of these kinds of policy outcomes (see Table 3).

Using these categories, a policy area such as climate change, for example, can be thought of as a Type I 'major' failure, scoring very high on all the dimensions of policy failure highlighted above, and, of course, this is how it is often viewed; whereas problems within an area such as charities policy and the misuse of tax provisions, are a good example of typically low-intensity and low-magnitude failures. Others, such as long-duration, low-intensity anti-poverty policy failures, or more focused, but highly visible failures such as those surrounding riots at major sporting events are examples of the kinds which fall into the remaining two categories.

Table 3. Four Principal Types of Avoidable Policy Failures: Magnitude and Salience in the Unintentional Failure Space

		Magnitude (extent and duration)	
		High	Low
Salience (intensity and visibility)	High	Type I: major failure e.g. climate change (international treaty) policy failure	Type II: focused failure e.g. sports crowd control (riots) policy failure
	Low	Type III: diffuse failure e.g. anti-poverty policy failure	Type IV: minor failure e.g. policy service contract bid failure

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In many contemporary studies, these different aspects and types of failure are often poorly specified and incorrectly juxtaposed, and this conceptual confusion has stood in the way of cumulative theory-building into the causes and consequences of policy success and failure, and has contributed to problems related to understanding the relationship existing between policy outcomes and learning. These dimensions, however, are all primarily descriptions of specific types of policy outcomes and do not address the issue of why failures of different scales and types occur or, more significantly, how they can be avoided through improved knowledge-management processes or policy learning in government.

The different causes of failures and their implications for policy learning: unravelling the programme, process, and political sources of policy success

In his recent work, McConnell (2010a) has usefully argued that the origins of policy success lie in three aspects of policy which must be reconciled if policy success is to occur: the *political*, the *process*, and the *programme* aspects (McConnell, 2010b; Marsh and McConnell, 2010). As shall be argued below, this is an important insight into the nature of policy success which helps unify and clarify the existing literatures on both policy learning and failure while simultaneously pointing towards means and mechanisms through which common sources of failure can be avoided or overcome (Fawcett and Marsh, 2012).

Policy failure as a programme issue

Most extant studies of policy success and failure, such as those dealing with the kinds of examples cited in the discussion of Table 3 above, can be seen to have focused virtually exclusively on the *programme* level. That is, they involve the traditional notion that a policy, to be successful, must attain or exceed its original programmatic or technical goals, at roughly the same cost, with the same degree of effort, and within the same period of time as originally envisioned (McConnell, 2010b). In this view, as we have seen, policy learning has often been viewed as an activity within government related to the attainment of these technical aspects of policies and it is expected that management strategies such as the acquisition of more and better data and analysis can enhance the probability of policy success by reducing the risk of policy failure through poor information collection and use in policy formulation or implementation. As discussed above, however, this position rests on shaky empirical grounds in the assumptions it makes about knowledge use in government. However, this does not mean that it is without merit as an aspirational goal and certainly some common sources of policy failure lie in this programme dimension of poor policy design (Feldman, 1989; Meltsner, 1980).

Policy failure as a process issue

However, McConnell's analysis suggests that other dimensions of policy success also exist and must be addressed if failures are to be avoided and a second general source of policy failure identified by McConnell is the *process* failure. That is, policies not only can fail in substantive, technical terms (objectively or as perceived to be failing to deliver expected material outcomes) as is typically the case with programme failures but also in process terms – as simply being unable to proceed from idea to reality through the successful completion of the many stages of a policy process (Bovens et al., 2001; Brandstrom and Kuipers, 2003). In this process sense, as Lindblom (1959) noted more than half a century ago, a policy is often considered a success if it successfully navigates a complex,

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veto-point-filled and multi-actor approval process to creation and implementation, regardless of its actual ability to 'deliver-the-goods' in terms of its substantive programme effectiveness or efficiency.

While policy studies have focused on programme failures, studies in fields such as public administration, law, and public management have often identified process issues as sources of failure. The study by Dunleavy (1995) of a half-dozen UK policy failures in the 1980s and 1990s and studies by Moran (2001) of a series of policy failures in the UK ranging from rail privatization to construction overruns and the BSE crisis attribute blame to hubristic and overly quick decision-making, for example, and point clearly towards the idea of 'avoidable' failures linked to poor policy formulation and execution. Older studies focused on implementation problems, such as the kinds of red-tape and goal-displacement 'bureaupathologies' identified by students of implementation and administration such as Victor Thompson (1965), again stress the significance of process-related sources of policy failure. Popular commentators also often blame the failure of policies to attain their goals not on the technical or programmatic aspects of policy so much as on process-related factors such as the personality quirks of leaders and psychological limitations of formulators, decision-makers, or implementers (such as stupidity and venality on the part of politicians and administrators) or on organizational failings related to government decision-making and implementation (such as a pervasive 'bureaucratic mentality' preventing innovation and promoting inefficient implementation). More recent academic studies in this vein include, for example, studies of failures in European coastal zone management by Shipman and Stojanovic (2007), in the tourism industry in Australia by Michael and Plowman (2002), and of the USA's nuclear-waste-siting policy by Freudenberg (2004); all chronicle efforts at policy development which were launched successfully, but failed to come to fruition as policy processes rather than programme-related aspects of policy failed.

Howlett (2009) has grouped these kinds of process failings according to where they occur in the policy process. These include situations at the agenda-setting stage in which overreaching governments take on too many simultaneous initiatives (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993); at the formulation stage where they attempt to address 'unaddressable' or 'wicked' problems where neither the cause of a problem nor the solution to it is well enough known (Churchman, 1967) to generate feasible policy alternatives; at the decision-making stage where institutional venues designed for serial or seriatim processes may bog down policies (Jones, 1994) or where governments engage in log-rolling and other forms of bargaining behaviour which undermine the integrity of policy proposals (Andersson and Heywood, 2009; Treisman, 2007); at the implementation stage where governments take on the implementation of too many policies beyond their organizational capacity to provide results (Meier and Bohte, 2003); or at the evaluation stage where they fail to properly evaluate the results of their policies and thus fail to incorporate this knowledge into subsequent policy reforms (May, 1992; Scharpf, 1986) (see Table 4).

Significantly, these kinds of process failures are much less amenable to correction via 'shallow' or 'thin' technical learning than are programme failures. Rather, many process failures are related to institutional design and capacity issues such as organizational and human-resource capability and competences which, when lacking, lead to a failure to generate a policy or the generation of one which is either difficult to implement or whose limitations fail to be detected and altered, or both (Gleeson et al., 2011). Policy-makers and managers interested in avoiding common types of process-related failure can address some of the causes of failure set out in Table 4 through enhancing the capacity of policy actors or better designing policy processes and institutions. Putting in place and adequately resourcing formal systems of policy appraisal and evaluation (Russel and Jordan, 2007; Turnpenny et al., 2009) or the application of the precautionary principle and other

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Table 4. Common Policy Process Failures by Stage of the Policy Cycle

Agenda setting	Overreaching governments establishing or agreeing to establish overburdened or unattainable policy agendas.
Policy formulation	Attempting to deal with problems without investigating or researching problem causes and identifying the probable effects of policy alternatives.
Decision-making	Failing to decide on a policy within a reasonable period of time or distorting its intent through bargaining and log-rolling.
Policy implementation	Failing to deal with implementation problems including lack of resources, principle–agent problems, oversight failures, and others.
Policy evaluation	Lack of learning due to lack of, ineffective, or inappropriate policy monitoring and/or feedback processes and structures.

such heuristics (Sheingate, 2006), are good examples of the specific kinds of devices and procedures that can be developed in order to minimize many sources of process failure (Wolman, 1981).

Better management of policy processes is key here (Ridder et al., 2006; Wu et al., 2010), but has been little studied (Hicklin and Godwin, 2009). The solution for overburdened agendas, for example, lies in better institutional designs and management. Insisting that government intentions be clarified and made consistent with resource endowments at the formulation stage, and at the same time insisting that criteria for measuring policy goals are clearly specified and their rationales set out so that evaluation can proceed at a high level of sophistication, for example, can avoid many process problems (Anderson, 1996; Hawke, 1993).

Significantly for notions of policy learning, better appreciation of the nuances of process issues is what needed here, not more precise analysis of programme attributes or outcomes. That is, these improvements require the accumulation of 'deeper' policy learning linked to institutional and policy process design and transfer, not programme-oriented learning focusing on the technical programme characteristics of a policy (Banks, 1995). This kind of process-related learning has been significantly lacking in the case of many international treaty efforts, for example, where governments and international organizations have consistently overreached and overburdened policy agendas, consequently failing to move multilateral treaties to fruition. Lessons about these kinds of process-related failures and how they can be overcome are not amenable to programme-related technical learning, but are rather the subjects of a different kind of learning concerning the institutional and other contexts in which policies are formulated and implemented.

Policy failure as a political issue

The same is true of policies which fail less through programme- or process-related issues, but for political reasons. As has often been noted in the blame-avoidance literature cited above, policy outcomes have political consequences affecting the ability of parties and individuals to obtain or retain their positions in government and elsewhere in the political system. And, as social constructivists have noted, designations of policy success and failure are semantic or 'discursive' tools themselves used in public debate and policy-making processes in order to seek political, partisan, and often electoral advantage (Fischer and Forester, 1987, 1993; Hood, 2002; Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood, 2005). Policy failures easily translate into declines in electoral support and legitimacy (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002) and can result in the growth and success of rival parties and contestants for office even in non-democratic systems. The early academic literature on the subject of policy failures highlighted these negative political consequences of adverse policy outcomes on subsequent political evaluations

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and the fortunes of policy-makers (Ingram and Mann, 1980; Kerr, 1976; Wolman, 1981) and more recent studies have returned to this subject.

As Hood (2010) has noted, for example, considerations of the politics of policy failure focuses attention back towards, and highlights the significance of, the fifth and sixth dimensions of failure listed in Table 1: 'avoidability' and 'intentionality'. Bovens and t'Hart (1996: 76), also focused attention in their studies of policy failure on judgements made by the public about whether a government could reasonably have been expected to be able to foresee a problem and outcome and whether it could control any contingencies which arose as a programme was put into place (see also Elliott, 2009; Grant, 2009). Such evaluations depend on the imputation of degrees of intentionality of behaviour and outcome to government actors, which can be highly partisan and controversial all the more so since government intentions themselves can be, intentionally or otherwise, very vague and ambiguous, secret, or even potentially contradictory or mutually exclusive. Moreover, government policies take time to put into place and circumstances may change in such a way as to render moot initial government assessments of policy contexts and judgements of the severity of policy problems and the appropriateness of particular policy tools for their solution (Howlett et al., 2009).

Other examples of analyses which highlight the uncertainty and controllability of the political outcomes of government action as a key designator of policy failure include Allen and Gunderson's study of environmental policy failures (2011) and McConnell and Stark's analysis of the foot-and-mouth epidemic in the UK in the late 1990s (2002). Both studies found public and expert assessments of the level or lack of 'preparedness' of governments for dealing with a problem to form the basis for public and expert judgements as to the avoidability of undesirable programme outcomes and for the attribution of policy success and failure to the specific policy actors thought to be responsible for them (Ellig and Lavoie, 1995; McCubbins and Lupia, 1994).

It is the essence of the blame-avoidance literature that such attributions of blame are thought to have significant electoral or legitimation consequences for all policy participants and thus to be a key subject of policy learning (Flynn, 2011; Hood, 2002, 2007, 2010; Weaver, 1986). It has often been noted, for example, that judgements made by political actors about how and whether policies will rebound to their material or electoral fortune affect their judgements about the desirability of government continuing with or altering aspects of existing policies (DeLeon, 1988; Mayntz, 1983; Warwick, 2006). Kearns and Lawson's account of policy failure in housing policy in Glasgow (2009) provides a good example of how such dynamics work, as does the example of the discussion of the politics of climate change policy-making found in Corner and Randall (2011). These learning dynamics affect all manner of policy actors at all levels of government (see Table 5).

That is, policy proposals are rife with actual and potential negative political consequences for political executives and legislatures (see Table 5) and, as such, learning about this aspect of policy is at least as important as learning about technical programme impacts and process designs, if not more so. These partisan and electoral dimensions of policy success and failure featured prominently in discussions of the need for policy analysis to include overt judgements as to not only the programme and process aspects of policy alternatives, but also their political feasibility (Dror, 1969; Majone, 1975; Meltsner, 1972; Webber, 1986).

As was the case with process failures, a different kind of 'thicker' politico-experiential learning is required to take into account the political aspects of policy-making and avoid failures of this kind. Policy-makers must be able to draw lessons from their own and other jurisdictions' experiences with political assessments and experiences with similar policies in order to be able to understand better the political aspects of their own policy design space (Howlett, 2011). Better integration of political and administrative advice at all stages of the policy process through the use of political staffers and

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Table 5. Authoritative Actors Affected by the Political Aspects of Policy Failure

Location affected	Impact
Executive (leadership)	Negative policy evaluation undermines the credibility of the leader and ability to command support.
Legislative	Negative policy evaluation affects coalition behaviour and parliamentary support for the government.
Partisan	Negative policy evaluation affects political party loyalties and party member/activist behaviour towards leaders and others.
Electoral	Negative policy evaluation affects voter behaviour and support for the party/government/regime.

advisers, for example, is one mechanism through which political knowledge and learning can be enhanced in policy-making (Connaughton, 2010; Eichbaum and Shaw, 2008; Svara, 2006).

Conclusion: overcoming process and political policy failures through deep policy learning

Policies can fail to attain success in numerous ways, while as McConnell (2010b) has noted they can be judged an unambiguous success only in the single case in which success occurs across all three policy, process and political dimensions. This illustrates well part of the reason why agreement on policy success and failure is often difficult to obtain and why politicians and administrators are so highly sensitive to policy risks. That is, it is not just that these terms are inherently value-laden social constructions, but that in the six instances between unambiguous failure and unambiguous success, policies are at best *partially successful*, while also being partially failures, lending an inevitably complex risk component to both public and expert evaluations of overall policy and governmental success and failure.

May (1992), Walsh (2006), and Hood (2010), among others, have all noted how, due to the blame-adverse nature of policy-making behaviour, policy failure is a concept intimately linked with the core of public policy-making and is a major subject of policy learning among policy practitioners although, to a lesser extent, among scholars and students of public policy-making (Anheier, 1999; Hood, 2010; McConnell, 2010b; Peters and Hogwood, 1985; Wolman, 1981). As this article has set out, policy failures come in many different forms, types, and subtypes and distinguishing between them in terms of their characteristics and source of failure is a requisite first step in clarifying the relationship existing between learning and failure and in identifying the means through which they can be overcome. The different locations, types, and sources of programme, process, and political policy failures, their impact, and possible solutions are summarized in Table 6.

Each of the principal types of failure identified in Table 6 is amenable, at least in theory, to improvement in knowledge of political, process and policy behaviour and consequences and the enhanced identification and implementation of best practices that comes from taking these three dimensions of the subject into account; that is, through better policy learning. Not surprisingly, given the poor and confused state of policy studies into the condition of policy success and failure and the nature of policy learning, however, many previous studies and proposals in this area have not distinguished clearly enough between different types of policy success and failure and the conditions under which they are likely to occur, and, therefore, have not been as clear as they could be about prescriptions for avoiding failure and enhancing success. As the discussion presented here has shown, many analysts have focused on programme failures and prescribed technical learning

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Table 6. Policy Failures and Avoidance Mechanisms

Location of failure	Type of failure	Source	Impact	Examples of avoidance mechanism/solution
Programme	Technical, efficiency, and effectiveness related.	Failure to match policy goals and means.	Leads to an avoidable failure to deliver on expectations.	More data/research/ information and knowledge. Better theories and lesson-drawing regarding best programme practices.
Process	Agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making, policy implementation, and evaluation failures.	Overreaching or overburdened government agendas, poor policy formulation, failed decision-making, poorly resourced implementation, unsystematic evaluation.	Policies fail to complete the policy cycle.	Higher levels of policy advisory capacity (e.g. better training) and better management of processes and knowledge of institutional designs and processes.
Political	Executive, legislative, partisan, and electoral failures.	Adverse judgements of government competency and leadership capabilities.	Electoral defeat, delegitimation, and governance or governmentality failures.	Better integration of political and administrative advice at all stages of the policy process (e.g. through use of political staffers and advisers).

and have not dealt adequately with the equally significant process and political sources of policy failures and the kinds of learning best suited to them.

As proponents of evidence-based policy-making and improved policy analytical capacity have noted, technical learning and improved knowledge utilization can help offset or hedge against the risks of many programme-related failures. And policy-makers and managers interested in avoiding substantive programme failures indeed should devote more attention to policy research and implementation in order to improve their knowledge of possible programme outcomes and reduce uncertainty and risk in this area (Gleeson et al., 2011; Howlett, 2009; Peters, 1996). However, programme failings, despite being the main target of analysis and effort in the policy sciences, are only one of three possible sources of policy failure, and the other two (procedural and political failures) are much less amenable, if not impervious, to the kind of 'technical' or 'thin' learning best suited to programme failures and require a different kind of knowledge and analysis altogether.

That is, in order to learn appropriately, appropriate lessons must be drawn about the specific type of failures involved in past, present, and future policies and policy proposals, and about all of their programme, process, and political sources (Baggott, 2012). Without due attention being paid to potential process and political sources of failure, an emphasis only upon technical learning may not lessen, but in fact contribute to a continued lack of policy success; that is, repeating over and over again the errors of the past, often developing ever more precise and detailed programmes and plans with still little chance of overall success (Gunningham et al., 1998; Howlett and Rayner, 2004; Schultz, 2007).

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Note

1. Table N1 shows how several of the aforementioned types of policy failures identified in the existing literature can be understood to represent the cells of a matrix setting out the possible combinations and permutations of well- and poorly executed policy formulation and implementation.

   Policy accidents: whereby good plans are not executed properly.
   Policy mistakes: whereby good execution is wasted on poorly developed plans.
   Policy fiascos: whereby poor planning and poor execution lead to very poor results.
   Policy anomalies: whereby the most rigorous analysis and execution still did not result in the achievement of goals, against all reasonable expectations given an existing policy paradigm.

Table N1. Existing Policy Failure Designations as Subtypes of Avoidability Issues

		Theory and evidence used to formulate programmes and plans	
		Rigorous/well-accepted	Flimsy/disputed
Policy execution	Effectively executed or best practices	Policy anomalies	Policy mistakes
	Ineffectively or poorly executed	Policy accidents	Policy fiascos

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