

## Book Review: Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis

Mallory E. Compton and Paul 't Hart (eds) (2019) *Great Policy Successes: Or, A Tale About Why It's Amazing That Governments Get So Little Credit for Their Many Everyday and Extraordinary Achievements as Told by Sympathetic Observers Who Seek to Create Space for a Less Relentlessly Negative View of Our Pivotal Public Institutions*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.

The title of this edited volume is a sure sign that it is aiming to be a landmark piece of work. *Great Policy Successes* takes its cue from and flips around, Peter Hall's 1981 book *Great Planning Disasters*, while the subtitle is inspired by Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky's seminal 1973 book *Implementation* with its 42-word sub-title. In essence, this volume is rooted in the traditions of classic works of public policy, but it also seeks to deliver something new. It offers an antidote to our obsession with policy blunders, fiascos, disasters and other such descriptors that seek to focus our attention on government failures. Certainly, the editors are not in denial about the pathologies of government, but instead they offer a refreshing reminder that governments can, at times, get it 'right'.

As the editors indicate from the outset, policy success is a tricky phenomenon to grasp. Much as governments often like to provide data-based and rhetorical certainty, the reality is that it is difficult to escape the significant role of interpretation. One person's success can be another's failure, if there is no underlying agreement on the nature and causes of policy problems and the values (and tools) being used to address them. In the Introductory chapter, Compton and 't Hart helpfully provide something of a roadmap to alert us to key

aspects of success. While recognising the success is the product of the policy craft of devising and implementing policies, they also recognise that success is a product of political work – of alliance building, persuasion and so on. They identify four main forms of assessment that help us approach the tricky issue of policy success. These focus on the program (the classic outcomes and outputs of public policy), processes (from design to program management), politics (such as reputational enhancement for policy makers) and endurance (success over time).

The book follows through on these issues with fifteen academically ‘crowd-sourced’ success stories in countries such as Brazil, Singapore, Estonia, Australia, Germany and Norway. The logic here is not one of rigid case comparison nor of identifying causal mechanisms. Rather, and sensibly for such a fledgling area of study, it seeks to document, understand and problematize a series of appropriate and interesting cases in ‘one place’.

All the cases studies are highly illuminating and far from indentikit. Some successes were borne out of adversity (or at least the potential threat of it) such as Singapore’s health policy reform in the face of demographic changes, and the Netherlands’ adaption of its Delta flooding regime to cope with the potential impacts of climate change. Others were the product of opportunity, such as the digital transformation of Estonia once the country was free from Soviet rule. Others still were characterised by centrally-driven top-down measures, such as NHS waiting times in the UK and economic reform in New Zealand. Furthermore, many reforms were the product of years of work spanning different governments, such as Brazil’s anti-poverty cash transfers program and the revitalisation of Melbourne into one of the world’s most liveable cities. Others were characterised by high

politics, such as Finland's comprehensive schooling as embedded in a left-leaning ideological commitment to a comprehensive welfare state, contrasting with the Dutch Delta program where a commission of experts studiously helped defuse a potentially polarising issue i.e. climate change.

The book does not seek to discover a magical formula for policy success or subscribe to a general explanatory theory of policy success. Its focus is far more on providing a roadmap to help us think about what success looks like and (if we can) think about 'mid range' explanations that are contextually sensitive but deal with factors such as concentration vs. dispersal of power, and political ideology vs. expert input. The fifteen showcase chapters bring such issues alive. In all chapters there are clues (very different, as we might expect) to what has driven success. They range from the inclusive deliberative processes that were the hallmark of Copenhagen's urban planning reforms, to tobacco control in the UK that was the product of a coalescence of evidence, changing health policy frameworks and fortuitous timing.

There is much to learn from this highly recommended book but every reader will find something different within its covers. The editors and contributors have 'done the work', but ourselves as readers (and where appropriate future researchers) need to think through the implications for our own areas of interest. Those wanting more can follow through via the 2019 companion volume *Successful Public Policy: Lessons From Australia and New Zealand*, edited by Joannah Luetjens, Michael Mintrom and Paul 't Hart and published by ANU Press/ANZSOG. Both are available via open access, helping spread the word that even although our attention is often focused on policy failures, 'getting it right' does happen.

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