Walk on the bright side—what might we learn about public governance by studying its achievements?

Mallory Compton, Scott Douglas, Lauren Fahy, Joannah Luetjens, Paul 't Hart, and Judith van Erp

Mallory Compton, The Bush School of Government & Public Service, Texas A&M University 4220 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-4220, USA, mallory.compton@tamu.edu

Scott Douglas, Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, Bijlhouwerstraat 6, 3511 ZC, Utrecht, The Netherlands, s.c.douglas@uu.nl

Lauren Fahy, Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, Bijlhouwerstraat 6, 3511 ZC, Utrecht, The Netherlands, l.a.fahy@uu.nl

Joannah Luetjens, Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, Bijlhouwerstraat 6, 3511 ZC, Utrecht, The Netherlands, j.c.luetjens@uu.nl

Paul 't Hart, , Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, Bijlhouwerstraat 6, 3511 ZC, Utrecht, The Netherlands, p.thart@uu.nl

Judith van Erp, , Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, Bijlhouwerstraat 6, 3511 ZC, Utrecht, The Netherlands, j.g.vanerp@uu.nl

Abstract:

Governments today often perform demonstrably well on many fronts, much of the time. Yet, their accomplishments are taken for granted or overshadowed by their shortcomings. The public, the media, and even the public service itself are collectively predisposed to notice government failures over successes. A focus on failure, breakdown and crisis helps us to hold power to account, and to learn how to avoid malperformance. However, turning that focus around can help us to identify and interpret practices that are worth learning positive lessons from. To move beyond best-practices requires the development of new assessment tools. In this article, we propose conceptual frameworks and methodological strategies that aim to assess and interpret governance success *in-situ* and with an appreciation for complexity.

Impact Statement:

The goal of this article is to identify evidence-based building blocks for smart and sensible practices of policy design, public leadership and management, while recognising that universal templates for success are not the right approach. It is critical that strategies to improve governance show appropriate sensitivity to context. We offer an alternative for high-level assessments of institutional qualities of 'good government'. Instead, we offer a practical toolkit to identify, assess, interpret, and learn from instances of public policy successes, highly successful public organisations, and collaborative, networked governance.

Keywords:

Successful public governance, positive public administration, performance measurement, public policy, collaborative governance

'Doing better, feeling worse': the perennial paradox of democratic governments. Governments today perform demonstrably well on many fronts, much of the time, and often better than ever before. Yet, their accomplishments are taken for granted or overshadowed by their shortcomings. An important reason is the deep-seated negativity bias influencing perceptions of their performance (Marvel, 2015), amplified through mechanisms of monitorial democracies (Keane, 2018). Watchdogs, lobbyists and oppositions use of the data offered by governments to point out follies and failures.

This emphasis on fault finding arises mainly through media scrutiny, political opposition, complaints procedures and the court system. These are, after all, mechanisms designed to hold government to account. Success-finding mechanisms, by contrast, are much less developed (Luetjens and 't Hart, 2019). Mechanisms to recognise and reward success reside mainly within professional bodies – e.g., through rankings, ratings and awards competitions. Thus, the deck is stacked. The public, the media, and even the public service itself are collectively predisposed to notice government failures over successes.

Public governance scholars have built up a rich language persuading us just how difficult it is to govern well, particularly in late modernity. We are told about the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, wicked problems and crises of 'the new normal'. And about the inherent tensions, conflicts, constraints, and unintended consequences of government action (King and Crewe, 2014; Schuck, 2014; Savoie, 2015). There has been less engagement with what can be learned from governments' pivotal achievements (Goderis, 2015; Roberts, 2018).

If formal and informal monitorial institutions are biased towards finding failure, and much scholarship is focussed on failure as well, then there is a real danger that a hegemonic discourse of disappointment and disenchantment becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We believe it is high time for more students of public governance and management to lean against these tendencies. A focus on failure, breakdown and crisis helps us to hold power to account and to highlight what practices of policy design, decision-making and public management had better be avoided. However, turning that focus around by developing conceptual and methodological tools can help us identify and interpret practices that are worth learning positive lessons from.

This is what we have attempted to do in our ERC-funded 2016-2021 research program 'Successful Public Governance' at Utrecht University: developing a language, assessment tools, and repository of cases of 'positive deviance' in the ocean of public policies, organizations and collaborations that together constitute how a particular polity or sector is governed. Our efforts are part of a wider push by authors across the world for a 'positive public administration' which is "devoted to uncovering the factors and mechanisms that enable high performing public problem-solving and public service delivery; procedurally and distributively fair processes of tackling societal conflicts; and robust and resilient ways of coping with threats and risks" (Douglas et al, 2019).

Though the ultimate goal of the endeavour is to identify evidence-based building blocks for smart and sensible practices of design, leadership and management (Nielsen et al., 2015; Rutter et al., 2012; Van Erp et al., 2019), universal templates for success are not the right approach. A 'measure what works, then copy what does' approach (e.g., Barber, 2015) is devoid of sensitivity to context. We propose conceptual frameworks and methodological strategies that aim to assess and interpret success *in-situ* and with an appreciation for complexity. Our research has been guided by two key questions:

- How is 'success' in public governance defined and assessed by those who engage in it (policymakers), those who experience it (stakeholders, citizens), those who assess and evaluate it (professional and investigative bodies) - and can it be meaningfully studied by academic researchers?
- Based on this, how can we meaningfully identify, assess, interpret, and learn from instances of (both mundane and high-profile) public policy successes, highly successful public organizations, and collaborative - horizontal, interactive, networked, joined-up - governance?

As these questions make clear, rather than focusing on the high-level, foundational, institutional qualities of 'good government' (e.g., Holmberg and Rothstein, 2012), we have chosen to get into the weeds of specific cases of success - public policies, programs, collaborations and agencies.

These efforts have been guided by shared conceptual frameworks and assessment tools to allow for transparent, systematic and nuanced analysis. For example, there is now an open-access repository of coded cases of collaborative governance (n=45) allowing for both qualitative and quantitative forms of focused comparison (www.collaborationdatabase.org, Douglas et al., 2020). Also to identify, assess and interpret instances of policy success, we have built on McConnell's (2010) pioneering work to develop a 4-dimensional assessment framework covering *programmatic* (ends-means-impacts)*, process* (fairness and smartness)*, political* (legitimacy and support) *and endurance* (temporal and adaptive) criteria (Compton and 't Hart, 2019). As Table 1 implies, it allows analysts to identify different degrees of success on these criteria over time, and to identify where such success is conflicted (e.g., a programmatically 'good' policy that is politically precarious) and resilient (breadth, depth of support; duration of programmatic success). It also enables analysts to map the criteria and arguments employed in the claims-making of different policy actors and formal as well informal evaluators.

Table 1: Dimensions of Policy Success: An assessment framework

Programmatic success: Purposeful and valued action	Process success: Thoughtful and effective policy making practices	Political success:

		Many winners, firm support and reputational benefits
• A well-developed *public value proposition* and *theory of change* underpin the policy • *Achievement* of (or, considerable momentum towards) the policy's intended and/or of other *beneficial social outcomes* • The pleasure and pain resulting from the policy are *distributed fairly* across the field of institutional and community stakeholders	• The design process ensures carefully considered *choice of policy instruments appropriate to context* and in a manner that is perceived to be correct and fair • The policymaking process offers reasonable opportunities for *different stakeholders to exercise influence* and *different forms of expertise* to be heard, as well as for *innovative practices and solutions* to be attempted before key policy choices are made • The policy-making process results in *adequate levels of funding, realistic timelines, and administrative capacity* • The delivery process effectively and adaptively deploys (mix of) policy instrument(s) to *achieve intended outcomes with acceptable costs*, and with limited unintended negative consequences	• A wide array of stakeholders feel they have been able to advance their interests through the process and/or outcomes of the policy • The policy enjoys relatively high levels of social, political and administrative support • Being associated with the policy *enhances the reputations* of the actors driving it (both inside and outside government).

Endurance success:
Consolidation and adaptation
• *High levels of process and programmatic performance are maintained* over time through timely adaptation of instruments and practices. • Stable or growing *strength of social, political and administrative coalitions favouring continuation* of the policy over time • Emerging narratives about the policy's long-standing success *confer legitimacy on the broader political system*

Source: adapted from Compton and 't Hart (2019).

What can be learned from looking at the 'bright side' of public governance in this fashion? We provide some brief *canapés* of our emerging insights on organizational and policy success.

On organizational successes – Boin et al (2020) offers 12 case studies of public organizations that have become and remained widely respected public institutions – including CERN, India's Electoral Commission of India, Singapore's anti-corruption agency, the BBC, and the European Court of Justice. Our studies show successful public organizations do not shy away from working through the conflicts they need to have. Our case studies suggest they have

learned to become good at reconciling competing values, interests, and constituencies. Enduringly successful organizations gradually move from 'great' men and women - and their top-down leadership - to more collegiate and consultative forms of governance that better allow them to adapt to changing contexts. Rather, successful organizations have *evolved structures and processes to harness difference and disagreement in ways that make them smarter and stronger*.

For example, CERN developed a form of shared leadership between its physicists, engineers, and national science ministries' bureaucrats on its board. This allowed it to evolve resilient norms and practices of 'balance-seeking' in its governance: between funding member states and the spending CERN administrators; between small and large contributing nations; between the scientists' advances in fundamental physics and the engineers' development of the technological tools required to test them; between the patience required to do the work necessary to achieve major scientific breakthroughs and the need to be seen to be active, relevant and impactful in the present vital to maintain the institution's global public and political support base. Organizations are often built by a few singular leaders with a powerful vision. To endure over time, though, organizations must open themselves up to more, potentially dissenting, voices.

On policy success – Our dozens of case studies of policies that 'work' shine a light on the intricate combinations of puzzling and powering, imagining and choosing, designing and delivering that make such successes possible: from the framing underpinning problem definition and strategic agenda-setting, to patient technocratic work of evidence-based design to prudent political work of amassing building supportive coalitions, to knowing when to charge head-first and when to tread gently and even pull back. Through QCA analysis, we have begun to model the configurations of factors at work in clusters of cases (Compton et al. 2019). By 2022 there will be a published body of more than 75 case studies of policy successes, in Australia and New Zealand (Luetjens et al., 2019), Canada (Howlett et al., forthcoming), the Nordic countries (DelaPorte et al., forthcoming), and globally (Compton and 't Hart, 2019).

One cluster of cases suggests that *successful public policies tend to address a problem that was well defined and broadly acknowledged* at the outset of the policy development process. For example, the design of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme in Australia was propelled by a broadly supported desire to expand the number of school-leavers attending university, while allaying the concerns about equity that had plagued the issue. The clever design of the scheme ensuring that the flow of benefits was not skewed towards more privileged groups in society.

Secondly, bipartisan support that was often lacking when policies were initially adopted was carefully nurtured as the policy itself attained a degree of maturity. Once achieved, such

'oversized majorities' allow the policy to endure across multiple changes in government and take root in the community's value system and sense of identity. New Zealand's nuclear-free policy is a good example. It was introduced in 1987 by a Labour Government against heavy opposition from the conservative end of politics. Yet subsequent National Party–led governments left the policy in place, having understood that it was what the public wanted. In 2007, on the twentieth anniversary of the law, the National Party's spokesperson for foreign affairs conceded that 'the retention of this legislation that is called iconic, and that is symbolic of our independence of thought and judgment in international affairs, is not in question' (New Zealand Parliament 2007: 9759).

Thirdly, there was a cluster of cases evolving around *leveraging a crisis to gain traction for well thought-out policy reform proposals that had been biding their time in proverbial bureaucratic bottom drawers*. For example, when a series of 14 mass shootings across two decades in Australia culminated on 28 April 1996 in the Port Arthur Massacre, where a single gunman killed 35 people with military-style semiautomatic rifles, policy change – tightened licensing, banning of semi-automatic weapons, buy back scheme – was swift and stark. Adopted in a crisis, the new policy was nonetheless the result of years of policy development. The government of the day united different parties and stakeholders to present a broad coalition in favour of the new laws. With those laws in place, the risk of an Australian dying by gunshot fell by more than half and has remained low ever since.

In Wilson's (1887: 198) seminal paper the objective of the study of public administration should be to "discover (…) what government can properly and successfully do (…) with the utmost possible efficiency". Through *also* studying public governance success, in all its complexities and contingencies, scholars can offer practitioners not only some validation of their efforts but evidence-based building blocks for smarter design and management of public policies, programs, organizations, and collaborations. If we want our political systems to continue to live up to the promise of not just popular sovereignty and orderly transition of power but intelligent public problem-solving (Lindblom, 1965), we should make it part of our core business.

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