Outlining Policy and Assessing Success of Policy

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Abstract

Government policy operates in response to the demands of society. Policy success, the general expectation of any policy-maker, is claimed commonly in political life. That is a general goal for any government in order to prove effectiveness and efficiency in its actions. However, the outcome of policies usually lies somewhere between success and failure. This is because of the three dimensions of policy success and their contradictions. Whilst policy learning is concerned as a tool to assess how policies are working and to move policy toward the achievement of desired goals. The case of banning plastic bags in Australia is an ideal example to investigate how a policy can be successful at different levels.

Key words: policy success, policy failure, assessing policy success.

Introduction

In societies, government policy operates in response to the demands of society. Policy success, the general expectation of any policy-maker, is claimed commonly in political life. Many countries, ranging from Australia, Singapore, Sweden, Germany, the UK, the US and Canada, have debated the success and failure of public policies, such as internet censorship, welfare cutbacks, pollution control and tackling climate change (McConnell, 2010b). Baldwin (2000) states that a concept of success is slippery due to human behaviour being purposeful, success being defined as desired or favourable results. Although policy-makers attempt to generate successful programs, it is a difficult and sometimes impossible process (Peters, 2015). However, while various policies are claimed to have been successful, many have failed. Partisan politics raise problems that depend on social circumstances and ideas (McConnell 2010a). That is, policies can be seen as successes by supporters or failures by critics. Peters (2015) shows that identifying policy failure is easier for citizens than policy analysts. For most citizens the idea of success or failure is more related to effectiveness and what the policies deliver. For policy analysts, assessment of policies is more complicated. Many authors (May, 1992 and Howlett, 2012) agree that policy can fail in numerous ways, such as the extent and

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duration of policy.

The claim of policy success has created the need for definition of a ‘successful policy’. However, the key problem in defining success or failure is the lack of any systematic criteria for assessment (Mash and McConnell, 2010). These assessments are narrowly focused on success meaning meeting policy objectives.

In addition, it is also acknowledged that policies may not result in either full success or complete failure. In fact, most results of policies often lie between success and failure. In this context, the evaluation of and learning from a partly failed policy requires studying the successful aspects of that policy. Policy evaluation, which is the last stage of the policy cycle, is often used by the government to assess how policies are working (Howlett et. al., 2009). Furthermore, one of the major purposes of evaluation is for the policy-maker to be able to learn from past mistakes or even past successes in order to be able to make subsequent policies better (Peters, 2015).

This paper will firstly discuss policy success. This will include the definition of policy success, its three dimensions (process, program and politics), and the different types of policy success. In the second part, the paper will examine policy learning to show how it benefits policies and policy-makers. The case study about the banning of plastic shopping bags in Australia will be used in the third part to integrate and compare all the ideas in the first and second part.

Understanding policy success and its dimensions

Defining policy success is not easy because assessing the results of policies is a subjective process involving the different interests of individuals and groups (Newman, 2014). In reality, the idea of complete success in policy-making is met rarely (McConnell, 2010a). However, it is accepted that some aspects of a policy may be successful. In order to understand how policies succeed or fail it is needed to comprehend the different dimensions of policy, which are process, program and politics (McConnell, 2010b).

Process is the traditional major concern of public policy analysts and examines how policies are legitimised through collective choices in the public interest. This also includes the policy making process which illustrates the creation of a specific or set of policies (McConnell, 2010). The process also refers to the adoption of a policy (Bovens, 2010). Program is concerned with the quality of the goals of policies and the generalised intentions of statements of policies. It is rooted in the traditional analysis of policy-making processes. Thus, it assesses policies based on their objectives and goal achievements (Bovens, 2010).

Politics refer to consequences of the policy decisions on the reputation and the electoral prospects of the politicians.

McConnell (2010a, p.351), based on the three dimensions, defines that ‘a policy is successful if it achieves the goals that proponents set out to achieve and attracts no criticism of any significance and/or support is virtually universal’. This definition of policy success shows that government can and sometimes does attain its goals even though not everyone will perceive the achievements of government as successful. This
definition also points out that there needs to be success in the three dimensions in order to be termed a 'successful' policy.

**Different types of policy successes**

The results of policies are not only seen as success and failure. Because the three dimensions of policy always have different results, hence, policy can be assessed and categorised into different types of successes. Ranging from success to failure, they are success, resilient success, conflict success, precarious success and failure (McConnell, 2010b).

**Success** can be considered as a government does, what it set out to do with major public support and hardly any opposition. This happens when the three dimensions of policy are successful. **Process success** is first of all the preservation of the government’s policy goals and instruments (McConnell, 2010a). Process refers to the five stages of policy-making, in which public issues emerge and are framed, options for these issues are created and explored, interests are consulted and decisions are made. Success occurs when the policy passes successfully the required procedures. In this context, it can generate ‘a considerable degree of legitimacy on policy outcomes, even when those policies are contested’ (Fawcett and Marsh, 2012). In this dimension, political executives want to see their core proposals become laws and success is seen as achievements of these proposals (Mash and McConnell, 2010). **Program success** occurs when the measures that the government adopts produce the desired results (McConnell, 2010a) and a policy is implemented according to objectives laid down when it was approved (Mash and McConnell, 2010). The nature of programmatic success is defined by the positive reflection from society to the results of policies. The analysis can consider the quantifiable benefits or saving resulting from the policy (Fawcett and Marsh, 2012). In addition, a policy program can also be successful if it benefits a particular actor, target group or interest based on issues such as territory, religion and gender. In this context, for example, in 2004 in the UK, civil partnerships legislation entitling gay and lesbian couples to legal recognition of their relationships can be seen as a success for Gay Rights (Mash and McConnell, 2010).

**Political success** provides significant political benefits and enhances the reputation of the government and political parties and assists both, the electoral prospects of politicians and overall governance projects (Fawcett and Marsh, 2012). A successful policy may help rescue the political party from low popularity or help consolidate its lead in the polls.

**Resilient success** is the second best result. Resilient success means that the government has achieved its policy in broad terms although the policy has required small modifications. Resilient programs are survivors although they have shortfalls.

**Conflict success** is a struggle for government. It achieves its goals of policy-making in some respects, but has to make significant modification along the way. Conflict success is not what the program intended. Proponents are troubled by substantial time delays,
considerable target shortfalls, reduced resources and failure of communication. The program generates substantial controversy, galvanising reviews and amendments from opposition parties and forcing the government into a defence of its core values and the aim of its program. Conflict success allows the government to partially achieve its goals, but it gets less than it desired in terms of result, and more than it expected in terms of opposition.

**Precarious success** operates on the edge of failure. Policies do exhibit small achievements, but the level of opposition and consequent departures from goals outweigh any success. Precarious success has some merit for proponents but falls well short of the original intentions with substantial controversy. Precarious political success is a substantial liability for the government, even if there are small benefits. The political benefits of retaining a policy are small, but the cost is great. Precarious success is often transient to failure and termination.

**Failure** is defined as ‘inability of a policy to achieve the goals that proponents set out to achieve, and opposition is great and/or support is virtually non-existent’ (McConnell, 2010a, p.356). This may include policies that have small success overshadowed by large scale failure. **Process failure** occurs when the government is defeated in its ambition to enact legislation or make a decision. Howlett (2012) shows that public administration, laws and public management are the sources of failure. This focuses on the ability to ‘deliver-the-goods’ through many stages of a policy process from the inception of ideas to reality. The failure of any stage (agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, policy implementation or policy evaluation) will lead to process failure. It may be a consequence of the mobilisation of opposition preventing the government from doing what it thinks desirable or it may be due to the lack of a sufficient coalition of interests necessary to achieve governmental goals. **Program failure** happens when the government fails to accomplish what it intended. Howlett (2012) shows that failure comes from the design of policy and its effectiveness; that although the policy may have been implemented well, its goals were of no value. In addition, the policy program was less effective despite costing the planned budget. **Political failure** refers to political consequences, negatively affecting the reputation of political parties and individual politicians, such as threatening the position of those politicians and political parties that sponsored the failed program (Howlett, 2012).

**Contradiction between dimensions**

The results of policy do not always have to be tidy. Different results may occur across the three dimensions of policy i.e. a policy can be more successful in one dimension than in others.

**Successful process and unsuccessful program**: A key concern of policy-makers is to get decisions taken and legislation passed by using executive power to steer the policy-making process toward its goals (McConnell, 2010a). Process success occurs when the government gets the policy it wants through the support of a coalition of interests. However, success at the process stages does not mean that success of the program is guaranteed. McConnell (2010b) shows that a poor understanding of societal checks and balances and a poor capacity for adjustment of policy goals and proposed instruments
Successful process and unsuccessful politics: Good processes do not often create successful politics. Due to the capability of agencies or local systems (for more specific, see Zahariadis and Exadaktylos, 2015), the image of policy and its creators can be drifted or on track.

Successful politic and unsuccessful program: The inference is that some policies can succeed in political terms, but fail in program terms (McConnell, 2010b). Political success sometimes necessitates programs that leave much to be desired in terms of tackling policy problems (McConnell, 2010a). For example, wicked problems are complex policy problems with no clear solutions. A compromise program for these kinds of problems may be a success for politicians, even though the programs may ultimately fail.

Successful program and unsuccessful politics: Programs which produce the results desired by policy makers do not always result in political success. Although the policy-makers run programs well, critics may frame the policy as ‘ruthlessly efficient’ and ‘inflexible’ (McConnell, 2010b).

However, as the nature of policy success is far more complicated (McConell, 2010b), it is necessary to combine many more factors rather than simply the success-failure spectrum to understand the success of a policy. There are two reasons that are considered as common complicating factors in assessing policy success.

Success for whom: A policy often benefits particular targets. Assessing a policy requires identification of the reaction of interest groups to that policy (McConnell, 2010b). Mash and McConnell (2010) state that the result of policy reflects power relations and are likely to be perceived differently by different individuals or groups. Therefore, some would claim that policy success is nothing but a social construct which reflects existing power relations.

Time, space and culture: Any assessment of success can only be applied to a specific moment. A policy that appears as successful in the short term may seem less successful after a longer period of time. On the other hand, some policies may fail at first place, but get success in the long-term. For example, the educational policies on migrants and minorities in the Netherlands had achieved its success after 30 years (Rijkschroeff et al., 2005). Moreover, depending on the political system, socio-economic and cultural conditions, policy success may be defined differently in different countries (Mash and McConnell, 2010).

Policy Learning

Policy learning is an important process in the context of policy success. Because it can help to improve the desired result of policy, move the less successful policy towards success. Bennett and Howlett (1992) show that, based on experience, policy-makers can modify their present policies and actions based on the interpretation of how the previous action had fared in the past. Learning occurs when new information, including past experiences and lessons, can be drawn as an important aspect of any form of
learning discussed in the policy literature (May, 1992). This happens not in a single instrument program but in two. One is linked to instrumental arguments about policy program contents, while the other, more political experiential in nature, affects overall consideration about knowledge-use, which affect policy process and political components and environment of policy making.

Policy learning is a primary motivation for much policy behaviour. It is generally associated with intentional, progressive, cognitive consequence of the learning that results from policy evaluation (Howlett et. al., 2009). It includes decision-makers understanding the intended and unintended consequences of policy-making activity. In addition, the implementing agencies need to understand the positive and negative implications of existing and alternative policies to evaluate both positive and negative examples of policies (Howlett, 2012). Policy learning can avoid repeating mistakes and move policy implementation even closer toward the achievement of desired goals.

Learning can be distinguished from automatic copying and mimicking behaviours. May (1992) shows that learning improves understanding as reflected by an ability to draw lessons from positive and negative experiences with policy problems, objectives and interventions.

There are different interpretations of what is meant by policy-learning. Hall (1993) states that learning is a part of the normal public policy process in which policy-makers attempt to understand why certain initiatives may have succeeded whilst others failed. On the other hand, Heclo (1974) shows that policy-learning is seen as an activity undertaken by policy-maker mainly in reaction to change in the external policy environment. The differences between Hall (1993) and Heclo (1974) result from the different kinds of evaluation (Howlett et. al., 2009). These two different types of evaluation are instrumental learning and social learning.

**Instrumental learning** entails new understandings about the viability of policy interventions or implementation designs. Policy-makers have to increase their understanding of different policy instruments or designs to avoid the inflexible copies. In principle instrumental learning could be facilitated by incorporating learning into policy designing.

**Social learning** involves either a new or an adaptation of the social construct of the policy by the policy-makers within a given policy domain. This learning does not require individuals or organisations to find out what will improve policy, but focuses on changing the view of policy-makers (Hall 1993). Social learning entails rethinking the fundamental aspects of a policy which relate to problems, interventions and objectives and the conflicting opinions of experts. The principle contribution of social learning is to draw attention to the role of ideas in policy-making. To attain policy success, decision-makers must understand why certain initiatives in a society may have succeeded whilst others have failed (Bennett and Howlett, 1992).

Bennett and Howlett (1992) show that to increase the effectiveness of policy-learning, it is necessary to identify who has to learn and what needs to be learnt. Bennett and Howlett (1992) also show that learning is an activity that can take place, both at the
individual and organisational levels, both of which play important roles in the generation, dissemination and evaluation of policy ideas. Bennett and Howlett (1992) also state that there are three indicators of learning. These are an increasing capacity for recognising differences, for organisational and hierarchical integration, and for reflective thought on the choice of structuring principle. In addition, policy-makers have to be aware of past and present experiences and future possibilities in order to reduce dissatisfaction with the existing policy.

CASE STUDY

THE BAN ON THE PLASTIC SHOPPING BAGS IN AUSTRALIA

Summary of the trend

During the past decade, legislation to ban or severely restrict the use of plastic bags have been legislated at a number of local, state and federal levels. There has been a rapid and worldwide emergence of opposition to the use of plastic bags. This opposition has been incorporated into policy and has given rise to new insights about the dynamics between norms of adoption and implementation of policy.

Plastic bags were introduced in the US in the 1970s, then in the Western Europe in the 1980s and in developing countries in the 1990s. There are between 500 billion to 1500 billion plastic bags used each year (Clapp and Swarnston, 2009). However, only a tiny percentage of them are successfully recycled. Plastic bags are increasingly seen as an environmental hazard that threaten human and animal welfare, because of their physical and chemical characteristics. There are some significant problems that plastic bags have created for the environment. Firstly, they create unsightly litter in public spaces, exacerbated by their light weight and parachute shaped design which enables them to travel easily through the air and in water. Secondly, they pose a public health and safety threat because they can act as breeding grounds for malarial mosquitoes and can block sewers and storm-water drains. Thirdly, they pose threat to wild-life which may become tangled in and may also ingest them. Fourthly, when plastic bags do break down, they are not biodegradable but photo-degrade into smaller pieces, and have long-term effects on quality of soil and water.

The early wave of the policy of banning plastic bags in a number of countries in the developing world was based on the primary concerns for human health and livelihoods. Following the initial emergence of the opposition to plastic bags, several rich industrialised countries began to adopt this policy. Up to 2011 at least 25 percent of the world population lives in areas with bans or fees placed on the use of plastic bags. In many countries, new industries have been established to recycle plastic bags (Department of Environment and Heritage Protection (DEHP), 2016).

The ban on plastic shopping bags in Australia

In Australia, Smith (2004) estimated that 6.9 billion plastic bags are used per year. Supplying plastic bags cost Australian retailers millions of dollars annually. This price is built into the cost of products and applies for all customers regarding whether they use plastic bags or not (DEHP, 2016). The concern about plastic bags focuses on littering,
particularly along the coast line, and the hazards that plastic bags pose for marine animals. In addition, the Australian government, local governments and departments of transport have to spend money to clean the plastic bags and other types of litter (Clapp and Swarnston, 2009). The Australian government adopted a voluntary reduction program and undertook a major study on the issue. In 2003, the Environment Protection and Heritage Council was committed to phasing out lightweight, single-use plastic bags by January 1, 2009 (DEHP, 2016). Meanwhile, a number of states took their own initiatives to ban plastic bags: South Australia in 2009, Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory in 2011, Tasmania in 2012. The remaining states are still preparing their own banning policy.

The South Australian Government’s Plastic Shopping Bags (Waste Avoidance) Act, 2008 legitimised the ban of plastic bags starting in May 2009. The ban on lightweight single-use plastic bags has been highly effective at reducing its supply from South Australia and has induced consumers to use alternatives to plastic shopping bags (ACT Government, 2014). Most consumers bring their own bags when shopping and attempt to re-use all types of bags. The waste stream data from Keep Australia Beautiful indicate a significant 45 percent decrease in the percentage of lightweight single-use plastic shopping bags contributing to the litter stream in South Australia (Aspin, 2012). The ban led to the widespread increase of reusable bags and encouraged the idea of extending the ban to include heavy and thick plastic bags. However, as people can no longer use plastic shopping bags to line rubbish bins there has been an increase in the purchase of plastic bin liners, from 15 percent to 80 percent; this is an unseen negative consequence of the policy. This will still affect the environment and may negate the success of the ban. This requires further education regarding use of plastic bags and the influence of choice of bags on the waste-stream and environment (Aspin, 2012).

In the Australian Capital Territory, the Plastic Shopping Bags Act, 2010 was implemented in 2011 to restrict the supply of plastic bags for shopping and the other purposes. This ban has led to the reduction of the plastic material going to landfill, successful in reducing the incidence of plastic bags as litter and has attracted support from most shoppers (DEHP, 2016).

However, the Northern Territory’s Environment Protection (Beverage Containers and Plastic Bags) Act, 2011 and the Tasmanian Plastic Shopping Bags Ban Act, 2013 have shown only variable success in reducing plastic litter (ACT Government, 2014).

Some states have not implemented this policy, but have responded to this idea. In the state of Victoria, it was proposed in 2009 that the ‘free plastic bag’ would be banned from 2009 and a 10-cent fee per bag would be charged to retailers who wished to distribute them (Clapp and Swarms, 2009).

In 2015, the Queensland government committed to investigate possible restrictions on single-use plastic bags. This plan aims to reduce the amount of plastic entering the environment (DEHP, 2016). Three instruments, a voluntary reduction measure, banning plastic bags, or requiring a charge for plastic bags, are considered for use. The Queensland government is still learning from international and national experience how to prepare more carefully, for the ban will be implemented in 2018 (DEHP, 2016).
In New South Wales, the plan for implementing the banning of plastic bags aims to reduce the environmental effects of plastic litter, to reduce the consumption of plastic bags and to recover the environment (Environment Protection Authority, 2016). The number of options considered for banning follows the South Australian experience of banning the high density polyethylene bag, banning the lightweight bags and banning all types of handled plastic bags. As per the learning results, the New South Wales government determined that educational campaigns can be effective when implementing their proposed program with other tools such as environmental warnings and labellings to provide information and to change the behaviour of the community.

Assessing the banning of plastic shopping bag policy in Australia

The policy of banning plastic shopping bags in Australia can neither be seen as a failure nor a success. This policy shows firstly the responsibility and accountability of Australian government to the demands of society about the protection of human health and the environment. Secondly, it shows the response to the international trend.

In terms of the three dimensions of policy, this policy has achieved some successes. For the process dimension, the banning policy attracted public interest and was legitimised at the national government level, and by some state governments. This can be seen as a success for those States which implemented the ban on the use of plastic bags, although at the national level it cannot yet be called a success.

In the program dimension, this policy has aimed at the target of reducing plastic litter in the environment. It can be seen as successful in South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory where the desired results met the goals. Mackle (2016) shows that, for environmental policy, the claim for success is supported by data. However for the other States which have not yet implemented it, this program can be seen as neither a success nor a failure. This is the same status as at the national level.

For the political dimension, this banning policy is supported not only by the whole political system but also by society, which includes consumers, retailers and other stakeholders.

Conclusion

Assessing a policy may be complicated. That is because a policy rarely has fixed criteria for measuring its success or failure and can be applied regardless of time and place (Mackle, 2016). The assessment is enhanced by understanding of the three dimensions involved: the process, program and politics of policies. These dimensions will provide a clear view of how policies either succeed or fail. Moreover, policies may not either be a complete success or complete failure. The different aspects of the three dimensions can be used to define the variations between success and failure which include resilient success, conflict success and precarious success. In addition, because assessing policies is predominately subjective, a policy needs to be set in its particular context and the beneficiaries identified. This will help in better understanding those areas and targets in which the policy has been successful.

Policy-learning is important to the success of policy-making. It can improve the results
of even the less successful policy. Through instrumental and social learning, the policy-makers can draw lessons from both failed and successful policies, from past and current experience and from the different jurisdiction systems. In order that policy-learning is successful it is necessary to identify who needs to learn and what will be learnt for any particular policy. This will enhance knowledge of the process, program and politics required for the best practice of making and implementing policies.

The policy of banning the plastic shopping bag in Australia has demonstrated some key factors for success in establishing a policy. Firstly, this ban was supported and approved across the Australian Federal Government and States and Territory Governments. Secondly, the ban has good goals and results which are a response to the demand of society against the impact of plastics on the environment and human health, as well as reducing the financial cost to governments. Although the implementation of banning plastic bags has differed between Australian states (some jurisdictions adopted an outright ban while others tried to limit ban, tax and adopt voluntary measures), the results have been valuable. Finally, the reputation of the government has had a positive reaction and as a consequence, the support of communities. The success of this policy in some states has also created lessons by which the other states can learn for their future implementations of this policy. At present, this policy can be seen as a success at the state level, but from the national viewpoint, the policy has not yet been implemented fully. Thus, the Australian Government cannot yet claim that this policy has been fully successful.

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